

# Robert Smalls

Created by Jacob Hamill, SCDNR Heritage Trust Archivist (2018).

## Grade Level

3-8<sup>th</sup>, High School English & U.S. History

## Estimated Time

1–1 ½ hours. More time may be allotted for presentations.

## Goal

Students will learn about the life and exploits of Robert Smalls, a slave in Charleston during the Civil War who gained his freedom by stealing a Confederate ship. Students will interpret and present Smalls's story for two different mediums - a short play and a public monument - and then discuss how their interpretations differed, in addition to their writing and thought process, depending on the medium.

## Objectives

After completion of the activity and viewing of the Fort Lamar documentary films, students will be able to:

1. *Observe* historical events featured in the Fort Lamar documentary films.
2. *Summarize* key events of the documentary films.
3. *Identify* the location of Fort Lamar and the Battle of Secessionville in South Carolina.
4. *Explain* the significance of the Battle of Secessionville in the context of the Civil War.
5. *Identify* Robert Smalls, and *discuss* his exploits and contributions during the Civil War.
6. *Analyze* the actions of African Americans, enslaved and free, during the Civil War, and their relationship/status to the Confederacy and Union.
7. *Interpret* a historical narrative and adapt it to different mediums, such as a short play or fictional public monument.
8. *Reflect* on their thinking process, and *discuss* how they chose to adapt Robert Smalls's story depending on the given medium.

## Academic Standards

### English

Inquiry-Based Literacy Standards (I)

- 3-3 Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis.
- 3-4 Synthesize information to share learning and/or take action.

- 4-3 Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis.
- 4-4 Synthesize information to share learning and/or take action.
- 5-3 Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis.
- 5-4 Synthesize information to share learning and/or take action.
- 6-3 Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis.
- 6-4 Synthesize integrated information to share learning and/or take action.
- 7-3 Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis.
- 7-4 Synthesize integrated information to share learning and/or take action.
- 8-3 Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis.
- 8-4 Synthesize integrated information to share learning and/or take action.
- E1-3 Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis.
- E1-4 Synthesize information to share learning and/or take action.

### ***English***

#### Communication (C)

- 3-1 Interact with others to explore ideas and concepts, communicate meaning, and develop logical interpretations through collaborative conversations; build upon the ideas of others to clearly express one's own views while respecting diverse perspectives.
- 3-3 Communicate information through strategic use of multiple modalities and multimedia to enrich understanding when presenting ideas and information.
- 4-1 Interact with others to explore ideas and concepts, communicate meaning, and develop logical interpretations through collaborative conversations; build upon the ideas of others to clearly express one's own views while respecting diverse perspectives.
- 4-3 Communicate information through strategic use of multiple modalities and multimedia to enrich understanding when presenting ideas and information.
- 5-1 Interact with others to explore ideas and concepts, communicate meaning, and develop logical interpretations through collaborative conversations; build upon the ideas of others to clearly express one's own views while respecting diverse perspectives.
- 5-3 Communicate information through strategic use of multiple modalities and multimedia to enrich understanding when presenting ideas and information.
- 6-1 Interact with others to explore ideas and concepts, communicate meaning, and develop logical interpretations through collaborative conversations; build upon the ideas of others to clearly express one's own views while respecting diverse perspectives.

- 6-3 Communicate information through strategic use of multiple modalities and multimedia to enrich understanding when presenting ideas and information.
- 7-1 Interact with others to explore ideas and concepts, communicate meaning, and develop logical interpretations through collaborative conversations; build upon the ideas of others to clearly express one's own views while respecting diverse perspectives.
- 7-3 Communicate information through strategic use of multiple modalities and multimedia to enrich understanding when presenting ideas and information.
- 8-1 Interact with others to explore ideas and concepts, communicate meaning, and develop logical interpretations through collaborative conversations; build upon the ideas of others to clearly express one's own views while respecting diverse perspectives.
- 8-3 Communicate information through strategic use of multiple modalities and multimedia to enrich understanding when presenting ideas and information.
- E1-1 Interact with others to explore ideas and concepts, communicate meaning, and develop logical interpretations through collaborative conversations; build upon the ideas of others to clearly express one's own views while respecting diverse perspectives.
- E1-3 Communicate information through strategic use of multiple modalities and multimedia to enrich understanding when presenting ideas and information.

### ***Social Studies***

- 3-4.1 Compare the economic conditions for various classes of people in South Carolina, including the elite, the middle class, the lower class, the independent farmers, and the enslaved and free African Americans.
- 3-4.4 Summarize the course of the Civil War in South Carolina, including the Secession Convention, the firing on Fort Sumter, the Union blockade of Charleston, the significance of the *Hunley* submarine; the exploits of Robert Smalls; and General William T. Sherman's march through the state.
- 4-6.4 Summarize the significant battles, strategies, and turning points of the Civil War, including the battles of Fort Sumter and Gettysburg, the Emancipation Proclamation, the role of African Americans in the war, the surrender at Appomattox, and the assassination of President Lincoln.
- 4-6.5 Explain the social, economic, and political effects of the Civil War on the United States.
- 8-4.5 Compare the military strategies of the North and the South during the Civil War and the fulfillment of these strategies in South Carolina and in the South as a whole, including the attack on Fort Sumter, the Union blockade of Charleston and other ports, the early capture of Port Royal, and the development of the *Hunley* submarine; the exploits of Robert Smalls; and General William T. Sherman's march through the state.
- 8-4.6 Compare the differing impact of the Civil War on South Carolinians in each of the various social classes, including those groups defined by race, gender, and age.

USHC-3.2 Summarize the course of the Civil War and its impact on democracy, including the major turning points; the impact of the Emancipation Proclamation; the unequal treatment afforded to African American military units; the geographic, economic, and political factors in the defeat of the Confederacy; and the ultimate defeat of the idea of secession.

### ***Theatre***

T-1 I can create scenes and write scripts using story elements and structure.

T-3 I can act in improvised scenes and written scripts.

### **Activity Type: In-Class**

This lesson plan is to be done as an in-class activity. The teacher will provide the required materials. Students will provide optional materials for their group presentations.

### **Materials**

- Background Readings
- Optional materials for presentations (as decided by students).

### **Fort Lamar Background**

- By the spring of 1862, Union forces under the leadership of Brigadier General David Hunter, commander of the Union's Department of the South, were poised to launch an assault on Charleston by way of land. A Union victory at the Battle of Port Royal in November of 1861 provided the Federals an excellent staging area for organizing an attack on the city. Logistical information provided by Robert Smalls, a runaway slave who had commandeered a Confederate steamer, the C.S.S. *Planter*, opened the way for Union troops to advance on James Island.
- Capturing Charleston early into 1862 could have dramatically turned the tide of war in the Union's favor. The North could have utilized Charleston's large harbor and railroad connections to launch large-scale campaigns into the South's interior, potentially forcing the Confederacy to divert its eastern forces away from Virginia.
- To protect Charleston's southern flank, the Confederates, under the command of Major General John C. Pemberton, constructed a string of fortifications on James Island, extending from Fort Pemberton on the Stono River to a small fort built on the neck of the Secessionville peninsula. General Pemberton placed South Carolinian Brigadier General Nathan George "Shanks" Evans in charge of the island's defenses.
- The Secessionville fort, then known as the Tower Battery for the watchtower constructed at the site, was flanked by marsh on both sides and was built on the narrowest portion of the peninsula, which measured only 125 yards wide. Colonel Thomas G. Lamar was placed in command of the fort and tasked with overseeing its construction.

- On June 2, 1862, Union forces under the command of Brigadier General Henry W. Benham, who was placed in charge of the operation by General David Hunter, landed on the southwestern tip of James Island at the Grimball Plantation.
- A few minor skirmishes followed as Union forces began to unload supplies and organize troops, in turn prompting the Confederates to reinforce their fortifications.
- Worried that they did not have enough men to capture Charleston, General Hunter ordered General Benham to not advance on Charleston or Fort Johnson until he received reinforcements or direct orders to attack.
- Despite these instructions, in the early morning of June 16th General Benham launched a surprise attack on the Secessionville fort. This force, totaling around 6,500 men organized into two columns, was expected to easily overwhelm the Confederate garrison of 500.
- As the Union force approached the fort, they had to navigate through overgrown hedge rows and open cotton fields, slowing their advance. As the land approaching the fort narrowed, the left side of the Union column was pushed into the marsh, breaking the line and compressing the center, causing the second wave to run into the first.
- At this point, around 5:00 am, the fort's defenders were alerted to the Union's presence. As the Confederates rushed to their stations, Colonel Lamar took personal command of the 8-inch Columbiad cannon. When the Union lines were within two hundred yards of the fort, they were met with the mighty Columbiad's blast.
- Despite sustaining heavy fire from the fort's cannons, the Union forces managed to climb onto the fort's parapets where they fought hand to hand with the Confederate defenders.
- The fort's garrison was quickly reinforced by surrounding Confederate battalions, who were able to repel the Union's foothold.
- The marshes inhibited the Union army from launching a successful flanking maneuver to assist the main assault, as the water and pluff mud proved to be impassable.
- Confederate artillery fire to the Union's flank, in addition to Confederate reinforcements, forced General Benham to order a retreat. Despite the battle only lasting around two and a half hours, losses were heavy.
- The Union sustained nearly 700 casualties, with 107 killed, while the Confederates experienced around 200 casualties, with 52 killed. Most of the battle's casualties occurred either on the narrow peninsula immediately in front of the fort or on the fort itself.
- After the battle, the Secessionville fort, which was referred to as the "Tower Battery" at the time of the battle, was renamed Fort Lamar in honor of its commander. Colonel Lamar, who was wounded during the battle, died a year later from fever contracted while on serving on the island.
- By July 8th, the Union army vacated James Island and returned to Port Royal.
- For disobeying orders and losing the battle, General Benham was court martialed and demoted.

- Fort Lamar was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

## Robert Smalls Biography

- Robert Smalls was born into slavery on April 5, 1839 in Beaufort, South Carolina. Owned by John McKee, Smalls worked in his master's house until 1851 when he was sent to McKee's Charleston home. In Charleston Smalls was rented out as a waterfront worker where he gained expert knowledge of South Carolina's coastal waterways. In 1856 he married Hannah Jones, a slave who worked at a Charleston hotel, and the couple had two children.
- When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the Union quickly sent warships to blockade Charleston's harbor. To white Charlestonians, the blockade was a symbol of Northern tyranny, but to the enslaved, the Union blockade offered a rare chance at freedom if they could somehow circumvent Confederate sentries and reach the Union warships.
- Smalls was conscripted by the Confederacy to serve as a crew member for an outfitted steamboat, the *C.S.S. Planter*. The crew of the *Planter* included Smalls and six other enslaved members, in addition to three white officers. In violation of military orders, the white officers occasionally left the vessel in the hands of its enslaved crew members overnight, believing the slaves were incapable of stealing the vessel and defecting to the Union. Capitalizing on the officers' naivete, Smalls and the other enslaved members of the *Planter* hatched a daring plan that would bring them and their families to freedom.
- In the early morning of May 13, 1862, Smalls put his plan into action. Impersonating the ship's captain by donning a straw hat, Smalls had the crew hoist the Confederate and South Carolina flags, and slipped the *Planter* out of the dock without raising the alarm. The vessel then made its way to the North Atlantic Wharf to pick up Smalls's wife and children, as well as the family members of the other crew members. According to plan, the *Planter* sailed to Fort Johnson and then on to Fort Sumter, where Smalls, disguising himself as the ship's captain, gave the Confederate signals required to pass and sailed by without interruption.
- Nearing the Union blockade, the crew lowered the Confederate and South Carolina flags, and raised a white bedsheet to signal surrender. However, by this point in the morning heavy fog had rolled into the harbor, obscuring the steamer and its white flag. Fearing the *Planter* was a hostile ship attempting to ram them, the crew of the nearby *U.S.S. Onward* readied its guns to fire on the vessel. As the *Planter* grew closer to the Union warship, the *Onward's* crew realized the ship was not hostile. Maneuvering the vessels alongside each other, the crew of the *Planter* rushed to the ship's deck in celebration. Taking off the captain's hat, Smalls shouted, "Good morning, sir! I've brought you some of the old United States guns, sir!"

- Obtaining freedom, Smalls and the other families were sent to Beaufort, which was under Federal control. For commandeering the *Planter*, Robert Smalls was awarded \$1,500, which he used to purchase his former master's home after the war.
- Smalls was later sent to Washington as part of a delegation to argue for the creation of an African American regiment from the emancipated slaves of the South Carolina Lowcountry. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton approved this proposal and Smalls returned to Union occupied South Carolina to rally his fellow freedmen.
- In October of 1862, he returned to Charleston and served aboard a Union ironclad, the *U.S.S. Keokuk*, until the vessel's sinking in April of 1863 off the coast of Morris Island. Smalls then returned to the *Planter*, serving as a pilot and wheelman under a white captain. For his bravery under Confederate cannon fire during a patrol in the Folly Island Creek, Smalls was promoted to the rank of captain in December of 1863. Smalls continued to serve in the Charleston area until the end of the war.
- Following the war, Smalls became a prominent South Carolina politician, serving in the state's assembly and senate, and serving five terms in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1874-1886. While in office, Smalls championed for the political rights of African Americans and argued against Jim Crow. Robert Smalls died on February 22, 1915, in Beaufort, South Carolina, in the same house he was born as a slave.

## Lesson

1. Give a brief overview of Fort Lamar and the Battle of Secessionville.
2. Show the Fort Lamar documentary films. Answer any questions students may have following the documentary.
3. Focus attention on Robert Smalls. Explain that while Robert Smalls's actions were only a small part of the Fort Lamar films, he became a very important and respected figure in the months and years following the Battle of Secessionville.
4. Give a lecture on Robert Smalls's actions aboard the *C.S.S. Planter* on May 13, 1862, as well as his endeavors following his freedom.
5. Emphasize to your students that African Americans (both enslaved and free) were important actors in the Civil War, and many, like Robert Smalls, took direct actions to obtain freedom and aid the Union.
6. Discuss the changing relationship between African Americans in the South and the Union Army. Explore terms, events, and concepts such as contraband, the Port Royal Experiment, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the creation of African American regiments in the Union army, such as Shaw's 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts regiment.
7. Divide the class into two groups. One group will be the "actors" and the other group will be the "interpreters". Explain that both groups will be recounting the actions of Robert Smalls. The actors will be presenting Smalls's story as a short play/skit, while the interpreters will be creating a public monument dedicated to Smalls.

8. Distribute the same background information to both groups using the referenced material below. Other supplementary material may also be used.
9. Allow students enough time to develop their presentations. The acting group should consider what roles each student should play, as well as the structure of their skit. The interpreting group should consider the size and shape of their monument, in addition to what is displayed and what text, if any, is present. Encourage both groups to approach their subject creatively.
10. Have the groups give their presentations. Students should take note of the similarities and differences between their presentations and assigned mediums.
11. After both groups have presented, guide a class discussion. Have your students reflect on their presentations and share their thought processes. Discuss how the different mediums posed different challenges, and how the students approached the narrative differently depending on their given medium.

## References

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- Gates Jr., Henry Louis. The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross - Which slave sailed himself to freedom? *Public Broadcasting Service*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/which-slave-sailed-himself-to-freedom/>, 2013.
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