



*Harper's Weekly* | June 14, 1862

## The Steamer “Planter” and Her Captor.



*Original image from the 1862 Harper's Weekly; the caption read: “Robert Smalls, Captain of the Gun-Boat ‘Planter’.”*

We publish herewith an engraving of the steamer *Planter*, lately run out of Charleston by her negro crew, and a portrait of her captain, ROBERT SMALLS – both from photographs sent us by our correspondent at Hilton Head. The following, from the *Herald* correspondence, will explain the transaction:

One of the most daring and heroic adventures since the war commenced was undertaken and successfully accomplished by a party of negroes in Charleston on Monday night last. Nine colored men, comprising the pilot, engineers, and crew of the rebel gun-boat *Planter*, took the vessel under their exclusive control, passed the batteries and forts in Charleston harbor, hoisted a white flag, ran out to the blockading squadron, and thence to Port Royal, via St. Helena Sound and Broad River, reaching the flag-ship *Wabash* shortly after ten o'clock last evening.

The following are the names of the black men who performed this gallant and perilous service: Robert Smalls, pilot; John Smalls and Alfred Gradine, engineers; Abraham Jackson, Gabriel Turno, William Morrison, Samuel Chisholm, Abraham Allston, and David Jones. They brought with them the wife and three children of the pilot, and the wife, child, and sister of the first engineer, John Smalls. The balance of the party were without families.

The *Planter* is a high-pressure, side-wheel steamer, one hundred and forty feet in length, and about fifty feet beam, and draws about five feet of water. She was built in Charleston, was formerly used as a cotton-boat, and is capable of carrying about 1400 bales. On the organization of the Confederate navy she was transformed into a gun-boat, and was the most valuable war vessel the Confederates had at Charleston. Her armament consisted of one 32-pound rifle gun forward, and a 24-pound howitzer aft.

Besides, she had on board when she came into the harbor one seven-inch rifled gun, one eight-inch Columbiad, one eight-inch howitzer, one long 32-pounder, and about two hundred rounds of ammunition, which had been consigned to Fort Ripley, and which would have been delivered at that fortification on Tuesday had not the designs of the rebel authorities been frustrated. She was

commanded by Captain Relay, of the Confederate navy—all the other employees of the vessel, excepting the first and second mates, being persons of color.

Robert Smalls, with whom I had a brief interview at General Benham's head-quarters this morning, is an intelligent negro, born in Charleston, and employed for many years as a pilot in and about that harbor. He entered upon his duties on board the Planter some six weeks since, and, as he told me, adopted the idea of running the vessel to sea from a joke which one of his companions perpetrated. He immediately cautioned the crew against alluding to the matter in any way on board the boat, but asked them, if they wanted to talk it up in sober earnestness, to meet at his house, where they would devise and determine upon a plan to place themselves under the protection of the Stars and Stripes instead of the Stars and Bars.

Various plans were proposed, but finally the whole arrangement of the escape was left to the discretion and sagacity of Robert, his companions promising to obey him and be ready at a moment's notice to accompany him. For three days he kept the provisions of the party secreted in the hold, awaiting an opportunity to slip away. At length, on Monday evening, the white officers of the vessel went on shore to spend the night, intending to start on the following morning for Fort Ripley, and to be absent from the city for some days. The families of the contrabands were notified and came stealthily on board.

At about three o'clock the fires were lit under the boilers, and the vessel steamed quietly away down the harbor. The tide was against her, and Fort Sumter was not reached till broad daylight. However, the boat passed directly under its walls, giving the usual signal—two long pulls and a jerk at the whistle-cord—as she passed the sentinel.

Once out of range of the rebel guns the white flag was raised, and the Planter steamed directly for the blockading steamer Augusta. Captain Parrott, of the latter vessel, as you may imagine, received them cordially, heard their report, placed Acting-Master Watson, of his ship, in charge of the Planter, and sent the Confederate gun-boat and crew forward to Commodore Dupont. The families of the crew have been sent to Beaufort, where General Stevens will make suitable provision for them. The crew will be taken care of by Commodore Dupont.

The Planter is just such a vessel is needed to navigate the shallow waters between Hilton Head and the adjacent islands, and will prove almost invaluable to the Government. It is proposed, I hear, by the Commodore, to recommend an appropriation of \$20,000 as a reward to the plucky Africans who have distinguished themselves by this gallant service—\$5000 to be given to the pilot, and the remainder to be divided among his companions.

Our correspondent sends us a drawing of an infernal machine, drawn by one of the negro hands of the Planter named Morrison. This chattel, Morrison, gives the following account of himself:

Belonged to Emile Poinchignon; by trade a tinsmith and plumber; has lived all his life in Charleston; was drum-major of the first regiment of the Fourth Brigade South Carolina Militia, and paraded on the 25th of last month; has a wife and two children in Montgomery, Alabama, whom he expects to see when the war is over. I asked him how he learned to read and write. Answer: "I stole it in the night, Sir."