

SLAVE

WARRIOR

HERO

FORGET JAMES BOND. MEET YOUR NEW HERO: ROBERT SMALLS.

BY LAUREN TARSHIS

**B**efore dawn on May 13, 1862, the ship *Planter* steamed through the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. The mood on the water was uneasy. For over a year, a war had been raging in the United States, the Civil War between the states of the North and the South. Southern ships filled Charleston Harbor, guarded by armed soldiers. Just beyond the harbor, 10 Northern ships waited with loaded cannons, prepared to destroy any Southern ship that dared approach.

The *Planter* carried ammunition for Southern ships, and the harbor guards assumed it was making an early delivery. The captain, whom the guards recognized as C. J. Relyea (rel-YAY) by his gold-trimmed jacket and wide-brimmed hat, waved and gave the proper signal with his whistle as he approached each of the five checkpoints.

One by one, the guards let the *Planter* pass.

Suddenly, it was clear something was wrong. The guards watched in astonishment as the *Planter* gathered speed and headed out to sea. Why was Captain Relyea sailing directly toward the Northern ships, which would surely blast the *Planter* to pieces?



Four generations of enslaved people, on the plantation where they worked



In fact, it was not Captain Relyea at the **helm**. The man in charge was Robert Smalls, a 23-year-old slave. Huddled in the ship's **hold** were his wife and children. Robert was leading a daring mission. Within minutes, he and his family would be free.

Or, they would be dead.

## A Life of Slavery

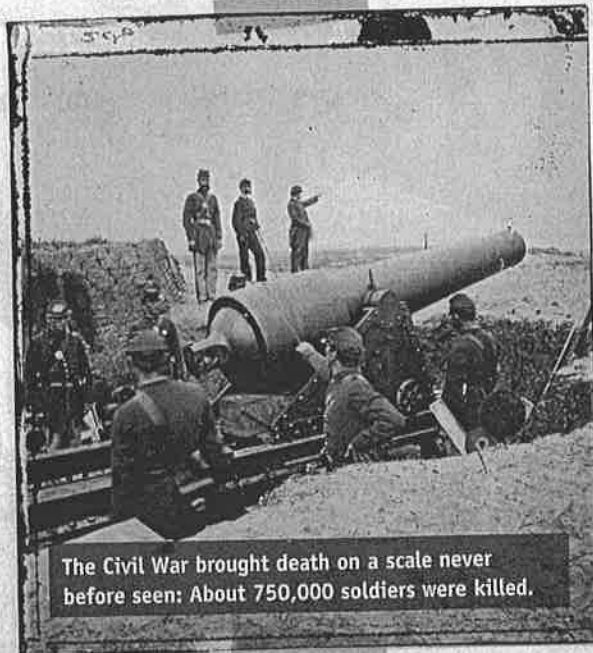
Robert had been preparing for this moment all his life. His mother was one of dozens of slaves belonging to the McKee family of Beaufort, South Carolina. She and Robert lived in a shack behind the McKees' home. Compared with most slaves, they were fortunate: The McKees treated them with kindness.

Still, Robert's mother made sure her son understood what it meant to be a slave. She told him about the millions of slaves who worked from dawn until dusk on plantations throughout the South, how they were brutally whipped for slowing down or asking for a drink.

She sometimes took Robert to see slave auctions in the town square. Men, women, and children were lined up on a wooden stage, for sale to the highest bidder. Once, Robert watched as a young boy was inspected by potential buyers. They examined the boy's teeth and feet like he was a horse. Nearby, the boy's mother wept; she would never see her son again.

Robert understood that according to the law, he wasn't a person. He was a piece of property, like the cow in the McKees' barn or Mr. McKee's favorite chair.

He wanted to flee to the Northern states, where slavery was banned. He'd heard of slaves who'd made the terrifying journey, hiding in caves, dodging slave catchers and bloodhounds. His mother explained that for every slave who escaped, hundreds died or were captured and punished. Robert should be grateful, his



The Civil War brought death on a scale never before seen: About 750,000 soldiers were killed.



LINCOLN LAE

“Now, if you don't comorn, I

mother said, to have kind owners. “Promise me,” she said to Robert, “you will never run away.”

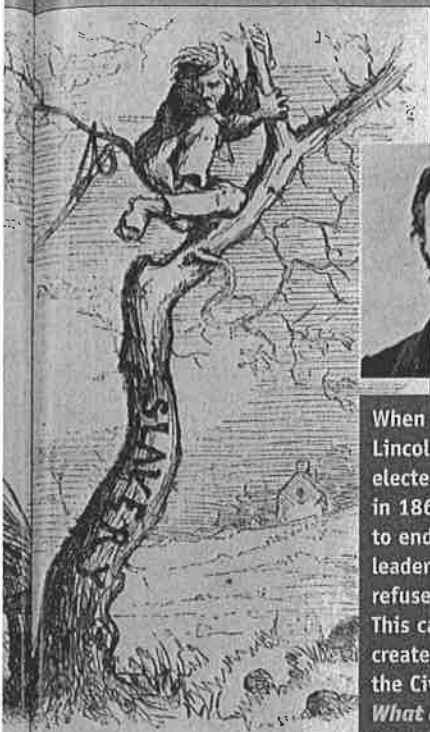
## A Haunting Memory

When Robert was 12, he was sent to Charleston to work. It was common for slaveholders to hire out their slaves; the money Robert made belonged to Mr. McKee, though he allowed Robert to keep a small portion of it.

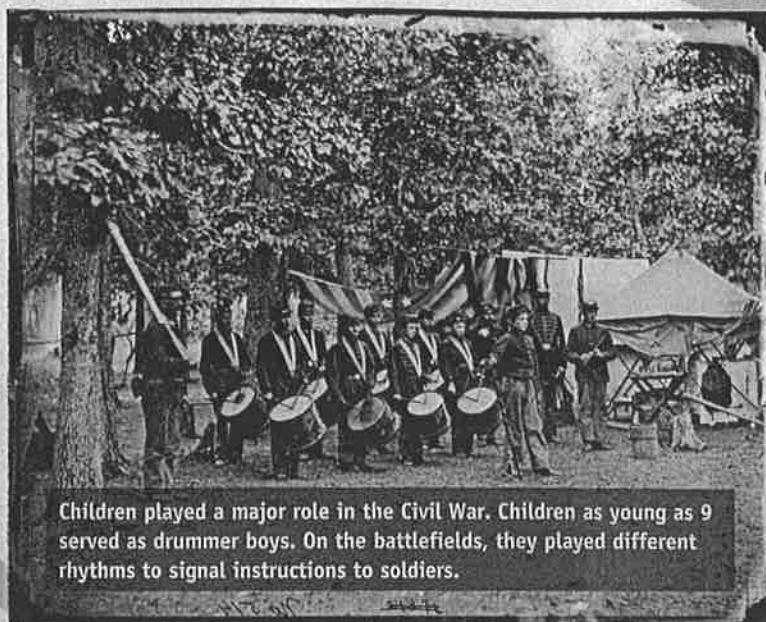
Charleston was a bustling city where slaves worked alongside whites and free blacks. Robert worked on several ships before landing a job on the *Planter*. He impressed the owner and was taught to pilot the ship.

Robert also fell in love with a **vivacious** woman named Hannah Jones, a slave and hotel maid. Slaves could not marry, but Robert and Hannah were permitted to live together. Hannah already had a daughter, and soon, she and Robert had two children together.

The family was happy, and yet Robert was haunted by the memory of the mother he had seen as a child, sobbing as her son was sold at auction. By law, Robert and Hannah's children belonged to Hannah's owner. They too could be taken away at any time.



When Abraham Lincoln (inset) was elected President in 1860, he hoped to end slavery. But leaders in the South refused to ban it. This cartoon was created just before the Civil War. *What do you think it means?*



Children played a major role in the Civil War. Children as young as 9 served as drummer boys. On the battlefields, they played different rhythms to signal instructions to soldiers.

**IN LAST WARNING.**  
"I'll cut the Tree from under you."

## A Bloody War

Meanwhile, slavery was tearing the country apart. President Abraham Lincoln planned to **abolish** slavery. The Southern states refused to allow that to happen. By February of 1861, leaders of seven Southern states had announced that they were splitting off from the country. On April 12, Southern soldiers attacked a military base in Charleston, and the Civil War began.

Robert was forced to fight against the U.S. government, against President Lincoln, against those who wanted to end slavery. To Robert, this was intolerable. And so in spite of Robert's promise to his mother, he decided to risk everything for freedom.

## A Bold Plan

Robert devised a plan: He would **commandeer** the *Planter* and turn it over to the Northern ships. It was an act of hijacking—and outright **treason**. If he was caught, he and the crew would be killed. They could also be blasted to pieces by Southern ships during the escape, or by the Northern fleet before he could surrender.

On May 13, Robert put the plan in motion. Captain

Relyea left for the night. Robert waited until the harbor was quiet, and then ordered his crew to fire up the ship. They picked up Hannah and the children at a wharf where they were hiding. (If the plan should fail, Hannah had said, "It is better that we die together.") Robert wore Relyea's hat and jacket to fool the guards.

It worked—until the *Planter* raced out of the harbor. *Kaboom!*

The Southern ships **bombarded** the *Planter* with gun and cannon fire, but it was too late. The *Planter* was soon under the protection of the Northern fleet. The Northern commander was **incredulous** when he met the *Planter's* crew: all slaves.

Except they weren't slaves anymore.

Robert, his family, and the crew were free. Robert became an instant hero. The ship, loaded with ammunition, was a prize for the North. Newspapers celebrated the mission, and Robert met President Lincoln. Northern commanders, impressed with Robert's skill, hired him to run secret naval missions.

The Civil War would rage for three more bloody years. But in 1865, slavery, at last, was outlawed throughout the land. ●



# Civil War Superhero

Why you should tell everyone about Robert Smalls.

(Hint: It's not just for the reasons you think.) By Justin O'Neill

**H**ad you heard of Robert Smalls before you read the article "Slave, Warrior, Hero"?

Me neither. But now I can't stop talking about him.

A few months after Smalls's escape, an editorial in the *New York Daily Tribune* proclaimed Smalls "a hero—one of the few history will delight to honor."

But if we've never heard of him, is he really a hero?

The word *hero* comes from ancient Greek; it means "protector." In ancient times, mythical heroes were worshipped like gods. Today, our heroes help us identify the values we think are important.

"We largely define our ideals by the heroes we choose, and our ideals—things like courage, honor, and justice—largely define us," writes philosophy professor Scott LaBarge of Santa Clara University in California. In other words, heroes are people to admire, examples for how to live.

After the Civil War, Smalls went on to live a pretty

admirable life. He ran successful businesses and got elected to Congress five times.

And there's another reason I admire him. It has to do with a small footnote to his life story.

After the war, the McKee family lost everything. Smalls returned to Beaufort and bought the McKees' house. When Mr. McKee died, Mrs. McKee, by then an old woman, had nowhere to go. So Smalls invited her to live with him. He took care of her until she died.

This might not seem like a big deal, but think about what it means. Smalls was a slave—a victim of one of the most evil practices in history. Yes, his former masters were kind compared with other slaveholders, but that doesn't make what they did any less despicable. In spite of that, Smalls helped Mrs. McKee, though he would have been justified throwing her out on the street.

Here's why Smalls is heroic: He was a "protector" of freedom. He understood its value—he risked his life for it. Later, he honored

the freedom he had gained by showing compassion for the one who enslaved him. It was a courageous way to celebrate his success and to set a *new* example for how to live.

Despite all odds, Smalls lived a life representative of humanity's most admirable ideals. He emerged from horrifying circumstances as a hero, and deserves to be remembered forever.

Spread the word. ●

After the war, there was great prejudice against freed slaves. Yet Smalls remained a strong voice for his people. "All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life," he famously said. *What do you think he meant?*



## CONTEST

**Write a Letter** Write a letter to your principal persuading him or her to let you put on a school play about Robert Smalls. Explain what makes Smalls a hero and include details that will be particularly compelling to your principal (for example, how your play will benefit the school). Send your letter to **ROBERT SMALLS CONTEST**. Five winners will get *Traveling the Freedom Road* by Linda Barrett Osborne. See page 2 for details.

GET THIS ACTIVITY ONLINE

