

Capitol Men

The Epic Story of
Reconstruction Through the
Lives of the First Black
Congressmen

Philip Dray

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One of the surprising results of the Reconstruction period was that there should spring from among the members of a race that had been held so long in slavery, so large a number of shrewd, resolute, resourceful, and even brilliant men, who became, during this brief period of storms and stress, the political leaders of the newly enfranchised race.

—BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and others lived during the Reconstruction period.

—PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

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PREFACE

OF ALL THE IMAGES of long-ago America, perhaps few are as poignant as the Currier & Ives lithograph from 1872 depicting the first seven black members of the U.S. Congress. From the midst of Reconstruction, one of the most precarious times in our nation's history, they gaze out confidently in their neatly trimmed beards, vested suits, and ties, indistinguishable, except for their color, from their white counterparts. The portrait, showing Hiram Revels of Mississippi; Benjamin Turner of Alabama; Jefferson Long of Georgia; Robert De Large, Robert Brown Elliott, and Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina; and Josiah Walls of Florida was a proud symbol of the liberation of America's newest citizens, proof of the tremendous social revolution the Civil War had wrought.

The picture was considered an object of scorn among many Southern whites, however, who refused to countenance the sudden transformation of slaves into holders of public office. Emancipation, and then the appearance of black federal troops in the conquered South, had been offense enough; when, under the terms of congressional Reconstruction, men of color began to vote, win elections, and wield political authority, the patience of Southerners was pushed to its limit. "The North thinks the Southern people are especially angry because of the loss of slave property," wrote the North Carolina Unionist Albion Tourgee. "In truth, they are a thousand times more exasperated by the elevation of the free negro to equal political power." As the Virginian George Mason railed, "The noble Caucasian, in whose very look and gait the God of creation has stamped a blazing superiority, [must] bow down to and be governed by the sable African, upon whom the same God has put the ineffaceable mark of inferiority! A more flagrant desecration of the representative principle ... is not to be found in the annals of the human race."

Faded prints of the engraving still hung in modest sharecroppers' cabins when researchers from the Works Project Administration visited the Southern Black Belt in the 1930s. The men in the picture were by that time largely forgotten, and the image, and others like it, had become historical curiosities. In the 1870s, the states that had sent the "colored representatives" to Congress were themselves roiled by violent factionalism, undermining what legitimacy these men had in Washington, as the nation backed away from the ideals of Reconstruction. In 1901, resolutions of thanksgiving would be passed in the North Carolina legislature when George H. White, the sole remaining black member of the U.S. House of Representatives, finished his term in office. By then black Southerners had been virtually expunged from politics, even as voters; the greater part of a

century would pass before another elected representative of color from a Southern state arrived on Capitol Hill.

Reconstruction was initially a hopeful time. America, emerging from civil war, attempted to reinvent itself. A broadened concept of citizenship was introduced, as were new guarantees of equal treatment under law, commitment to public education and public welfare, efforts to redistribute land, and more equitable methods of taxation. Laws and constitutional amendments were forged to improve upon the vision of the country's founders; new government agencies were formed, such as the Freedmen's Bureau, which assisted the recently freed slaves, and the Justice Department, which helped enforce their new rights. This effort rode on the leadership of resolute national legislators and the actions of countless individuals, organizations, and missionaries, but also on the determination of the freed slaves themselves, four million strong, who grasped the long-awaited chance to steer their own destiny.

But despite this earnest struggle, Reconstruction in the end could overcome neither the resistance of the South, where its innovations had their most meaningful impact, nor the North's mounting apathy and desire for sectional reconciliation. Redemption, or home rule, as it was often called, came to the South, and Reconstruction was denounced as a fatal example of governmental hubris and overreaching. History and popular culture for decades characterized it as an atrocious failure.

The South, it was held, had been punished too cruelly for secession—its attempted act of self-determination. Its leaders had been humiliated and its people victimized in a grotesque experiment that elevated former slaves to citizenship, placing whites "under the splay foot of the Negro." Vindictive Northerners had been not only hypocrites, in trying to script how others might coexist with a restive, dangerous black minority, but also fools to think they understood the racial dynamics of Southern life. The myth of the Southland redeemed from Reconstruction's errant policies would become a fixture of American memory, retold in countless memoirs, articles, and works of history, from the 1874 appearance of *The Prostrate State: South Carolina Under Negro Government*, by James Shepherd Pike, to the early-twentieth-century Klan-glorifying novels of Thomas Dixon. It provided the backdrop for two of the most commercially successful films of the twentieth century, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939); it resurfaced in 1956 in John F. Kennedy's award-winning book of political biography, *Profiles in Courage*; and it remained for years a staple of high school and college textbooks.

Yet beyond the distortions and the myths lie Reconstruction's considerable achievements—strides in universal education, the forging of black political know-how and leadership, broad national efforts to solve problems of racial prejudice and injustice, and the creation of laws that, although largely nullified by the Supreme Court, stayed on the books, a valuable heirloom in the nation's attic trunk, available for use at an appropriate future time. They would be crucial to the civil rights revolution of the mid-twentieth century.

Reconstruction's echoes resonate still. When Florida election officials in the year 2000 forced voters in heavily minority districts to wait for hours in line before casting a ballot, and when Ohio Republicans, four years later, stationed poll monitors at voting places to intimidate black voters, they were reviving methods that had proved effective nearly a century and a half before, in the Reconstruction South. The debates heard today over affirmative action, police profiling, school integration, economic parity, and reparations for slavery would be largely familiar to Americans of

the 1870s and 1880s, when newspapers carried, almost daily, stories of black citizens denied their rights, when black congressmen pleaded with their white colleagues to treat seriously the terror tactics of Southern vigilantism, and when a justice of the Supreme Court inquired, in an infamous ruling, how long those recently emerged from slavery would continue to be "the special favorite of the laws." Current efforts to safeguard civil rights and the rights of the accused, in an age of terrorism and illegal immigration, have their antecedents in the post-Civil War struggle for national standards of citizenship and personal freedom as well as guarantees of due process.

The black representatives to Congress, the subjects of this book, emerged from diverse backgrounds. Many were of mixed racial ancestry and had the social advantages of white parentage, such as access to education; some were free before the war, whereas others had been slaves; several were professionals—lawyers, teachers, or ministers—while others had worked as skilled artisans or tradesmen; a few had won distinction in the military. As black men who competed successfully to attain elective office in a society dominated by whites, they tended to be exceptional individuals—as resilient as they were resourceful. South Carolina's Robert Smalls had hijacked a Confederate steamer and delivered it to the Union blockade off Charleston. P.B.S. Pinchback of Louisiana started out as an accomplished riverboat gambler. Robert Brown Elliott outdid the former vice president of the Confederacy in a debate on the floor of the House, and his colleague from South Carolina, Richard Cain, when he could not secure government help to make land available to the freedmen, formed his own corporation to do so. The portly, goateed senator Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi, born a slave, once hid for his life from a Confederate raiding party yet rose to become a prosperous Delta planter who traveled as a dignitary to European courts, where it was said he displayed "the manners of a Chesterfield."

Looking at the congressmen's picture and knowing the expectations it once inspired, it's hard not to wonder how things went so wrong, or how events might have turned out differently. Why did white Southerners find these seemingly decent, conscientious black officeholders, and the newly enfranchised African Americans they represented, so unacceptable? Was it simple race-hatred, a refusal that those low enough to have been slaves should rise to citizenship, let alone positions of authority? Was there truth to the accusations of corruption and incompetence made against them? Were their demands too great for a nation recovering from a devastating war? And how did the black elected officials themselves view their own efforts, those of their white Republican allies, and Reconstruction's prospects for success?

For the sake of narrative I have focused on some of the most prominent black congressional officials of the era, while also attempting to sketch in the background of the challenging world in which they lived and the stories of the men and women of both races whose actions affected their role. These include the presidents Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, and James A. Garfield; Frederick Douglass, the editor, author, and ex-slave who was perhaps the black congressmen's greatest champion and who chronicled their endeavors in his aptly named weekly, the *New National Era*; the abolitionists Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison; Charles Sumner, the willful Massachusetts senator devoted to civil rights, and his Radical colleague, Thaddeus Stevens; the black nationalist Martin Delany; the women's rights advocates Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton; General Benjamin F. Butler, who raised the spirits of slaves crossing Union lines by dubbing them "contrabands," and his daughter Blanche and son-in-law Adelbert Ames, the besieged Reconstruction governor of Mississippi. Other important figures include the carpetbagger governors Daniel Chamberlain of South Carolina and Henry Clay Warmoth of Louisiana; the Union generals

William T. Sherman, Rufus Saxton, and Otis Oliver Howard; the Confederate general James Longstreet; and the Supreme Court justice John Marshall Harlan, "the Great Dissenter," who tried valiantly to stem the tide that wiped away Reconstruction's accomplishments and made segregation the law of the land.

The "glorious failure," as Reconstruction is sometimes termed—politically turbulent, riven by corruption, often exceedingly violent—can be a disquieting saga to get to know: a lost opportunity, certainly, and in many ways a shameful time in our nation's history. Yet it is also a powerful story of idealism and moral conflict that belongs only to us and whose arc is as beautiful as it is tragic. At its core is something of undeniable value—the courage of black and white Americans who together aspired to right the country's greatest wrong. That this coalition has always been tentative in our history, or that the grand experiment of Reconstruction failed or was premature, cannot diminish the effort's genius or inherent nobility.

Chapter 1

BOAT THIEF

A PERSON GAZING OUT ACROSS Charleston Harbor in the predawn quiet of May 13, 1862, would probably have found it hard to believe that the Civil War had begun at this very spot only a year before, with the thunderous shelling of the federal garrison at Fort Sumter. Certainly the signs of war remained, most noticeably the rebel cannon that guarded the harbor and pointed seaward from numerous shore ramparts, their sights fixed on the ships of the Union blockade positioned three miles offshore. But all was now perfectly still, and the only discernible movement took place aboard the *Planter*, a small Confederate transport that appeared to be preparing to depart.

Hours before, the *Planters* white captain, C. J. Relyea, and his officers had gone ashore for the night, leaving the vessel in the hands of its mulatto pilot, Robert Smalls, and creating the very opportunity that Smalls and his fellow slave crewmen had been waiting for. Having discussed in detail their plan to use the boat to make a break for the Union blockade, they stealthily began their chores between 1 and 3 A.M., maneuvering the *Planter* to a nearby pier to pick up Smalls's wife and two children as well as four other black women, a child, and three other men. Because the punishment for what they were about to do would surely be death, Smalls had told the others that if caught, they would not surrender but would destroy the boat, along with themselves and all the Confederate guns and ammunition it carried. Two of the crewmen had heard Smalls's warning and elected to stay behind, disembarking as the new passengers came aboard. At about 3 A.M. final farewells were whispered and the *Planter* eased back from the pier.

Despite the hour and the darkness, the city defenses were on alert against Union raiding or reconnaissance parties. Charleston, known for its cultured antebellum society and its leadership in the Southern secessionist movement, formed the emotional and political heart of the Confederacy; it was also a strategic Atlantic port, and its defenders knew that the federals, having been driven from Fort Sumter in the war's first action, dreamed of recapturing it. To escape the harbor, the *Planter* would have to pass directly under the guns of several formidable batteries, including those of Fort Sumter itself, which was now in Confederate hands. The fort, set strategically in the middle of the harbor's entrance, was a manmade island, a pentagon-shaped fortress with walls sixty feet high and six feet thick and guns protruding from all sides, emanating "an aura of doom and menace."

As the *Planter* moved toward the gauntlet, some on board suggested racing past the rebel installations, but Smalls reminded them that such a panicky move would likely be fatal: their best and only hope was to pretend nothing was out of the ordinary. He was banking on the likelihood that sleepy rebel watchmen would not be suspicious of a work ship nosing its way out of the harbor before dawn, nor would they be inclined to imagine that slaves were stealing it.

With this audacious act, Robert Smalls was exploiting a lifetime of trust and privilege placed in him by his white masters—first as a favored house servant, then as a semi-independent laborer and skilled sailor. Born on the South Carolina Sea Islands in April 1839, he was the son of Lydia, a slave woman and either the Charleston merchant Moses Goldsmith or John McKee, who was Lydia's master. As a

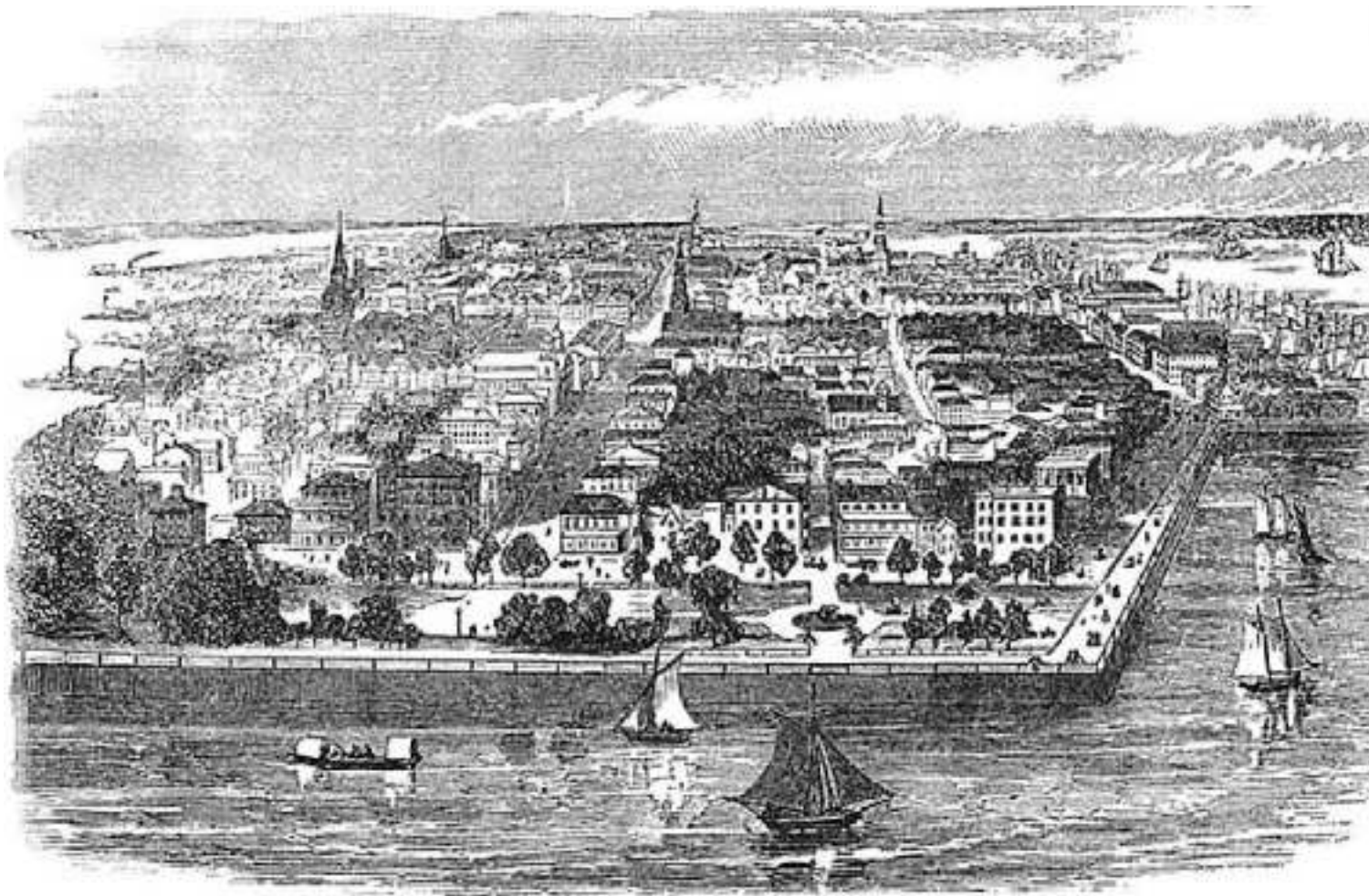
girl, Lydia lived and worked on a McKee plantation on Ladies Island, adjacent to the Sea Island town of Beaufort. Because of the dread fear of malaria, the wealthy planters of Beaufort visited their landholdings on the nearby islands only occasionally. One Christmas, when Mr. and Mrs. McKee toured the plantation, distributing oranges and other small gifts to the slaves, Lydia was precocious enough to compliment her mistress on the dress she was wearing. Mrs. McKee, charmed by the youngster's remark, asked her age. "I was born the year George Washington got president," Lydia replied. When John McKee next returned to the plantation, he asked after "the little girl who knew about George Washington," and took Lydia with him back to Beaufort to serve as a housemaid.

Beaufort was the capital of Port Royal Island, which, with the nearby islands of Ladies and St. Helena's, held a prominent position in the lush coastal region Carolinians call the low country. With its endless bays, rivers, tidal estuaries, and broad wetlands, its vast open distances, swarms of shore birds and marsh cranes, and the ancient live oak trees whose "fingers" almost scraped the ground, it seemed a faraway, otherworldly place. In the seventeenth century it had become a rice-growing mecca after the planters selectively imported West African slaves who had knowledge of rice cultivation; these slaves introduced the complex methods of irrigation, seeding, and flood control that made the Carolina rice plantations profitable. By 1860, the South was exporting 182 million pounds of rice per year, two thirds of it from South Carolina, and the crop's success had helped make both Beaufort and Charleston prosperous towns, with grand white-columned mansions, high-steeped churches, and the Southeast's most cosmopolitan society.

Robert Smalls grew up in the McKee household, childhood playmate to his master, Henry McKee, who was likely his half brother, while his mother, Lydia, served the McKee family. So comfortable was the arrangement that after several years Lydia began to worry that her bright, energetic son might come to difficulty in the town someday by failing to understand his true status. To forestall such a problem, she took the unusual step of forcing Robert to watch the slave auctions and whippings at the arsenal building on Beaufort's Craven Street, reminding him that only good fortune kept him from sharing the fate of the wretched people he saw there. Her strategy was not, however, entirely successful, for at age twelve Robert was caught defying the local slave curfew and soon after told his mother that he had listened with interest as another slave read a passage from a book by the abolitionist Frederick Douglass—the kind of proscribed acts she feared could get him cast out of the McKees' Beaufort house to toil on the family's island plantations, or worse. South Carolina rice plantations by no means presented the worst work conditions. Because the owners relied greatly on African ingenuity, the slaves had managed to negotiate somewhat more favorable work conditions than prevailed elsewhere in the South. Rather than labor from sunup to sundown, they were expected each day to execute assigned tasks; once they had completed them, they were free to hunt, fish, or cultivate their own crops. Still, work in the fields was strenuous; slaves labored long hours in knee-deep water, and there was an ever-present danger of snakes, insects, and malaria—the very risks that kept the white planters on Beaufort's higher ground. Lydia wished to spare Robert from such a fate and finally appealed to the McKees to send her rambunctious son to Charleston, where the family maintained another home and where she believed Robert's insubordinate streak would be less apparent.

In contrast to Beaufort, Charleston was a metropolis, a place of hubbub, splendor, and riches. Carriages with liveried servants traversed the palm-tree-lined boulevards and waited under the lamplights of impeccable mansions and hotels. Gentlemen strolled the Battery, talking politics and business, as ladies in crinoline window-shopped along fashionable King Street. Beyond the busy

central market, with its fish stalls, vegetables, spices, and colorful rows of textiles, hundreds of large masted ships lined the waterfront, taking on pallets of rice, tobacco, and other foreign-going cargo.



CHARLESTON BATTERY DURING THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

The city ran on the energy of thousands of slaves like Robert Smalls, as well as a substantial community of free blacks, many of whom were small tradesmen or skilled artisans such as roofers or carpenters. Even free blacks, however, were made to wear identity tags and have a white "guardian," for the ongoing political agitation over slavery in the 1840s and 1850s had made local whites jittery. South Carolina, and Charleston in particular, had experienced at least two significant slave rebellions—the Stono Rebellion of 1739, which broke out only twenty miles from the city, and the aborted Denmark Vesey uprising of 1822. In the Stono disturbance, one hundred slaves trying to escape to Florida ravaged plantations and killed two dozen whites before encountering the militia, which slaughtered them and placed their severed heads on posts by the roadside. In response to the affair, the colonial legislature enacted the Negro Act of 1740, severely restricting slave behavior and mobility. The Vesey rebellion, planned for July 14, Bastille Day, 1822, was the brainchild of a fifty-five-year-old carpenter, Denmark Vesey, a former slave who had purchased his own freedom. Before Vesey could strike, however, two house slaves alerted the authorities, and he, along with several comrades, was arrested and put to death. The threat of slaves' being fired to revolt by conspiracies led by free Negroes remained very real in the minds of white Carolinians, perhaps because after 1820 blacks began to outnumber whites in the state, and free blacks, because of their greater worldliness, were believed to be more likely to stir the embers of discontent.

Although slave-control measures were carefully observed in Charleston as secession and war

loomed, Robert Smalls managed to win increased trust and freedom from his white family. He arranged with the McKees to hire himself out as a day laborer and later as a town lamplighter, paying fifteen dollars a month to his owner. In 1856, at age seventeen, he married a thirty-one-year-old slave named Hannah Jones, who worked as a hotel maid. From his modest earnings, Smalls began saving to buy his own and his wife's freedom, as well as that of their daughter, Elizabeth, who was born in 1858. His fortunes brightened considerably when he attained work in the town's maritime trades. From his boyhood in coastal Beaufort he was already familiar with boats and their operation, and he proved a quick study, learning the myriad channels, currents, and shoals of Charleston Harbor. John Simmons, a white rigger and sail maker who took a liking to the young man, mentored him in shipboard work and navigation, and by 1861 Smalls was the wheelman (blacks were not allowed to hold the title of pilot) aboard the *Planter*, a cotton-hauling steamer plying the rivers and inlets between Charleston and the Sea Islands. One hundred fifty feet in length and able to carry fourteen hundred bales, it was, because of its four-foot draft, ideal for maneuvering in the shallow coastal waterways. When war broke out, the boat was quickly commissioned by the Confederacy. Guns were installed on its foredeck and afterdeck, and it was immediately put to use ferrying troops, laying mines, and servicing the work crews building the harbor's fortifications.

Smalls's travels at the helm of the *Planter* frequently brought him into the vicinity of his old home at Beaufort, although after fall 1861 no Confederate vessel could approach the place. On November 7, Union naval forces seeking a Southern anchorage for their blockade had bombarded and then invaded the Sea Islands, one of the first portions of the Confederacy to be conquered by federal troops. The South chose not to defend the outlying region, and local plantation owners fled the arriving Union forces, leaving behind their crops, stately homes, and as many as ten thousand slaves.

The Union toehold on the Sea Islands was of great military value, but the area became another kind of beachhead the following spring, with the arrival of two shiploads of Northern abolitionists. These missionaries, men and women from Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, perceived in the abandonment of the blacks of the coastal islands an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate that, with the proper guidance, former slaves could exercise the virtues of citizenship and free labor. "The Port Royal Experiment," as it became known, was meant to prove the adaptability of free blacks, their eagerness to be educated, and their viability as wage laborers, so as to ease Northern concerns about emancipation. The endeavor proved more complex than anticipated. Though the departed slaveholders were not missed, their sudden exit was wrenching to the social hierarchy of the islands and raised difficult questions: how to restart the islands' agricultural economy, bring in crops, open schools, and decide whether the former slaves would own land or what civil rights they might enjoy. Indeed, even in the Sea Islands had raced well ahead of the formulation of the federal government's own policy toward slaves liberated from their masters by advancing Union armies: were the slaves to be regarded as other people's property or as free human beings?

If federal authorities continued to wrestle with such matters, there was for Robert Smalls little confusion. It had been no secret to him, or most other slaves, that the victory of Abraham Lincoln in the election of 1860, and the outbreak of war itself, held the definite potential for freedom. Looking out on clear evenings from the pilothouse of the *Planter*, Smalls could see the lights of Beaufort and marvel at the fact that his mother and other relations and friends there were already free.

By spring 1862, with the federal lines so close, Smalls and the other slaves on the *Planter* began talking of crossing over, perhaps using the boat itself as a means of deliverance. Any slave caught plotting such an act, let alone carrying it out, would be killed, and Smalls understood that neither his connections to a good Southern family like the McKees nor his usefulness as a ship's pilot would save him. But he agreed with his mates to discuss the notion further and to watch for an opportunity to escape.

They had several advantages. Smalls knew the placement of the Confederate batteries and the location of all the mines in Charleston Harbor—he had helped put them there—as well as the signals needed to pass by the harbor defenses. He later explained that the scheme for using the boat to escape was partly inspired by a casual remark made by one of his crew that, in height and build, he resembled the ship's white skipper. One afternoon when the whites were elsewhere, the crewman had playfully slapped Captain C. J. Relyea's distinctive straw hat onto Smalls's head and exclaimed, "Boy, you looks jes like de captain."

The *Planter* returned to Charleston on May 12 after having spent nearly a week moving guns from Cole's Island to James Island. Smalls suspected that since the boat had not berthed in Charleston for many nights, its white officers would likely choose to spend the night ashore, leaving him in charge. (This violated Confederate naval policy—at least one officer was required to remain with the ship at all times—but the rule was often disregarded.) In the afternoon a wagon carrying two hundred pounds of ammunition and four small pieces of artillery arrived at the wharf for transport to Fort Ripley, a newly built harbor fortification. Realizing this cargo would be a substantial prize for the Union forces, Smalls quietly ordered his men to take their time loading it onto the *Planter*, so that the delivery to Fort Ripley would be put off until the next day.

Once the whites had departed, Smalls and his fellow conspirators made their final arrangements and then laid low until about 2 A.M., when he ordered the boilers fired. As a precaution, Smalls had told the crew that if a sentry came by, they should complain loudly and bitterly about the early morning departure and curse "the cap'n and his orders." A sentry on the wharf did hear the steamer come to life but later recalled he did not "think it necessary to stop her, presuming that she was but pursuing her usual business."

Smalls had timed their departure so that his ability to impersonate Captain Relyea would work to maximum effect. If they tried to pass Fort Sumter in total darkness, he feared the sentry there might demand to speak with him to ascertain his identity; but Smalls surmised that in the half-light just before dawn, Relyea's profile, his naval jacket, trademark straw hat, and even his characteristic way of pacing the deck, which Smalls had learned to mimic, would suffice to allow the boat to pass without inspection. Having positioned himself in the pilothouse as the vessel reached Fort Sumter, he "stood so that the sentinel could not see my color" and nonchalantly gave the correct series of short blasts on the ship's steam whistle. After a pause that must have seemed an eternity, the sentinel replied, "Pass the *Planter*..."

Once past Sumter, Smalls at first followed the set route for Confederate vessels departing the harbor, heading southeast in order to hug the coast along Fort Wagner. But he did not complete that final turn. Crying down to the engine room to cram the boilers "with pitch, tar, oil, anything to make fire seven times heated," Smalls abruptly swung the *Planter* toward the open sea. Confederate signalers atop the shore batteries expressed concern, querying the *Planter* as to why it was heading th

wrong way. Had they grasped Smalls's intentions, they might have succeeded in bringing the ship under fire, but with the *Planter's* furnaces roaring, the boat was in moments safely out of range. As the ocean waves crashed over the speeding bow, Smalls removed Relyea's hat and exulted to his companions, "We're all free niggers now!"

They were in fact hardly out of danger. The Union boat crews manning the blockade had sprung to life as the *Planter* approached, worried that the unknown vessel might be a Confederate ram. Smalls, from his bridge, heard drums being beaten in a call to arms. He quickly ordered the Confederate flag hauled down and a white bed sheet hoisted in its stead.

"Ahoy there," a voice from the Union ship *Onward* called out, "what steamer is that? State your business!"

"The *Planter*, out of Charleston," Smalls replied. "Come to join the Union fleet."

A very surprised Captain F. J. Nichols of the *Onward* was the first aboard the Confederate boat, where he was surrounded by Smalls and his band of exuberant runaways. Nichols later reported that he was told by "the very intelligent contraband who was in charge...I thought the *Planter* might be of some use to Uncle Abe."

The next day's notice in the *Charleston Courier* took a less cheery tone. "Our community was intensely agitated Tuesday morning by the intelligence that the steamer *Planter* ...had been taken possession by her colored crew, steamed up and boldly run out to the blockaders," the article read. "The news at first was not credited; and it was not until, by the aid of glasses, she was discovered, lying between two Federal frigates, that all doubt on the subject was dispelled." The paper, in its account of "this extraordinary occurrence," noted that one of the Negroes aboard the boat belonged to Mrs. McKee, and reported that it appeared from shore that the Yankees were already stripping the captured ship of its deck guns. This represented a hurtful loss at a time when the Confederacy was desperate for reliable ordnance, but to the federals, the acquisition of the *Planter's* guns was only a secondary gift. The greater prize was the boat itself, for the Union navy lacked vessels with a shallow draft, able to operate in the channels around the Sea Islands. Equally important, the United States had gained the services of Robert Smalls, whose knowledge of the local waters, as well as his intelligence about the positions of Confederate mines and gun emplacements, would be invaluable.

Harper's Weekly and the *New York Tribune* were among many Northern periodicals to herald the theft of the *Planter*; *Harper's* ran an illustration of Smalls, terming his feat "one of the most daring and heroic adventures since the war commenced." The blow to the South's pride was commensurate, and its newspapers demanded harsh penalties for the white officers who had allowed slaves to steal a valuable boat. General Robert E. Lee wrote from Richmond that all precautions must be taken to ensure such an avoidable tragedy did not recur. (Captain Relyea and two of his officers were convicted of disobedience in the case but evaded punishment.)



ROBERT SMALLS AND THE *PLANTER*

Smalls's daring act not only boosted Northern morale but also represented a decisive victory for his people. At a time when America's leaders could not agree on what to do with blacks freed from bondage by the war, and when even many abolitionists were uncertain about former slaves' potential as independent workers and citizens, the *Planter's* story made a compelling case for their native pluck and resourcefulness. "What a painful instance we have here of the Negro's inability to take care of himself," deadpanned the *Providence Journal*. "If Smalls had a suitable white overseer, he would never have done this foolish and thoughtless thing. Such fellows need a superior who is familiar with the intentions of divine providence and who could tell them where they were meant to stay."

Smalls's action had an immediate effect on a debate then roiling Washington as to whether blacks emerging from slavery could serve as soldiers in the Union armies. Smalls himself was soon given the chance to advocate for their inclusion.

From the war's beginning, a vocal element in the North had argued for emancipating the slaves in order to ground the nation's conflict in a moral cause, demoralize the South, and possibly create a new source of troops. But President Abraham Lincoln hesitated. To cast the fight as a war of emancipation rather than one that solely aimed to reunite the Union, would, he feared, alienate the border states and push them into the Confederacy. "My paramount object in this struggle," Lincoln proclaimed, "is to save the Union. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would do that." It was thought by many, including Lincoln, that an emigration program to resettle the slaves would be required if four million blacks were suddenly to become free; until early 1863, the government even entertained the hope that the South, or parts thereof, might return to the Union voluntarily, perhaps with some program of gradual emancipation and compensation to slaveholders

for their loss.

Curiously, the militarization of blacks was originally a Southern strategy; Negro regiments were formed in Georgia, Tennessee, and Louisiana in the early months of the war. The Confederacy's battlefield successes in 1861 and 1862, however, convinced its leaders that there was no need to use black troops; the practice was repugnant to most Southerners anyway, and so the men were largely sent home. (Some, like Josiah T. Walls, later a black congressman from Florida, eventually crossed over to the Union forces, becoming one of the few Americans to fight on both sides in the war.) The South did not revisit the idea until early 1865 when, in desperate straits, the Congress of the Confederate States agreed to let General Lee seek the enlistment of black troops; within weeks, however, the rebel cause was lost.

Union policies were ultimately pushed toward resolution by the slaves themselves, for the eagerness of black refugees to flee their masters was evident wherever federal troops advanced. "War has not been waged against slavery," Secretary of State William H. Seward wrote, "yet the army acts ... as an emancipating crusade." In May 1861 a weak compromise on the issue was reached in Virginia where the Union general Benjamin F. Butler, commander of Union forces at Fortress Monroe, was confronted with three runaway slaves seeking his protection. One, George Scott, told Butler that the Confederates had put him and other slaves to work building gun emplacements and ramparts. At Butler's behest, Scott guided a Union scouting mission to the enemy's lines to verify this claim. When soon after, a Confederate officer came to Butler's headquarters under a flag of truce to claim Scott and the other two runaways, Butler refused to release them. In moving his army through Maryland, he had promised state officials he would not act to incite slaves to insurrection. Now, however, he couldn't help but wonder why he should return slaves known to be assisting the Confederate war effort. At the suggestion of one of his aides, Butler resolved the situation by declaring Scott and the others "contraband of war."

The designation was much discussed in Washington. The term "contraband" implied ownership and conveniently did not call into question the legal basis of slavery. It fit nicely within the strictures of the First Confiscation Act, passed in August 1861, which allowed federal troops to take command of any property being used to abet or promote the Southern rebellion, including slaves laboring for the Confederate military effort. Officially the concept of confiscation was to go no further. When the Union general John C. Fremont declared martial law in Missouri in late summer 1861 and pronounced the local slaves free, Lincoln immediately rescinded the order. But even though the president had canceled Fremont's action, and members of his cabinet continued to parse the meaning of Butler's "contraband," the significance for black people still in bondage was clear: they would not be returned to their owners once they reached federal lines.

The pressure on Washington increased in spring 1862 when the Union general David Hunter, relieving General William T. Sherman as commander of the Sea Islands, announced his decision to turn the numerous contrabands in his charge into soldiers. Hunter, upon taking over Sherman's command, had wasted little time in seizing Fort Pulaski, a strategic post at the sea approach to Savannah, and he was eager for additional conquests. He had written to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton of his special desire to retake Fort Sumter for the Union cause. With such ambitions, it was natural that he saw the thousands of ex-slaves gathering at Port Royal as potential troops and hoped that an earlier order from the former secretary of war, Simon Cameron, authorizing Sherman to employ "loyal persons," might effectively cover the action he contemplated. "Please let me have my

own way on the subject of slavery," he asked of Stanton as early as January. "The administration will not be responsible. I alone will bear the blame; you can censure me, arrest me, dismiss me, hang me you will, but permit me to make my mark in such a way as to be remembered by friend and foe."

There were doubts in Washington as to the battle-worthiness of men so recently slaves, but Hunter's bold approach had the support of many who believed black men *would* fight, and fight hard, for freedom. "Nothing would please me more, and bring the race into favor," wrote the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, "than to see Southern chivalry well whipped by an equal number of black men. It would indeed be refreshing." Black Americans, slave and free, had a proud martial heritage extending from Bunker Hill to the Plain of Chalmette—a tradition of loyalty and courage under fire that was often conveniently forgotten by whites. As Douglass later recalled, "I reproached the North that they fought the rebels with only one hand, when they might strike effectively with two—that they fought with their soft white hand, while they kept their black iron hand chained and helpless behind them."

General Hunter acted in stages to bring in blacks as soldiers. On April 4 he wrote to Stanton to request fifty thousand muskets and fifty thousand pairs of scarlet pantaloons, the latter to distinguish contraband troops on the battlefield; on April 13 he declared that some of the contrabands in his district were henceforth to be considered free; and soon after, he announced his intention to organize blacks into military regiments. Recruitment, however, did not go as smoothly as Hunter wished. Many former slaves were eager to join the ranks, but others resisted the idea of returning so soon to any form of white authority. Some fled to the woods at the approach of federal recruiters, fearful because of rumors, spread by Southerners, that the Yankees would ship them to Cuba to be reenslaved or harness them to wagons and use them as horses. To help urge enlistment, Hunter declared all the slaves of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina free, and on May 9, a few days before Robert Smalls's theft of the *Planter*, which Hunter's actions likely encouraged, he ordered all able-bodied male blacks ages eighteen to forty-five, to report to Hilton Head for possible induction.

Hunter's decisions confounded official Washington, for the previous fall President Lincoln had ordered General Sherman not to mobilize blacks for regular military service. When Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln's secretary of the treasury, urged the president to allow Hunter's declaration to stand, assuring him that his supporters would rally around the idea, Lincoln testily warned Chase, "No commanding general shall do such a thing, upon *my* responsibility, without consulting me." Lincoln forced Hunter to immediately retract his declarations. Hunter did as he was told but did not relinquish his vision; when the House of Representatives formally inquired by what authority he had sought to arm "fugitive slaves," Hunter assured its members that

no regiment of "fugitive slaves" has been or is organized in this department. There is, however, a fine regiment of persons whose late masters are "fugitive rebels," men who everywhere fly before the appearance of the national flag, leaving their servants behind them to shift as best they can for themselves ... It is the masters who have, in every instance, been the "fugitives," running away from loyal slaves as well as loyal soldiers, and whom we have only partially been able to see ... their heads over ramparts, or, rifle in hand, dodging behind trees in the extreme distance.

Hunter's letter, read aloud in the House, amused the inquiring congressmen and may have helped win a reprieve for his campaign. He followed up by dispatching Robert Smalls as part of a South

Carolina delegation to convince President Lincoln of the potential of blacks as loyal fighting men. Smalls was, for the moment, one of the few military heroes the North had; the story of how he turned the tables on his Confederate masters was widely reported, and Smalls himself had quickly developed a knack for self-promotion, cheekily having himself photographed wearing Captain Relyea's uniform.

On August 16, 1862, Smalls and the Reverend Mansfield French, a Methodist minister from Ohio who had helped found Wilberforce University and now worked for the American Missionary Association at Port Royal, arrived in Washington to meet with Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton. The two also met with other cabinet members, including Treasury Secretary Chase. French and Smalls were well received, their firsthand knowledge of conditions on the ground in coastal South Carolina informing the discussions; but, as Hunter had likely anticipated, what everyone most wanted to hear was Robert Smalls's thrilling story of taking the *Planter*. There simply was no better argument for making contrabands into soldiers.

Powerful support arrived that same week from Horace Greeley, the influential publisher of the *New York Tribune* and a confidant of Chase. In an August 19 editorial titled "The Prayer of Twenty Millions," Greeley called on Lincoln to reconfigure the nation's war policy to acknowledge the root cause of the conflict and alleviate it by freeing the slaves. "On the face of this wide earth, Mr. President," Greeley wrote, "there is not one disinterested, determined, intelligent champion of the Union cause who does not feel that ... the Rebellion, if crushed out tomorrow, would be renewed within a year if slavery were left in full vigor; that army officers who remain to this day devoted to slavery can at best be but half-way loyal to the Union; and that every hour of deference to slavery is a hour of added and deepened peril to the Union." The article was much-reprinted and quoted, and it bolstered the case for allowing contrabands an active part in the war effort. As James T. Ayers, later recruiter of black troops in the conquered areas of the South, remarked, "As they waged war on us about the nigger, why, in God's name give them the nigger ... A wise and good administration, handled by Sambo, at the Britch of a good musket, surely is a plaster good enough for traitors." Through the efforts of men like Ayers, more than half the black soldiers to serve the Union cause would be recruited in the states belonging to the Confederacy.

Lincoln, although advised by many, including Vice President Hannibal Hamlin, of the efficacy of turning slaves into fighting men, still preferred, publicly at least, not to make any sweeping gestures. The president worried that "the organization, equipment, and arming of negroes would be productive of more evil than good," but, according to Chase, "he was not unwilling that commanders should, at their discretion, arm for purely defensive purposes, slaves coming within their lines." Stanton had learned from the Frémont and Hunter episodes that Lincoln did not like bold steps regarding the volatile issue of arming blacks, although he believed Lincoln would accept judicious moves in this direction by responsible officers. The Second Confiscation Act, which Congress passed in July 1862, allowed the president to use confiscated slaves "as he may judge best for the public welfare," implying possible military service. That summer, Lincoln had also begun discussing with his cabinet the idea of using his war powers as president to free all slaves held in Confederate lands. When he shared with them his first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation in late July, he also issued an order that black men, slave or free, could be recruited as noncombat soldiers. In late August, when Smalls and French returned to the South, Stanton gave Smalls a letter to take back to General Rufus Saxton, quartermaster at Port Royal, authorizing him to enlist and arm five thousand blacks for guard duty—keep watch over conquered Sea Island plantations and protect black settlements from possible rebel attacks. The letter further decreed that all black volunteers in this effort, and their immediate familie

were to be "forever free."



BLACK TROOPS MUSTERING

To take command of the First South Carolina, the first Union force comprised exclusively of freed slaves, General Saxton invited the New England abolitionist minister and writer Thomas Wentworth Higginson to Port Royal. Saxton's choice was largely a public relations move, for Higginson had been a colleague of the abolitionist martyr John Brown. "I had been an abolitionist too long, and had known and loved John Brown too well," Higginson wrote, "not to feel a thrill of joy at last on finding myself in the position where he only wished to be." In the 1840s Higginson had lost his pulpit in Newburyport, Massachusetts, because he advocated the use of violence to overthrow slavery and he achieved lasting notoriety in Boston in 1854 when he led, and was wounded in, a failed effort to rescue the captured fugitive slave Anthony Burns. He would write a series of influential articles for the *Atlantic Monthly* about his experiences leading black fighting men.

When officials in Massachusetts announced plans to enlist a black regiment, the first one from a free state, Frederick Douglass threw himself into recruitment. "Action! Action!" he enthused. "There is no time for delay. The tide is at its flood that leads on to fortune. From East to West, North to South, the sky is written all over, 'Now, or never.'" He urged black men to join at once. "The iron gates of our prison stands half open. One gallant rush from the North will fling it wide open, while four millions of our brothers and sisters shall march out into Liberty!"

From its unsure beginnings at Port Royal, General Hunter's dream of armed black men in Union blue set to punish the Confederacy became a substantial reality; by war's end almost 180,000 black Americans had worn Union army uniforms, while 24,000 served in the navy; a total of 37,000 sacrificed their lives. The famous assault on Fort Wagner by the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteers on July 18, 1863, led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, is the best-known tale of blacks' Civil War heroism, although Higginson's men skirmished with rebels as early as the winter of 1862–63 along South Carolina's coastal rivers, and ex-slaves showed tremendous valor that spring on the lower Mississippi below Vicksburg, where, on May 23, 1863, black Louisiana regiments advanced against Confederate shellfire at the Battle of Port Hudson.

Two weeks later Confederate forces attacked the federal encampment at Milliken's Bend in an effort to break the supply line supporting General Grant's siege of Vicksburg. The bloody fight—became a grudge match between newly minted black soldiers and their former masters. "The planters had boasted," reported the black writer William Wells Brown, "that, should they meet their former slaves, a single look from them would cause the negroes to throw down their weapons, and run." But when the two sides converged, the black troops, although outnumbered, countercharged the advancing enemy. "It was a genuine bayonet charge, a hand-to-hand fight, a contest between enraged men: on the one side, from hatred of a race; and on the other, desire for self-preservation, revenge for past grievances, and the inhuman murder of their comrades." That the fight was fierce and unrelenting was seen clearly in its aftermath. "White and black men were lying side by side, pierced by bayonets, and in some instances transfixed to the earth. In one instance, two men—one white and the other black—were found dead, side by side, each having the other's bayonet through his body."

Of the thousand or so black soldiers engaged in the battle, 652 were reported killed, wounded, or missing, several times the loss of 160 white Union troops. But an enduring statement had been made. A federal captain on the scene, after walking among the dead and dying on the stillsmoldering battlefield, told a Northern newspaperman, "I never more wish to hear the expression, 'The nigger won't fight'"

For all the freedmen who served under arms, the near-overnight conversion from chattel to soldier, "from the shame of degradation to the glory of military exaltation," had been overwhelming. For Robert Smalls, whose theft of the *Planter* had brought him acclaim and even influence with the authorities in Washington, the effect was hundredfold: national magazines sang his praises, a fort near Pittsburgh was named for him, while back home in the Sea Islands his childhood was re-counted by many with special pride and remembered for its early indications of his heroic character.



THE BATTLE OF PORT HUDSON

No one, however, could accuse him of resting on his laurels, as he went on to participate in seventeen deadly encounters with the enemy. The most dramatic came on April 7, 1863, when Smalls piloted the double-turret ironclad *Keokuk* in a fleet of six Union ironclads attempting to retake Charleston. The rebels, having thoroughly mined the waters around Fort Sumter and carefully

rehearsed how to concentrate their shore-based artillery in case of assault, pounded the invading federal boats. Two small Confederate ironclads, the *Chicora* and the *Palmetto State*, also engaged the Yankee intruders. The lead Union vessel, the *Weehawken*, got caught in a defensive net while another, the *New Ironsides*, stalled and blocked the ships following in its wake. Smalls's wheelman, standing directly beside him, was killed by a blast to the face, and the *Keokuk*, struck nearly a hundred times by blistering cannon fire from Fort Sumter, was disabled and eventually sank. Smalls was one of the few survivors.

The South thrilled to the victory. A year before at Hampton Roads, in March 1862, the fabled shooting match between the federal ironclad *Monitor* and its Southern counterpart, the *Merrimac*, had ended in a draw, but the repulsion of Union ironclads at Charleston demonstrated that the newfangled boats could be defeated by shore defenses and that the city could withstand an attack from the sea.

Later that year, Smalls was caught in another bloody scrape in the mouth of the Stono River at Folly Island Creek, this time piloting the *Planter*. Whenever Union vessels crept into the watery interior of coastal South Carolina, they risked a loss of maneuverability and the threat of taking close bombardment or sniper fire from shore. The Confederates, trapping Smalls's ship in a narrow part of the river and recognizing it as a stolen prize, resolved to recapture or destroy it, hemming the *Planter* in with an artillery crossfire that shredded the upper part of the wooden boat. When the captain, in the heat of battle, ordered Smalls to ground the vessel and surrender, Smalls emphatically declined. "Not by a damned sight will I beach this boat for you!" he shouted, warning that as far as the rebels were concerned, he and the crewmen were all runaway slaves, and that "No quarter will be shown us!" At that point, according to a later congressional report, "Captain Nickerson became demoralized, and let the pilot-house and secured himself in the coal-bunker." Smalls took control, somehow managing to steer the *Planter* out of range of the Southern guns. Nickerson was dishonorably discharged for his performance, and Smalls, cited for his coolness and bravery under fire, was made the boat's captain.

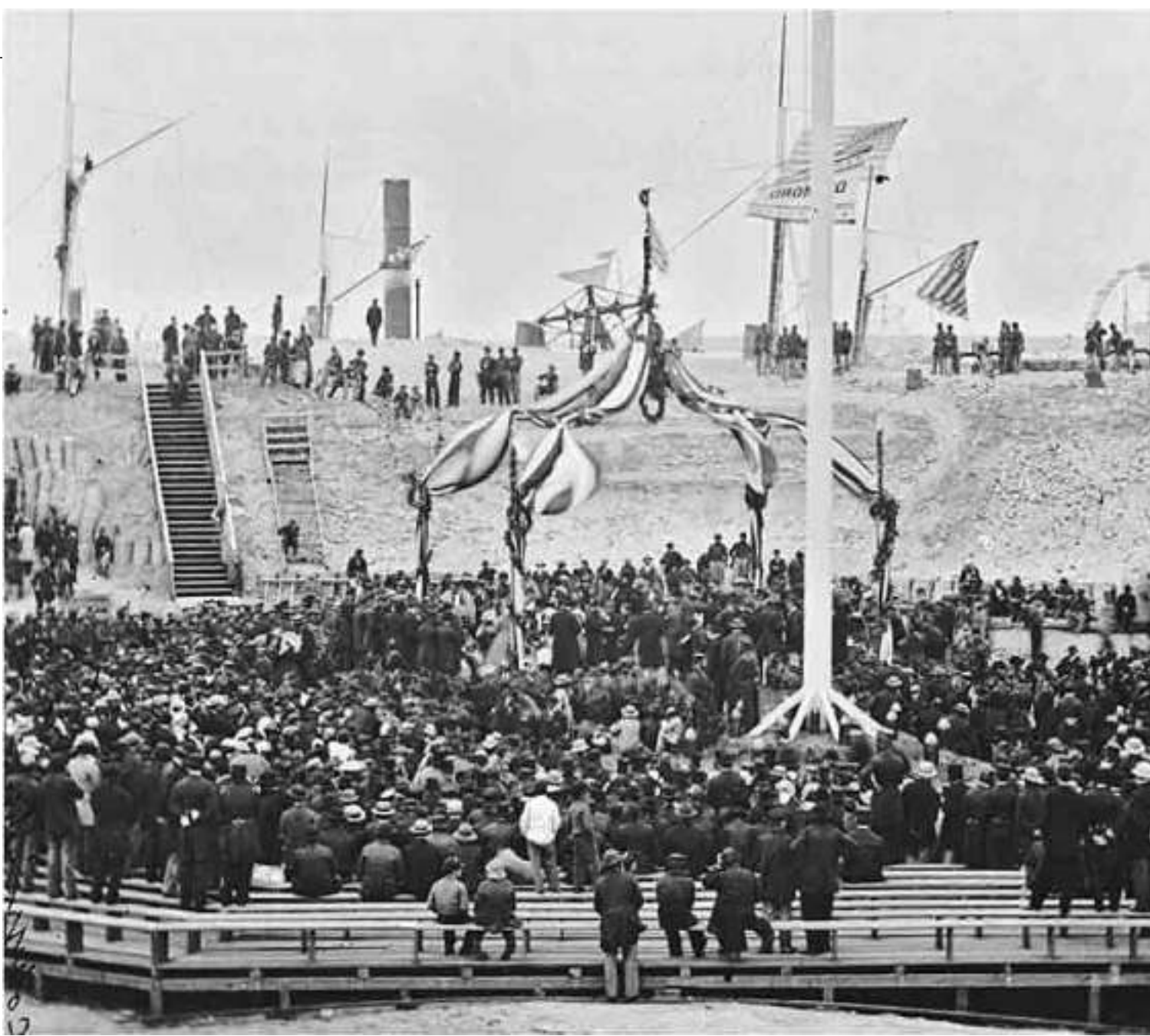
In the spring of 1864 he was ordered to sail the *Planter* to a shipyard in Philadelphia for repairs, when the work on the boat stretched from weeks into months, Smalls made himself at home in the northern city. Charlotte Forten, a black Philadelphian working as a teacher in the Sea Islands, had written letters of introduction for him to the city's substantial abolitionist community. Smalls busied himself by monitoring work on the *Planter* and raising money to assist the freedmen at Port Royal.

One day in December, Smalls and a black acquaintance were walking back to town from the shipyard when, to escape a sudden downpour, they boarded an empty streetcar. A few minutes later two white men got on, and the conductor told the blacks to leave their seats and go stand on the car's rear platform. Smalls refused. When the conductor insisted, he and his companion got off the car. Smalls was inclined to forget the incident, but the local press learned of it and denounced the fact that "a war hero who had run a rebel vessel out of Charleston and given it to the Union fleet ... was recently put out of a Thirteenth Street car." Broadsides went up, and a committee of Quakers announced a boycott of the streetcars, vowing to no longer allow a practice by which decent "colored men, women and children are refused admittance to the cars," while "the worst class of whites may ride." At a spirited mass meeting, concerned Philadelphians were addressed by local luminaries including financier Jay Cooke and locomotive manufacturer Matthias W. Baldwin. In the face of such aroused sentiment, the city's streetcar lines capitulated, the protest helping to inspire the state legislature to ultimately ban discrimination in public transportation throughout Pennsylvania.

That same year Smalls went to Baltimore to join a delegation of black South Carolinians at the Republican National Convention. The group was neither seated nor recognized by the chair, but they made history by formally petitioning the party to include black enfranchisement in its platform. At the time, with emancipation itself a recent development, the request by Smalls and his colleagues for the vote was not likely to get a hearing, even if their presence had been formally acknowledged; however, it was said that the black delegation from the secessionist state of South Carolina was the convention's chief curiosity.

At war's end, Smalls had a place of prominence at the April 14, 1865, celebration in Charleston, marking the anniversary of the firing on Fort Sumter. The ceremonial centerpiece of the day-long event was the hoisting of the Stars and Stripes over the fort by Major General Robert Anderson, the Union officer who had been forced to surrender it in 1861. The Carolina spring day was by all accounts most accommodating, the air "spiced with the aroma of flowers and freighted with the melody of birds, all guiltless of secession, and warbling their welcome." Men, women, and children filled the sidewalks and plazas, waving tiny flags and trying to catch a glimpse of the celebration in the harbor, where hundreds of festooned boats sounded their horns and bells and dispatched fireworks into the sky. On cue, as the American flag rose to its perch above the fort, all the guns in the harbor and those on shore fired a deafening salute.

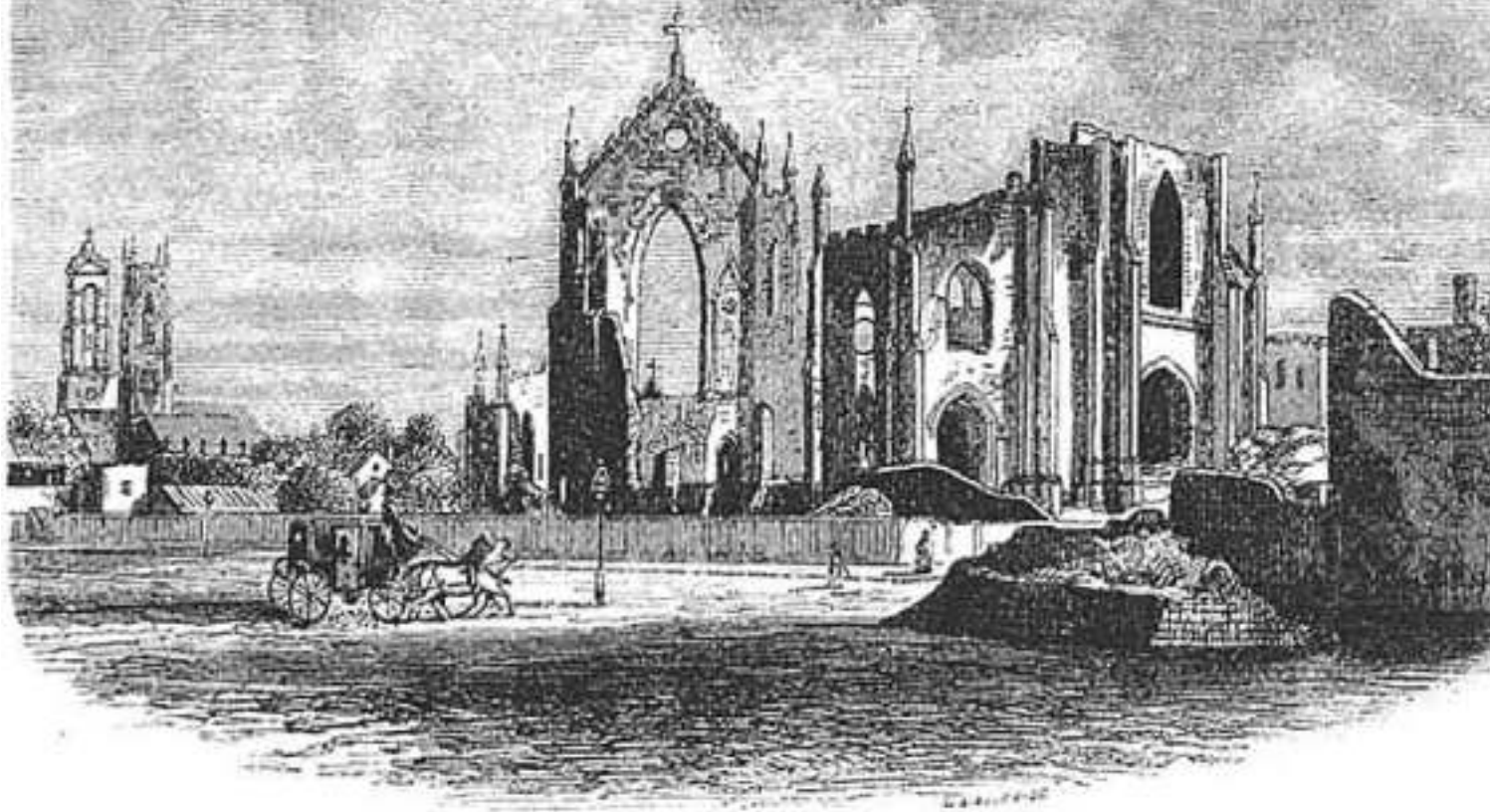
The abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Henry Ward Beecher were among those who had traveled from Boston and New York to witness the ceremony. Garrison was the editor of the *Liberator*, the nation's most ardent abolitionist publication, and a founder, along with his fellow Bostonian Phillips, of the influential American Anti-Slavery Society. Beecher, the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, occupied the most famous pulpit in the country at Brooklyn's Plymouth Church. This was a day of tremendous vindication for these men and their principled fight against slavery. The abolitionists had been abused for three decades, criticized as hateful agitators, and worse; Garrison had been stripped of his clothes by a Boston mob and almost hanged; Phillips had nearly been killed at a public meeting in Cincinnati by a boulder hurled down from a balcony.



THE RAISING OF THE FLAG AT FORT SUMTER

The freed people of Charleston rewarded their travails with a warm welcome. At a mass rally in Citadel Square, the diminutive Garrison was hoisted up into the air to seemingly float on a sea of smiling black faces. In a formal presentation, a speaker assured him that the "pulsations" of the heart of the black people gathered "are unimaginable. The greeting they would give you, sir, it is almost impossible for me to express; but simply, sir, we welcome and look upon you as our savior." Garrison, equally moved, replied,

It is not on account of your complexion or race ... that I espoused your cause, but because you were the children of a common Father, created in the same divine image, having the same inalienable rights, and as much entitled to liberty as the proudest slaveholder that ever walked the earth ... While God gives me reason and strength, I shall demand for you everything I claim for the whitest of the white in this country.



THE RUINS OF CHARLESTON

Both Robert Smalls and his now equally famous boat were also objects of interest to the crowd along the waterfront; Smalls posed gallantly atop the *Planter's* wheelhouse as visitors swarmed over its decks. An American flag was run up the boat's rigging to coincide with the flag raising at Sumter, and as it inched its way to the top, the crowd on the decks below followed its progress with a mounting cheer, until the pennant finally attained the pinnacle, to great applause. "Tears of gladness filled every eye," it was said, "and flowed down cheeks unused to weeping." Even Smalls succumbed to the moment, clumsily backing the *Planter* into another ship loaded with Union dignitaries.

The splendor of the April 14 jubilee in Charleston would glitter all the more in the memory of those who had attended because of the grim event that occurred that very night in Washington: the assassination of President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre. While it was not entirely clear what steps Lincoln would have taken to reintegrate the South into the Union, his sudden disappearance at a moment of such profound need could only deepen the country's uncertainty. Immense challenges lay ahead, nowhere more visibly than in South Carolina. Of 146,000 white males residing in South Carolina in 1860, 40,000 had been killed or seriously wounded in the war. Charleston itself, South Carolina's chief commercial port, had endured heavy Union naval shelling; of its five thousand houses, fifteen hundred had been destroyed and many others badly damaged. Much business property had been confiscated or was now worthless. "Of all the states overwhelmed by the rebellion, none lies so terribly mangled and so utterly exhausted as its prime mover, South Carolina," observed the *New York Times*, reminding readers that South Carolina was the birthplace of secession and that "its people have been longer and

more virulently alienated from the National Government than those of any other state."

Perhaps of even deeper significance than the physical damage was the sudden shift in the legal status of the bulk of South Carolina's residents: approximately 400,000 slaves, contrasted with a white population of less than 300,000, were now free. Politically, as well as socially, such demographics represented seismic change, auguring a future that few could imagine. Robert Smalls was destined to play a central role in this unprecedented transition, which was already being referred to by the not-yet-familiar term "Reconstruction."

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