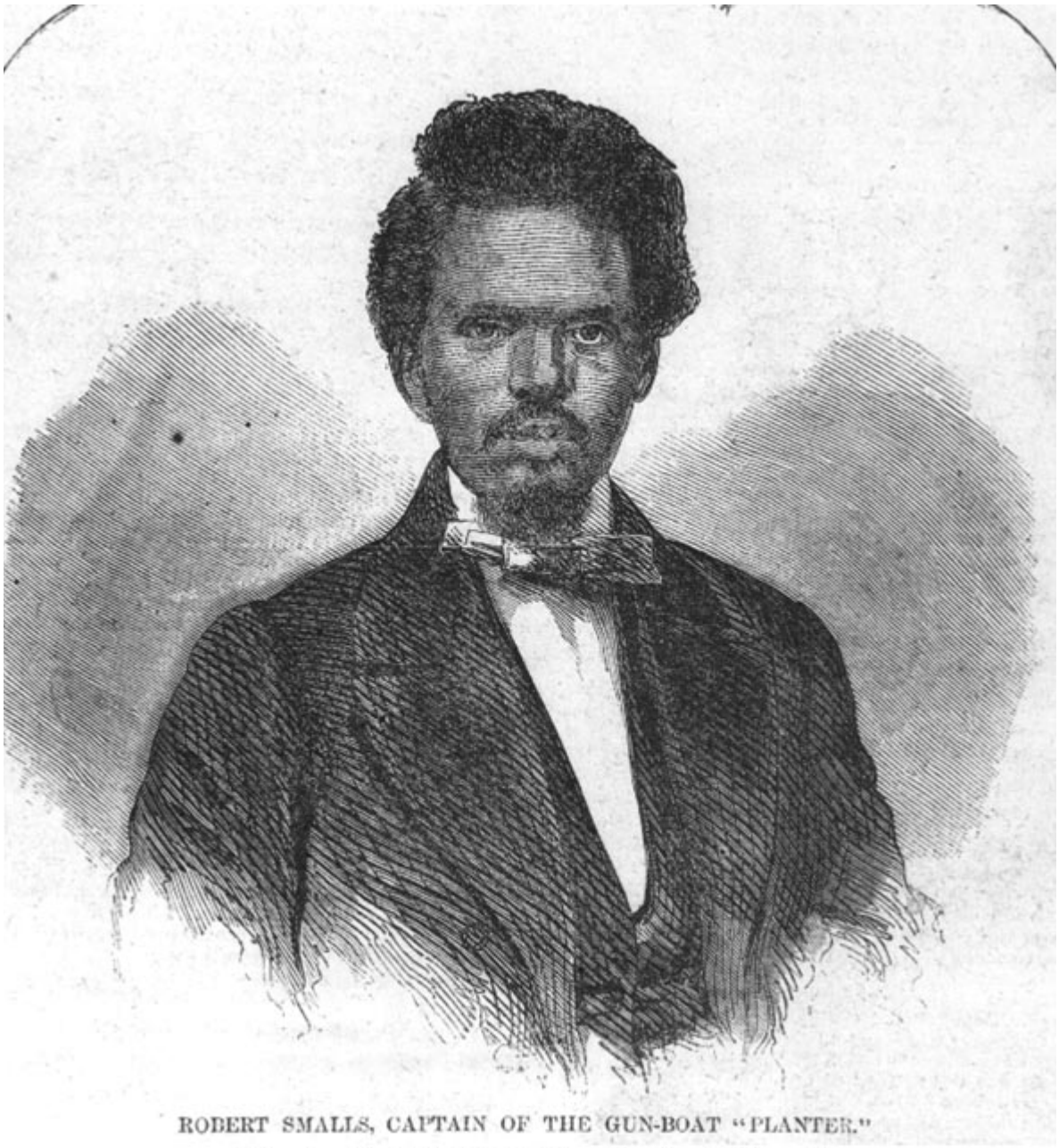
Resource #10. Robert Smalls

[A video transcript of NPS interpreter Michael Allen's telling of the Robert Smalls story will be inserted here/]



ROBERT SMALLS, CAPTAIN OF THE GUN-BOAT "PLANTER."

Photo # NH 58870 Robert Smalls

Resource #10. Robert Smalls (cont'd)

The chief Union naval commander in the south Atlantic informed the Secretary of the Navy about the daring feat of the slave Robert Small (later, Smalls), who disguised himself as a pilot and guided the Confederate steamboat "Planter" out of Charleston Harbor and into Union hands.

Port Royal Harbor S.C May 14. 1862

Sir I enclose a copy of a report from Commander E. G. Parrott, brought here last night by the late rebel Steamtug Planter, in charge of an officer and crew from the Augusta. She was the armed dispatch and transportation Steamer attached to the Engineer Department at Charleston under Brig: Genl: Ripley, whose barge a short time since was brought out to the Blockading Fleet by several contrabands.—

The bringing out of this Steamer under all the circumstances would have done credit to any one. At 4 in the morning, in the absence of the Captain who was on shore, she left her wharf close to the Government office and headquarters, with Palmetto and Confederate flag flying—passed the successive forts saluting as usual by blowing her steam whistle— After getting beyond the range of the last gun, she quickly hauled down the rebel flags and hoisted a white one.

The Onward was the inside ship of the blockading fleet in the main channel & was preparing to fire when her commander made out the white flag—

The armament of the Steamer is a thirty two pounder on pivot and a few 24 p[ound] howitzers. She had beside on her decks four other guns, one 7 inch rifled, which were to be taken, the morning of the escape, to the new fort on the middle ground. One of the 4 belonged to Fort Sumpter and had been struck in the rebel attack on that fort on the muzzle. Robert the intelligent Slave and Pilot of the boat who performed this bold feat so skilfully, informed me of this fact, presuming it would be a matter of interest to us to have possession of this gun.

This man, Robert Small, is superior to any who have yet come into the lines, intelligent as many of them have been— His

Resource #10. Robert Smalls (cont'd)

information has been most interesting and portions of it of the utmost importance—

The steamer is quite a valuable acquisition to the Squadron by her good machinery and very light draft— The officer in charge brought her through St. Helena Sound and by the inland passage down Beaufort river arriving here at 10 last night—

On board the Steamer when she left Charleston were Eight men, five women and three children—

I shall continue to employ Robert as a Pilot on board the Planter for the inland waters with which he appears to be very familiar—

I do not know whether in the views of the Government the vessel will be considered a prize but if so, I respectfully submit to the Department the claims of this man Robert & his associates. Very Respectfully Your Obed. Servt

S. F. Du Pont

Letter from Flag Officer S. F. Du Pont to Hon. Gideon Welles, 14 May 1862, South Atlantic Squadron, Letters from Officers Commanding Squadrons, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, Record Group 45, National Archives [FSSP T-544]. The Navy awarded the former slaves who abducted the *Planter* $4,584, half the appraised value of the ship, of which Small received $1,500. (Rear Admiral S. F. Du Pont to Hon. Gideon Welles, 19 Aug. 1862, South Atlantic Squadron, Letters from Officers Commanding Squadrons, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, Record Group 45, National Archives [FSSP T-553].) Small continued to serve on the *Planter* to the end of the war, first as pilot at $50 per month, and then as captain at $150 per month. (Alex J. Perry to Hon. Robert Smalls, 3 Jan. 1883, "Planter," Consolidated Correspondence File, series 225, Central Records, Records of the Quartermaster General, Record Group 92, National Archives [FSSP Y-48].)

Questions for Students:

- What conditions helped Robert Smalls to be able to resist his owner's control in this way?
- What were the consequences of his resistance?