

Smalls, Robert (1839–1915)

South Carolina. Born a slave. Mulatto. Literate. Merchant, editor.



Born a slave in Beaufort, South Carolina, Smalls was taken to Charleston by his owner in 1851. He worked there as a stevedore and harbor foreman, hired his own time, and when the Civil War broke out, had accumulated \$700, which he planned to use as part of the sum necessary to purchase his freedom and that of his wife and daughter. Employed by the Confederacy as a pilot on the *Planter*, Smalls guided the ship out of Charleston harbor in May 1862 and surrendered it to Union forces. The feat won him national attention. He was made a second lieutenant in the Union navy and became commander of the *Planter*, which was placed on quartermaster duty. Smalls was also given a reward of \$1,500, which he later used to purchase land and open a store in Beaufort in partnership with black political leader Richard H. Gleaves. Smalls spoke in the North in 1862 on the Sea Island experiment. In 1864, while in Philadelphia for repairs to the *Planter*, he became involved in a cause célèbre when he was evicted from a streetcar. A resulting mass protest meeting led to the integration of the city's public transportation. After the Civil War, he hired tutors to obtain an education.

During Reconstruction, Smalls became one of the most powerful political leaders in the South Carolina lowcountry. He represented Beaufort County in the constitutional convention of 1868, where he supported a proposal to make school attendance compulsory, and he served in the state House of Representatives, 1868–70, and the Senate, 1870–75. He was elected to five terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, serving 1875–79, 1882–83 (after being seated in a contested election), 1884–85 (when he was elected to fill a vacancy), and 1885–87. He ran for Congress unsuccessfully in 1878 and 1886. Smalls was an officer of the state militia, a delegate to seven Republican national conventions, and vice president of the party's state conventions in 1872 and 1874. According to the census of 1870, he owned \$6,000 in real estate and \$1,000 in personal property. He was a director of the black-owned Enterprise

Railroad. Smalls also published the *Beaufort Standard*, one of the most successful black newspapers in Reconstruction South Carolina.

In 1877, Smalls was arrested, tried, and convicted of having accepted a \$5,000 bribe in 1872 in connection with the awarding of a legislative printing contract. He was pardoned as part of an arrangement in which charges were dropped against Democrats accused of election fraud. He opposed the 1877–78 Liberia exodus, and he supported President Hayes's Southern policy. Smalls remained a political figure into the twentieth century. He was one of six black delegates to the 1895 constitutional convention, where he spoke out against the disenfranchisement of black voters. He served as collector of customs at Beaufort from 1889 to 1913, with the exception of four years in the 1890s. His son-in-law, Samuel J. Bampfield, was a longtime officeholder in Beaufort County.

Okon E. Uya, *From Slavery to Public Service: Robert Smalls 1839–1915* (New York, 1971). Bailey, *Senate*, II, 1482–86. Holt, *Black over White*, 165, app. Reynolds, *South Carolina*, 223, 276. Henry L. Suggs, ed., *The Black Press in the South, 1865–1979* (Westport, Conn., 1983), 295. *Biographical Directory*, 1824.