

Robert Smalls

Fearless Defender of Black America

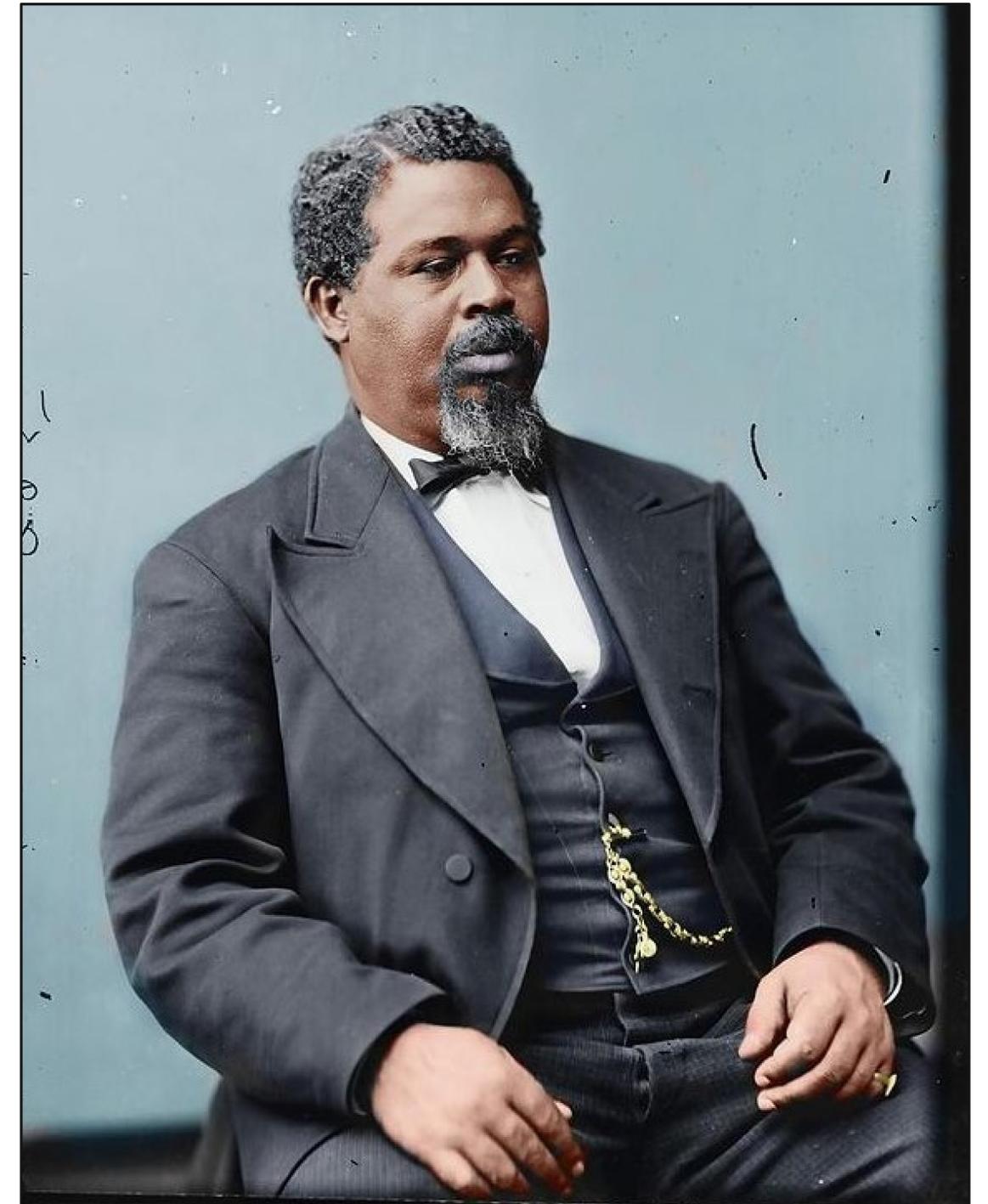
1839 - 1915

Civil War Hero

United States Congressman

Ex-slave Turned Entrepreneur

Gullah Statesman



Robert Smalls: A Life of “Radical Grace”



Robert Smalls memorabilia, including illustrations from Harper's Weekly (1862), his carte de visite (1875), and his Congressional autograph (1880).

Source: The Mark E. Mitchell Collection.

Have you ever heard of Robert Smalls? If so, what stories have you heard?

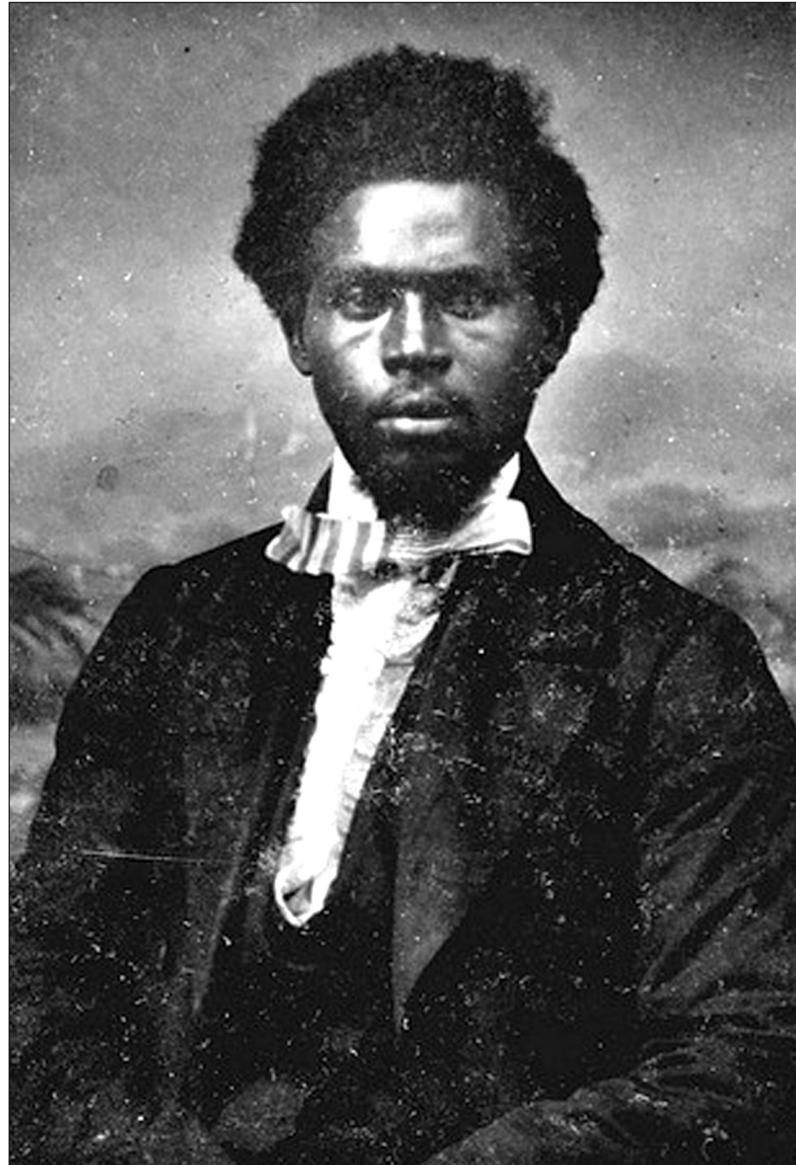
What do you know about the Black American experience of the Civil War and Reconstruction?

Why were many Black men – including Smalls, an escaped slave who took up arms against the Confederacy – able to hold positions of great political power across the South in the 1860s and 70s, but denied the right to vote by 1900?

Born into slavery in South Carolina, Smalls became a hero of the Union cause when he **commandeered** a Confederate gunship and escaped to freedom with his family in 1862. His wartime celebrity began a life of public service and statesmanship.



Robert Smalls: A Life of “Radical Grace”



Robert Smalls, photographed shortly after his heroic escape from Charleston in 1861.

After serving in the U.S. Navy during the Civil War, Smalls was an entrepreneur, a representative in the South Carolina legislature, and a five-term United States Congressman. He worked tirelessly to defend the rights of newly-emancipated Black Americans during Reconstruction and hold back the rising tide of white supremacy that began to overtake the state – and the whole South – in the late 1870s.

Throughout his life, Smalls demonstrated “radical grace,” showing mercy to his former oppressors, and trying earnestly to rebuild a South Carolina devastated by four years of war – with or without the help of the state’s white minority. But Smalls never compromised on the values for which he risked his life both during and after the war.



Childhood in Slavery

Robert Smalls was born to his mother, Lydia Polite, behind the house of his enslaver, John McKee, in Beaufort, South Carolina. His father was either McKee; his son, Henry; or possibly the plantation overseer Patrick Smalls.

Robert grew up favored by the McKee family, possibly because of this blood relation. His mother worked in the house, shielding Robert from the realities of the plantation life in the field – though Lydia insisted her young son witness the horrors of “the whipping post.”



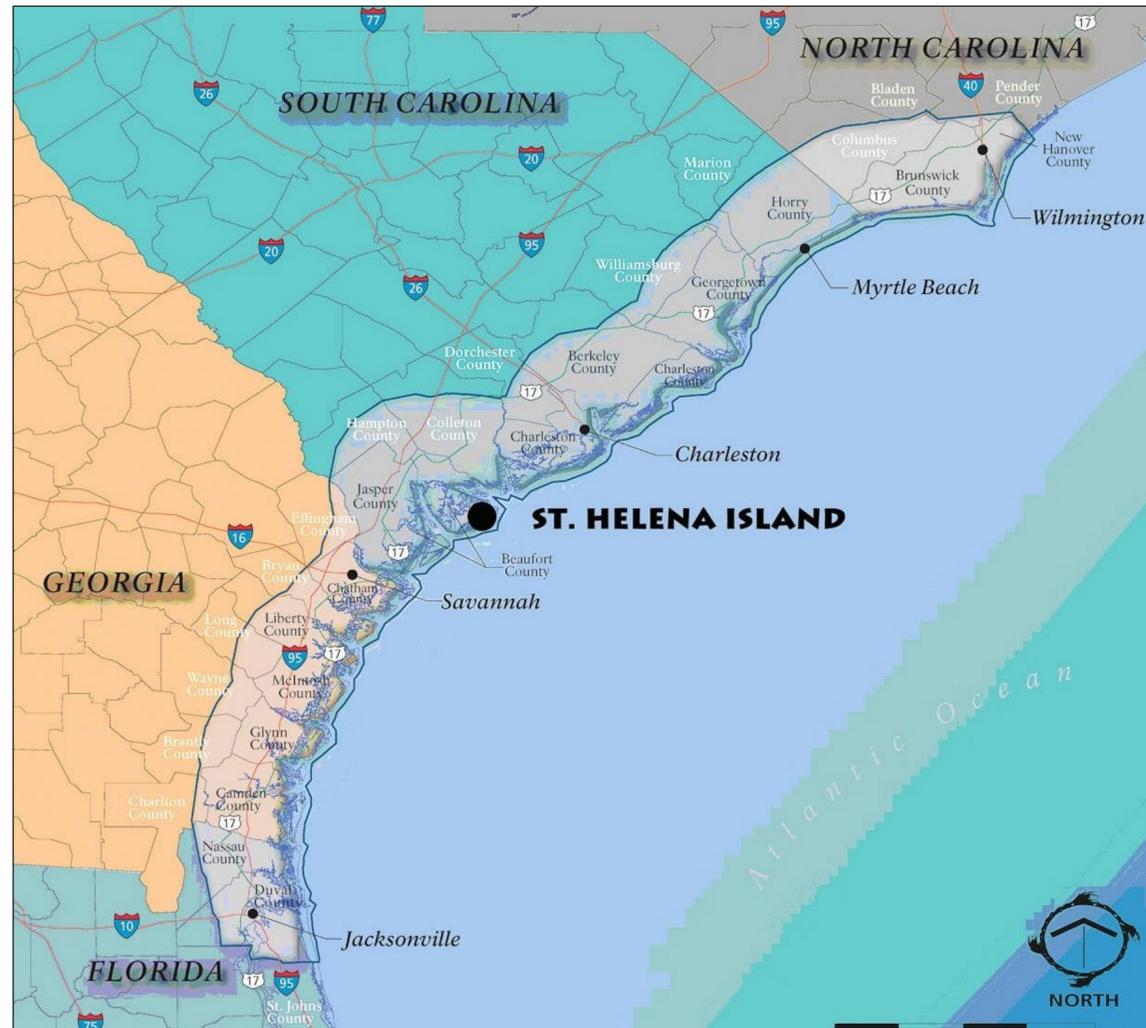
London News illustration of a slave auction in Charleston, South Carolina, 1856. The British Museum.

What role did slavery play in the economy of South Carolina? In the South more generally?

Why would Robert’s mother insist he witness slaves working the fields and being whipped?



Growing Up Gullah



Map of modern Gullah communities, running from southeast North Carolina to northern Florida. St. Helena Island, South Carolina – a main hub of Gullah culture – lies just east of Small's hometown of Beaufort.

The **Gullah** people are an historic Black community in the **Lowcountry** of the eastern U.S., stretching from the Carolinas to northern Florida. Their culture includes distinct folk beliefs, cuisine, traditional crafts, and an English **Creole** language that includes words from several African languages.

Smalls was born into this language and culture; his mother was raised on a plantation on Lady's Island, part of the Sea Islands that form the core of South Carolina's Gullah community. Smalls' Gullah background would be key to his political career.

What are other distinct languages or dialects spoken in America? What are their origins?

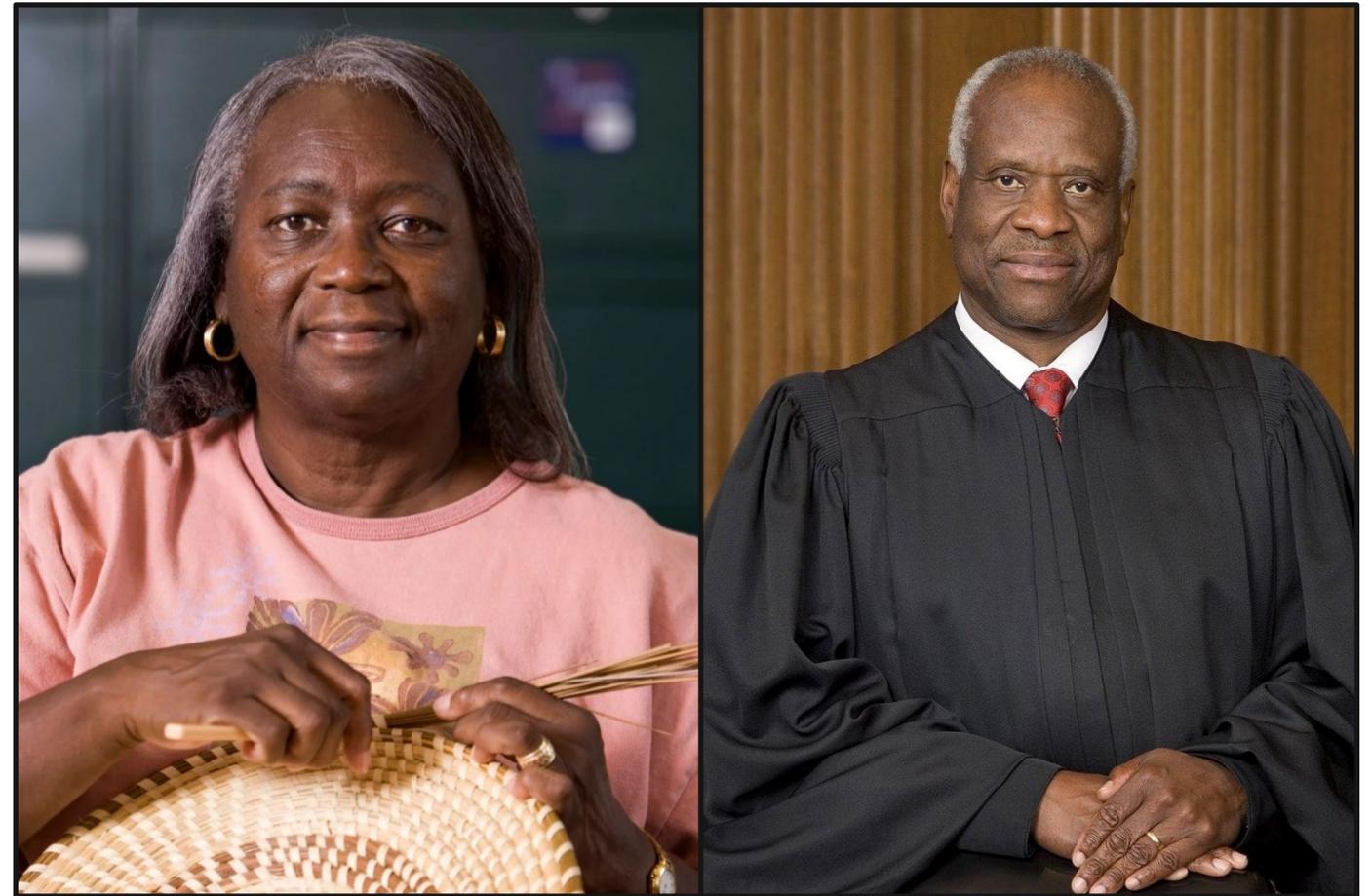
Which other African diaspora cultures speak a Creole language?



Growing Up Gullah

The Gullah community continues today, heavily concentrated in Smalls' home state of South Carolina. Modern Gullah (or Geechee) culture is best known to outsiders for its traditional rice-based dishes and handwoven sweetgrass baskets.

In the 20th century and today, the Gullah community has produced many notable African Americans, such as award-winning folk artist Mary Jackson and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who both grew up speaking Gullah as their first language.



Two contemporary Americans from the Gullah culture: MacArthur “genius grant” recipient, artist Mary Jackson of Charleston, South Carolina; and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas of Savannah, Georgia.

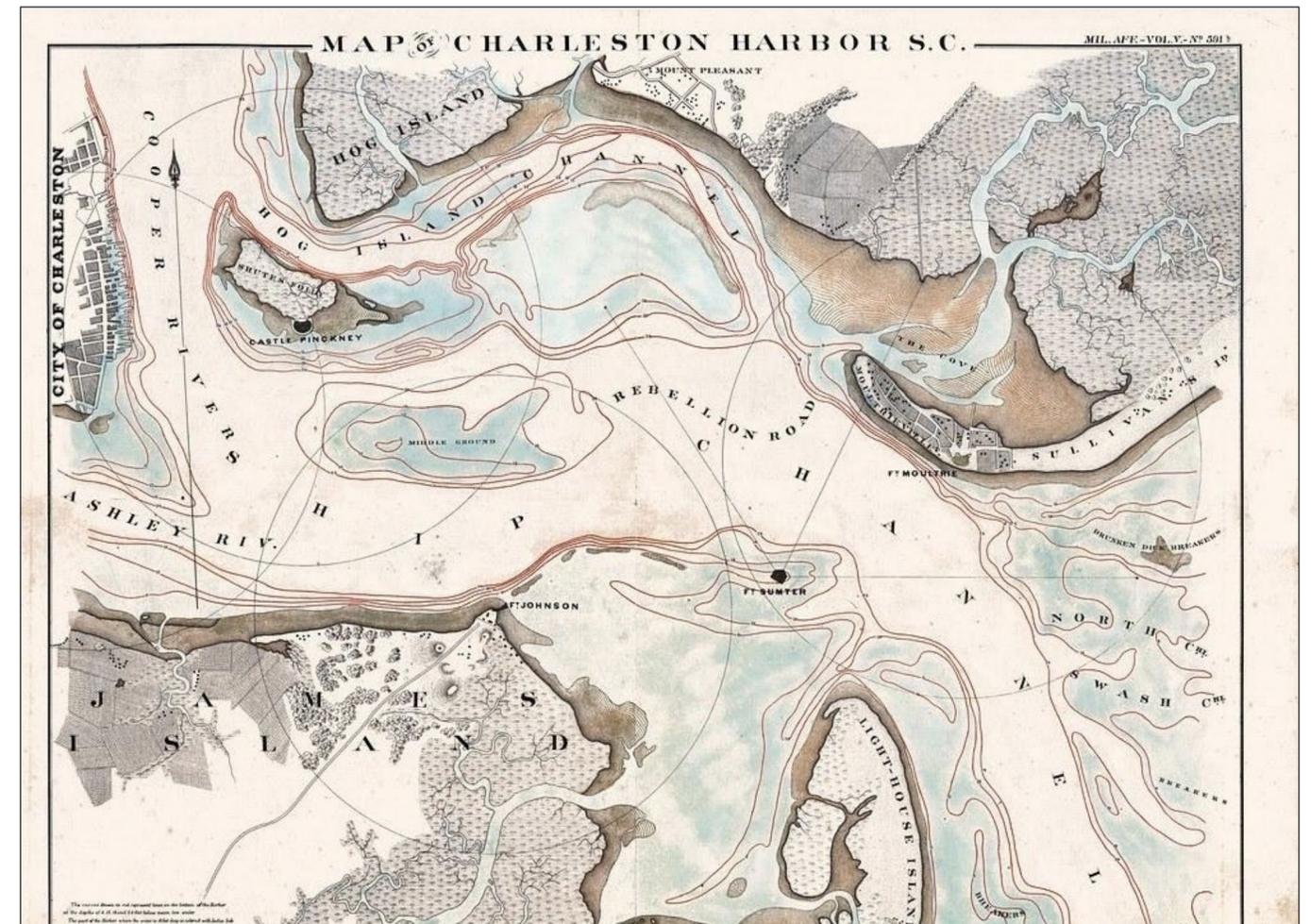
What are the advantages to coming from such a distinct culture (or subculture), as Robert Smalls did? How do these cultures work to maintain their unique character in a modern world that often threatens their traditional practices?



Charleston: A Dollar a Week

Smalls moved to the McKees' Charleston home in 1851, where he was hired out on the waterfront as a lamplighter, **stevedore** foreman, and sailor. A few years later, he met an enslaved hotel worker named Hannah Jones; they married and had three children together. Though the Smalls family lived separately from their enslavers back in Beaufort, they were forced to send almost all their income back to the McKees, keeping only a dollar week.

Smalls became an expert navigator of Charleston's waterways and the coasts of South Carolina and northern Georgia. It would be this knowledge, gained while working as a slave, that would allow him and his family to escape slavery – and help defeat it – once the opportunity struck.



Map of Charleston harbor and connected waterways, c. 1860.

Charleston: The Civil War Begins

The American Civil War began on April 11, 1861, with the rebel attack on Fort Sumter, not far from the Charleston shore, where the harbor opens onto ocean.

Smalls was **conscripted** into the Confederate Army and forced to serve aboard the *Planter*, a steamer once used to transport cotton. Now, outfitted with two heavy guns, it would transport Confederate weapons and supplies through the coastal waters – routes Smalls knew like the back of his hand.

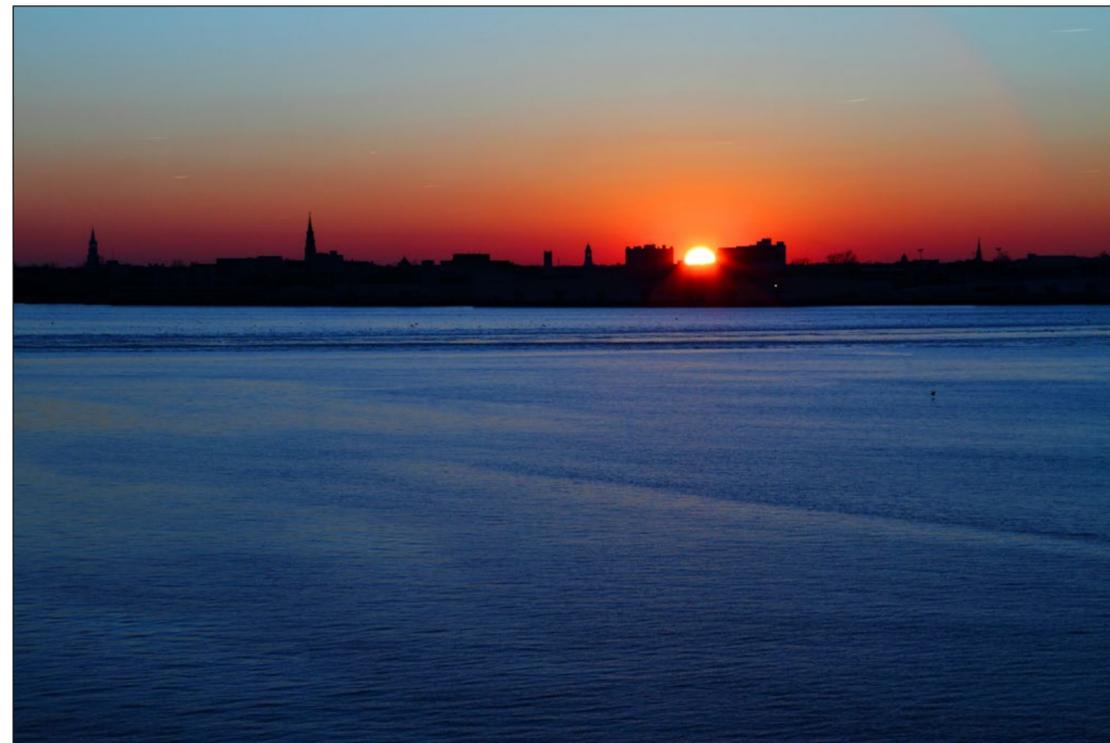
In the outer harbor, visible from Charleston's waterfront, was the federal blockade. Smalls saw his chance to escape – he would commandeer the *Planter* and steer it into the midst of those Union Navy ships.

Illustration of the assault on Fort Sumter by J.T. Headley, from The Great Rebellion: A History of the Civil War in the United States, The National Tribune, 1898.



May 12, 1862: Seizing the *Planter*

On the day Smalls put his plan into motion, he and other enslaved crew members of the *Planter* were loading heavy guns and other munitions, bound for Fort Sumter and other Confederate military outposts. They took their time, ensuring that the work would not be complete before sunset and that they would remain onboard overnight. In the evening, the steamer's captain and other whites onboard went into town to relax. Donning the captain's hat, Smalls and his men prepared to meet up with their families.



Sunset over modern Charleston, S.C. skyline.

Smalls and company kept the plot from their loved ones until the last minute. When Hannah learned of her husband's plan, she said: "It is a risk, dear, but you and I, and our little ones must be free. I will go, for where you die, I will die."

Once everyone was on board and in hiding, they left Charleston Harbor. Smalls knew the right way to signal Confederate forts with the ships' steam whistle and avoid scrutiny.

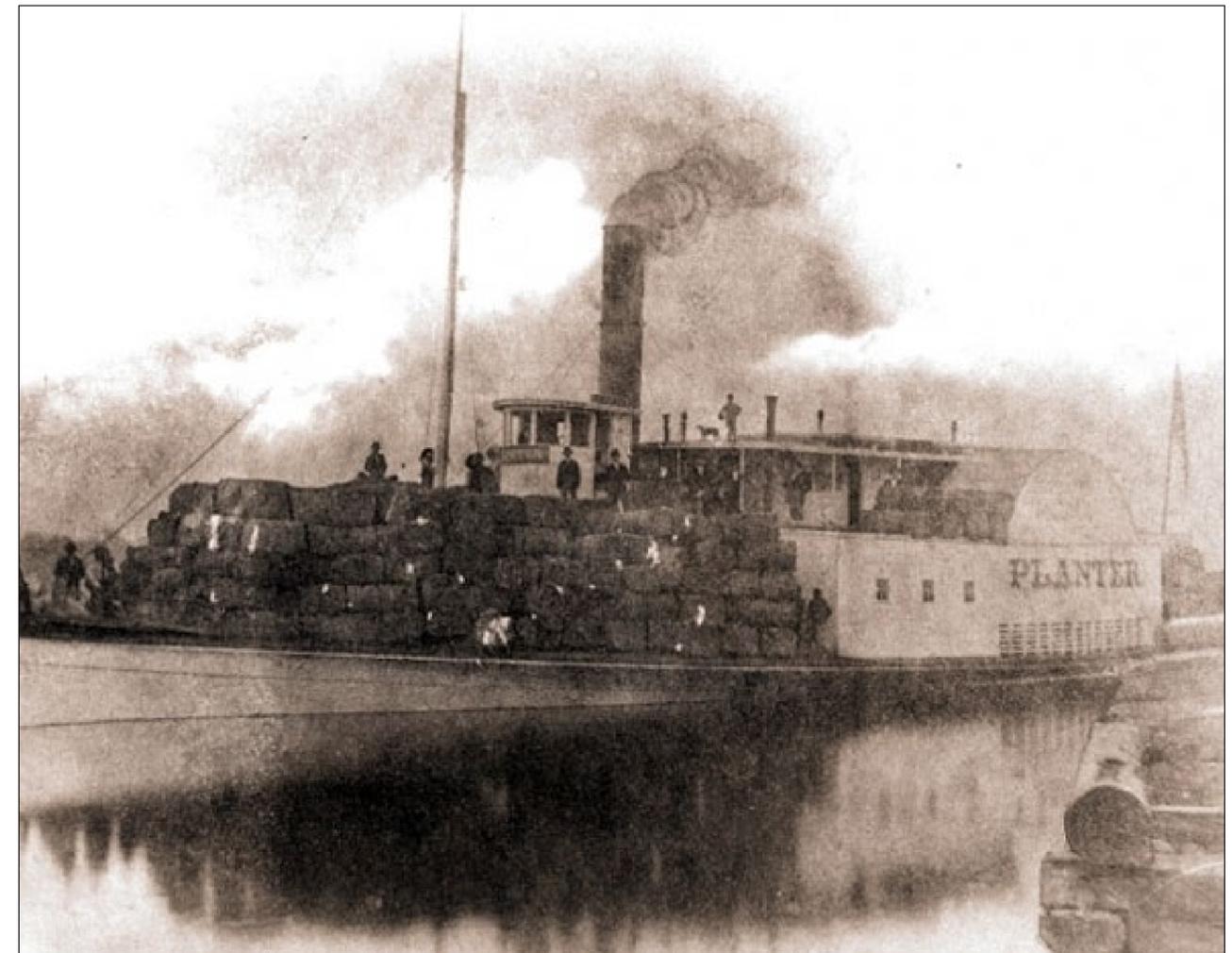


May 13, 1862: Almost Free

The most perilous moment came when Smalls sailed the *Planter* past heavily-armed Fort Sumter at 4:30 a.m. To the shock of his companions, Smalls navigated close to the fort, knowing that keeping his distance would arouse the soldiers' suspicions. Historian Cate Lineberry described the tense exchange in her book *Be Free or Die* (2017):

“[Smalls] steered the ship along its normal path, slowly, as though he were merely enjoying the early morning air and in no particular hurry. When Fort Sumter flashed the challenge signal, Smalls again gave the correct hand signs. There was a long pause. The fort didn't immediately respond, and Smalls now expected cannon fire to shred the *Planter* at any moment. Finally, the fort signaled that all was well, and Smalls sailed his ship out of the harbor.”

The Planter loaded with 1000 bales of cotton, c. 1860.



May 13, 1862: Reaching the USS *Onward*

Once out of range of Fort Sumter's guns, Smalls raised a bedsheet Harriet had brought along – a white flag of surrender – and approached the blockade fleet. Luckily, they arrived just as the sun was rising, ensuring that the “flag” was seen by crewman of the USS *Onward*.



Illustration of Smalls shortly after his escape.
Source: Harper's Weekly (1862).

The captain of the *Onward* reported that once the “contraband” aboard the *Planter* realized they would not be fired upon, they rushed on deck, dancing in celebration of their new freedom and cursing Fort Sumter in the distance. Smalls himself stepped out and proclaimed: “Good morning, sir! I’ve brought you some of the old United States guns, sir.”

This event caused a sensation among the Union Navy. Admiral Samuel Francis DuPont was especially impressed by Smalls, who had not only captured enemy weapons but provided detailed intelligence about the Confederate naval actions he had observed in his year aboard the *Planter*.



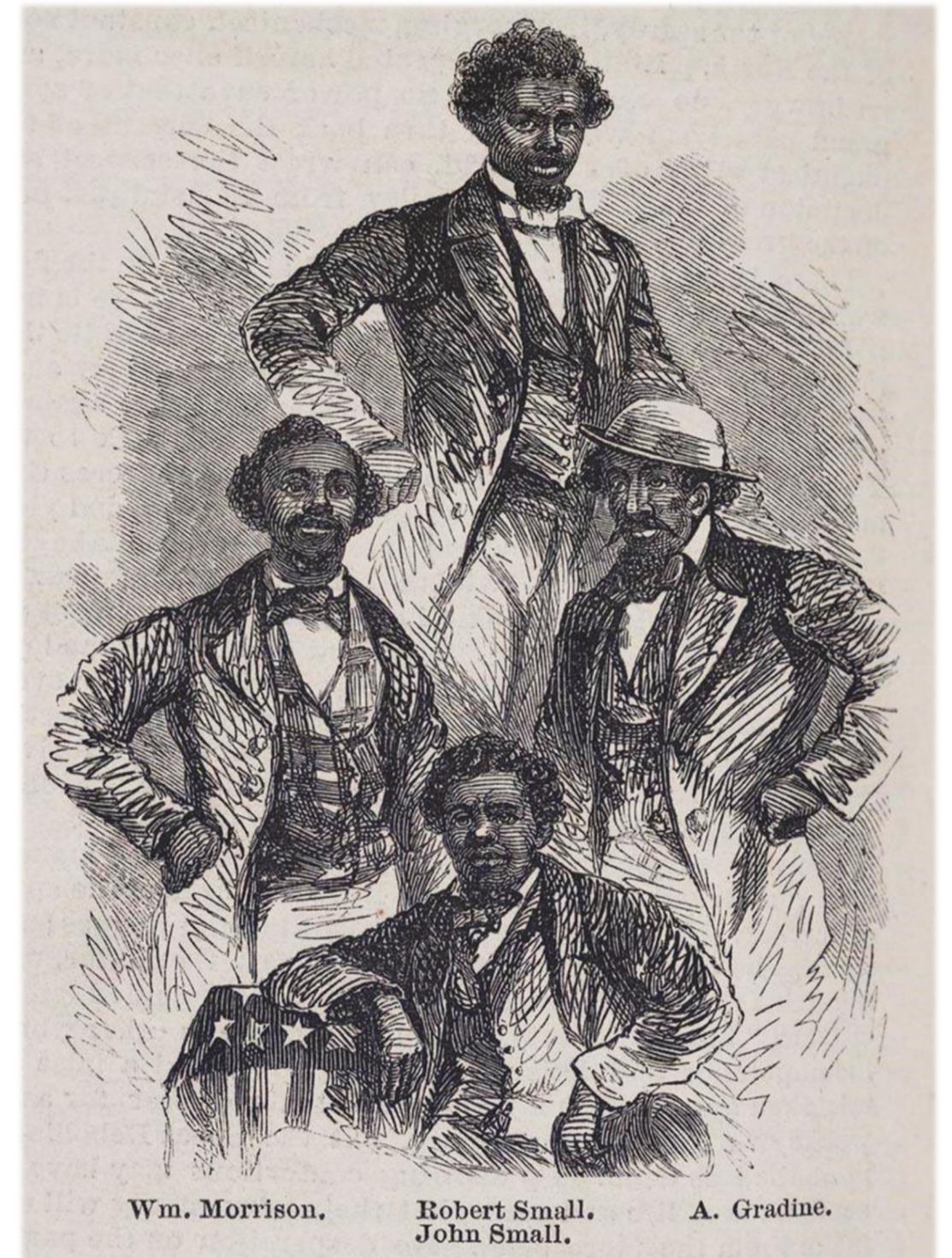
Celebrated Hero of the Union Cause

News of this daring escape swept through the country, and Smalls quickly became a hero of the Union cause. Against all odds, Smalls had gone from enslavement to national celebrity. He and his crew were awarded thousands of dollars in prize money, and their exploits were chronicled in national magazines like *Harper's*.

DuPont made Robert Smalls the captain of the *Planter*, and he spent the remaining war years serving the Union cause as both sailor and public speaker. Smalls toured the North recounting his adventures to and raising money for freed slaves; he also piloted the ironclad USS *Keokuk* and other Union vessels in battle.

In the final months of the war, Smalls piloted the *Planter* in support of General William T. Sherman's "March to the Sea" and final assault on Savannah, Georgia.

"HEROES IN EBONY: THE CAPTORS OF THE REBEL STEAMER 'PLANTER,'" *Illustration from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, June 21, 1862.*

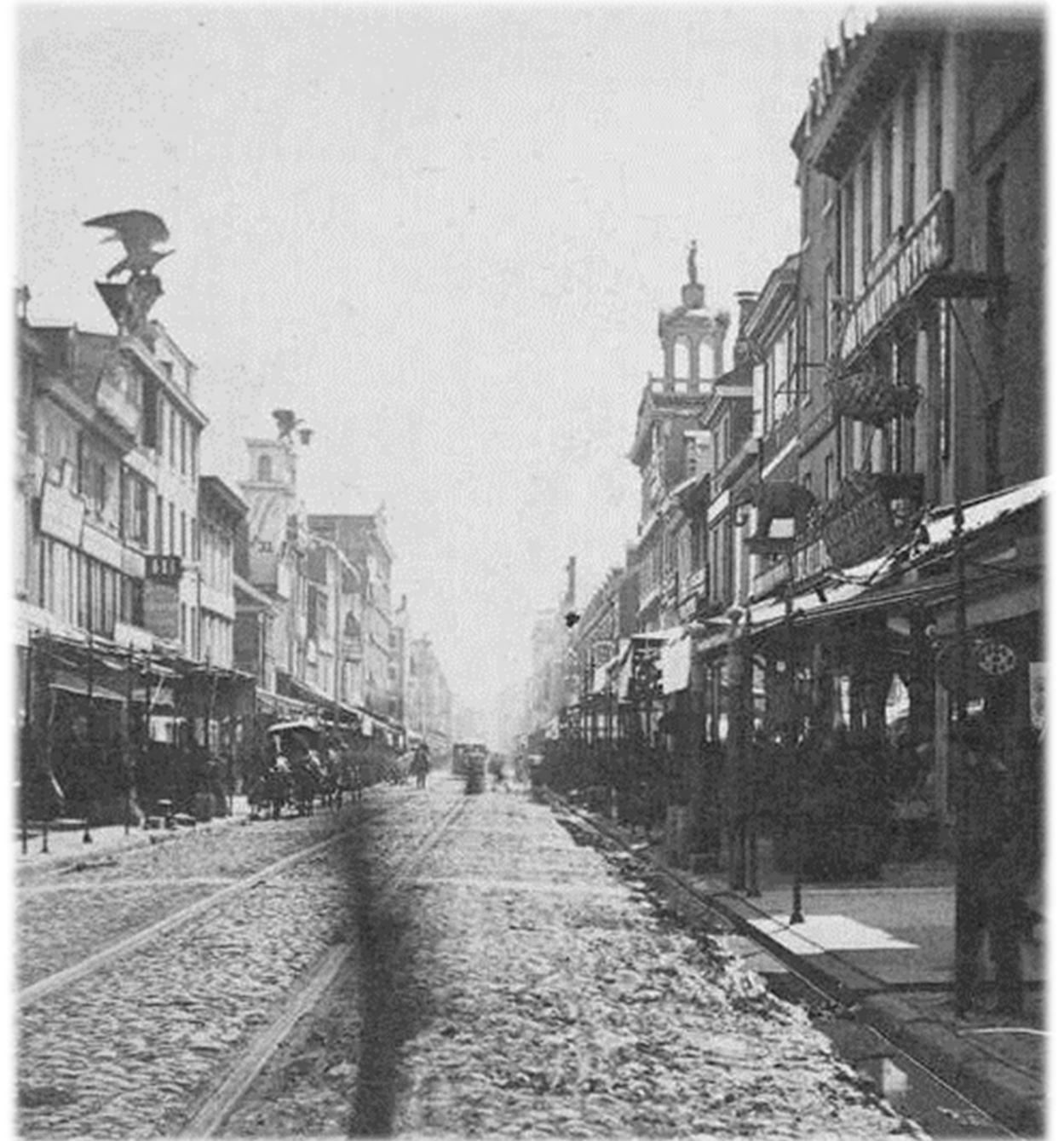


Education in Philadelphia

Smalls entered politics during the war, serving as an unofficial delegate to the 1864 Republican party convention. A few months later, Smalls travelled to Philadelphia, where he began the lifelong process of learning to read and write – a difficult task to begin in his mid-twenties.

He also received an education in the realities of Northern racism. When Smalls and a friend were riding a streetcar one rainy day, the conductor tried to eject them to make room for white riders. Historian Okon Uya writes: “The incident was promptly taken up the the press.

Newspapers carried the story of the war hero who had been put off a streetcar ... Quakers decided to boycott until black passengers were admitted.” Public outrage led to state laws against racial discrimination on public transit.



City streets in wartime Philadelphia, with streetcar tracks running down the center.



Return to Fort Sumter

On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House in Virginia. The war was over. On April 14, Smalls and the *Planter* attended the lavish victory celebration and flag-raising ceremony at Fort Sumter, shuttling newly-free Blacks from Charleston Harbor to witness the fireworks and fanfare on the island.

But this joyous event was overshadowed by tragedy: that same night in Washington, D.C., President Lincoln was assassinated.

How did Smalls' experiences in the Civil War qualify him for public service? What Woodson Principles do his actions exemplify?

Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments, Freedom to the Slave. Colored lithograph. (Philadelphia, 1863 or 1864).



Postwar Business Ventures



Smalls' postwar business partner, Haitian-American lawyer Richard Howell Gleaves.

Smalls returned to Beaufort after the war, continuing his education and investing his wartime earnings in the new opportunities that emerged in the South after the Union victory. Smalls and his business partner Richard Gleaves, a Haitian-American from Philadelphia, opened a store that catered to newly freed slaves – as well as a school for their children. In the early 1870s, Smalls published a short-lived newspaper, the *Southern Standard*.

In 1870, Smalls and other entrepreneurs formed the Enterprise Railroad, a horse-drawn railway intended to carry cargo and passengers from the Charleston waterfront to destinations further inland. The railroad's board of directors was composed almost entirely of Black businessmen. This fact, unthinkable in South Carolina only a decade before, was made possible by the federal government's plan of **Reconstruction** in the South.



Reconstruction in America



Illustration of U.S. Senator H.R. Revels of Mississippi, Rep. Benjamin Turner of Alabama, Robert DeLange of S.C., Jefferson Long of Georgia, Josiah T. Walls of Florida, Joseph Rainey of S.C., and R. Brown Elliott of S.C. – the “First Colored Senator and Representatives,” 1872.

Most historians would define Reconstruction as the period between the end of the Civil War and the late 1870s, though remnants of the social order it created remained in some parts of the South until the end of the century. In this era, Black Americans held national office and measures against racial discrimination were implemented across the nation.

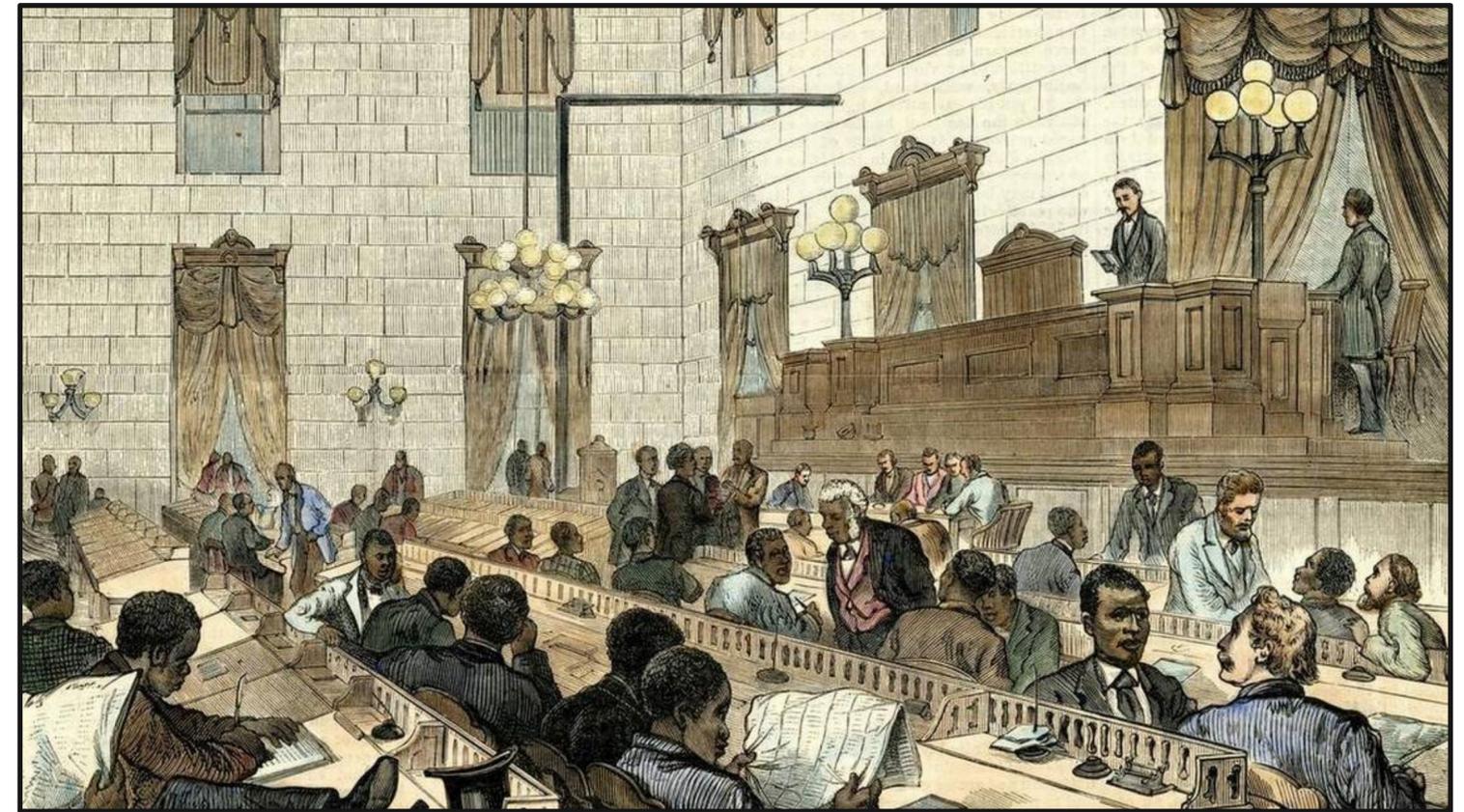
Thousands of Republicans travelled south to work in politics – some seeking personal gain, others hoping to aid a newly-united America’s experiment in multiracial democracy. But most white Southerners opposed Reconstruction, derisively referring to these Northerners as “carpetbaggers” and “scalawags.”



Reconstruction in South Carolina

South Carolina was distinct within the former Confederacy in that the majority of its residents were Black. Under the newly-ratified 14th Amendment, the majority of voters in the state were now African Americans who had formerly been enslaved.

Under the leadership of so-called “Radical” Republicans who more strongly committed to racial equality, a new state constitution was established in 1868 that abolished all racial barriers to property, voting rights, and public services. 73 of the 124 delegates who ratified this constitution were Black Republicans.



The racially integrated South Carolina state legislature of the Reconstruction Era, 1876.

Robert Smalls served as a delegate to the 1868 constitutional convention. Later that year, Smalls ran for a seat in the state House of Representatives and won, beginning a political career that would include terms in the state senate and the U.S. Congress.



Radical Grace in Action

Smalls was at the forefront of the radical changes sweeping the South – but his zeal for freedom was tempered by pity for his former enslavers. Like most Southern planters, the McKees were ruined after the war. But Smalls had used the prize money from his capture of the *Planter* to buy their old family house on Prince Street in Beaufort. Robert's mother Lydia survived the war, and lived with her son on Prince Street, in the house where they had once been slaves, until her death. The Smalls family would live in this house for the next 90 years.

In a startling act of mercy and “radical grace,” Smalls allowed Jane McKee, the aged and impoverished widow of his enslaver, to reside at the house in her old bedroom until her death. Suffering dementia, Mrs. McKee was unable to grasp the enormous changes of the postwar South. But the Small family treated her with compassion.



The McKee house in Beaufort, South Carolina, in which the Smalls family lived for almost a century.

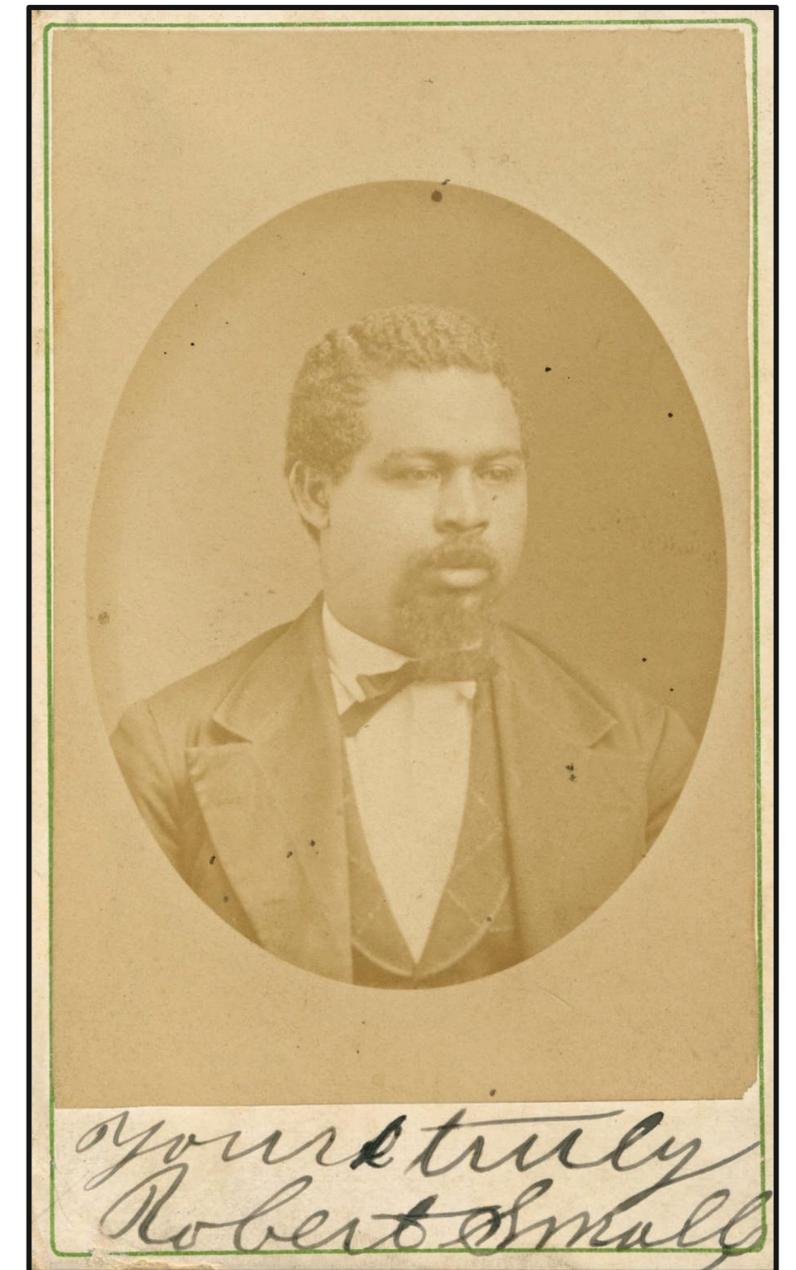


Congressman Robert Smalls

In 1874, Smalls ran for a seat in the U.S. Congress, to represent a newly-created district in southeast South Carolina. This district was home to a Black majority, outnumbering whites seven to one in some places. Many of these Black voters were part of Small's own Sea Island Gullah community. Their local hero won in a landslide, with almost 80 percent of the vote.

In his first term of office, Smalls brought home investment for his Sea Island and Lowcountry constituents, including improvements to Port Royal Harbor, near Beaufort, and to South Carolina's military academy, the Citadel.

Despite his lack of formal education, Smalls proved himself a shrewd politician throughout his career, making many lifelong allies – and a few enemies – within the Republican party. But during his reelection campaign, he faced outright violence.

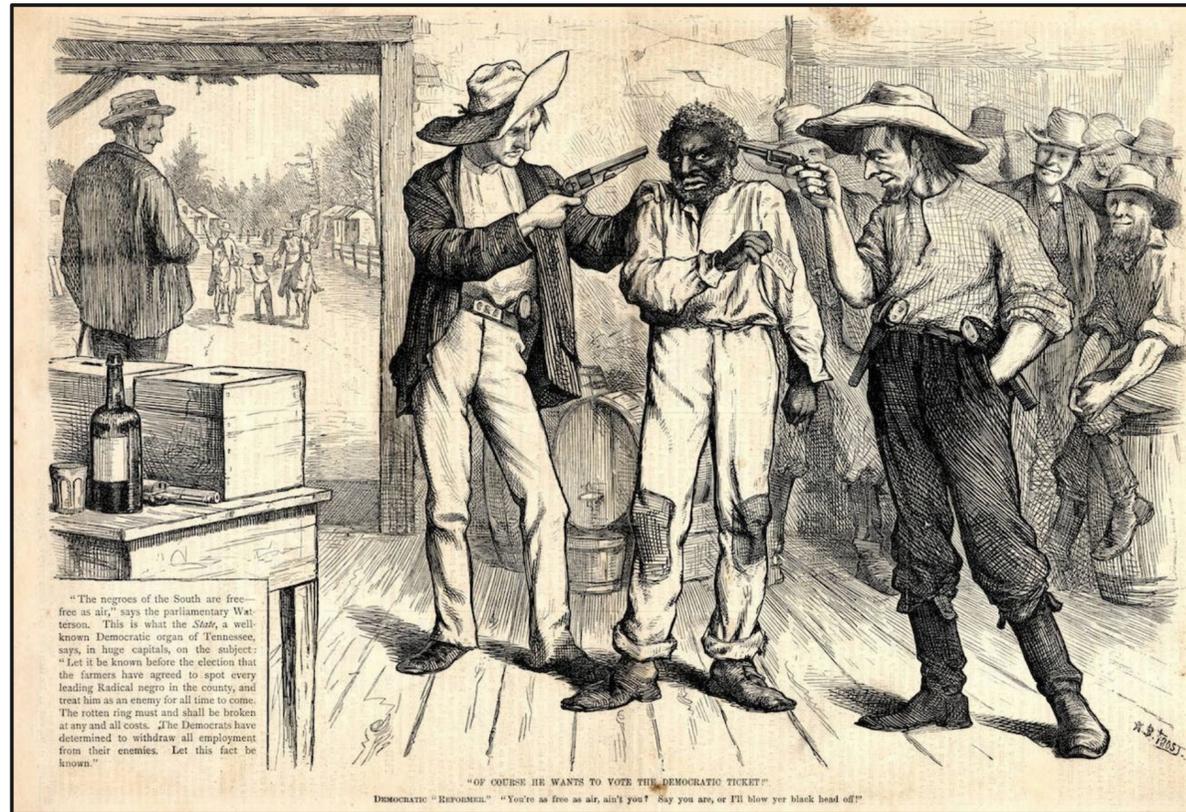


Another Carte De Visite from early in Smalls' political career.



1876: The Old South Strikes Back

The 1870s saw waves of terrorism and corruption that sought to end Reconstruction and multiracial government. White Democrats (often former Confederates) who overturned Reconstruction governments were known by supporters as “Redeemers.”



1876 cartoon from Harper's by Thomas Nast: “Of course he wants to vote the Democratic ticket! ... You’re as free as the air, ain’t you? Say you are, or I’ll blow your black head off!” As white Democrats sought to destroy Reconstruction, the Northern press warned of former Confederates “winning” elections by threatening Black voters.

What challenges would the federal government have faced at this time in trying to secure safe, fair elections in the South? What motivated the white Southerners who supported the “Redeemer” Democrats with violence?

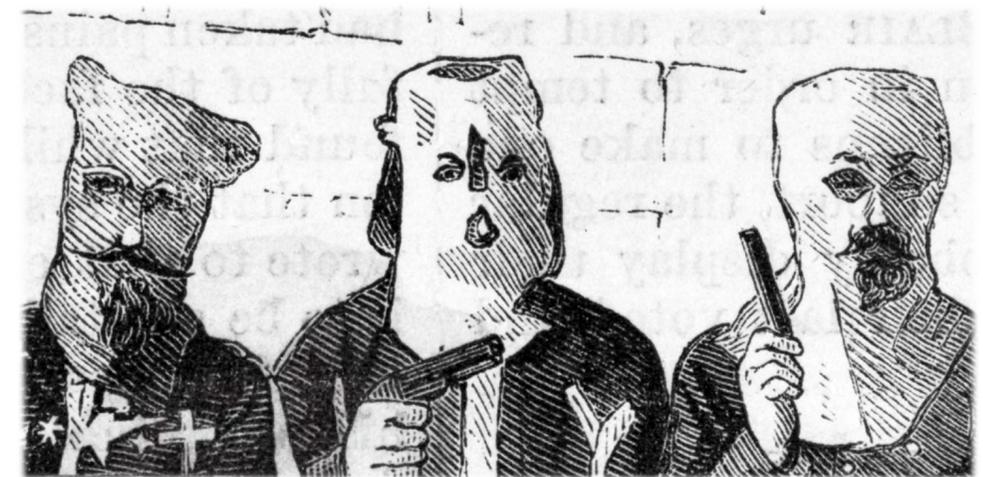
Do you know of other times in American history that violence, fraud, corruption, or some mix of the three has been used to influence or overturn the results of an election? What are they?



George Tillman and the “Red Shirts”

Robert Smalls' Democratic opponent in the 1876 election was George D. Tillman, a veteran of the Confederate Army, whose campaign played upon the racial anxieties and prejudices of the state's poor, uneducated whites. Several times during the runup to the election Smalls, his supporters, and other Republicans were met with riots. The most brutal of Tillman's supporters were the Red Shirts, who used intimidation, mob violence, and even the assassination of Republican officials to try and topple Reconstruction.

Smalls blamed Tillman for stoking these attacks, denouncing him as the “personification of Red Shirt democracy” and the arch enemy of my race.” Smalls lost the election by a thin margin – though he would retake the seat from Tillman in 1881.



Above: George Tillman. Below: Hooded paramilitaries, the Ku Klux Klan and the Red Shirts among them, used violence and terror to overthrow Reconstruction.



George Tillman and the “Red Shirts”

Less well-known than infamous terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, the Red Shirt brigades were the armed wing of the South Carolina Democrats and were the main group responsible for ending Reconstruction in the state. They used intimidation, ballot-stuffing, and even assassination to ensure that Wade Hampton became governor in 1876 and “redeemed” the state from the rule of leaders elected by the state’s Black majority under its 1868 constitution, which guaranteed suffrage for all men.

Also in 1876, Smalls attempted to add anti-discrimination measures to a bill reorganizing the army, intended to integrate the armed services and allow Black soldiers to rise in the ranks. But this effort failed – another sign that the fragile Reconstruction political order was cracking.



*Typical uniform of a Red Shirt militia member.
Source: South Carolina State Museum.*

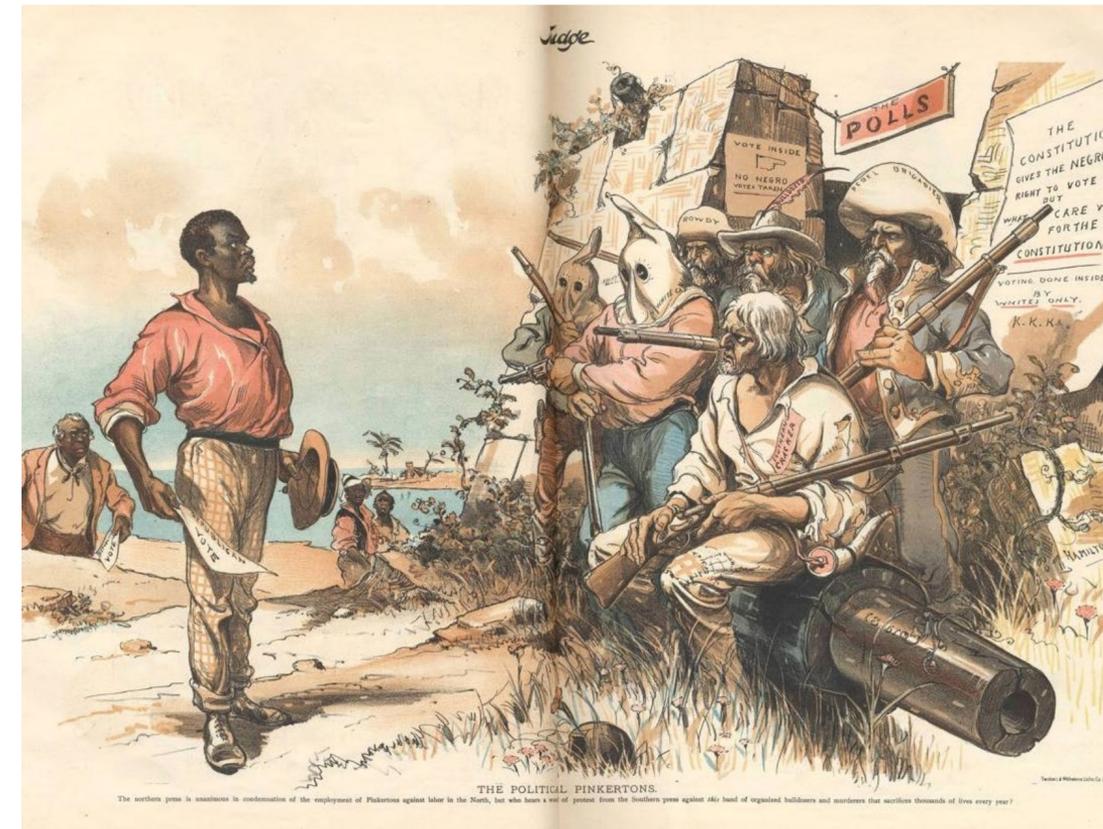


Final Return to Congress

In 1884, Smalls was again elected to the U.S. Congress. Though both Smalls and his rival, Confederate Army veteran William Elliott, anticipated violence, the election was relatively peaceful. Sea Island Gullah voters, unintimidated, turned out to support their community's great hero. Black state senators also nominated Smalls, unsuccessfully, for the U.S. Senate, primarily to protest the increasingly consolidated power of white supremacist Democrats.

The caption of this comic reads: “The northern press is unanimous in condemnation of the employment of Pinkertons against labor in the North, but who hears a word of protest from the Southern press against this ban of organized bulldozers and murderers that sacrifice thousands of lives every year?”

Who were the Pinkertons? What argument is this comic and its caption trying to make?



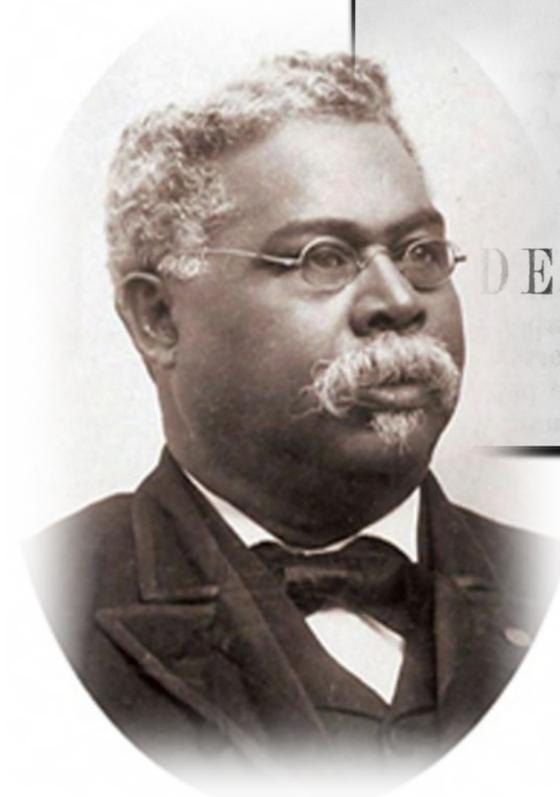
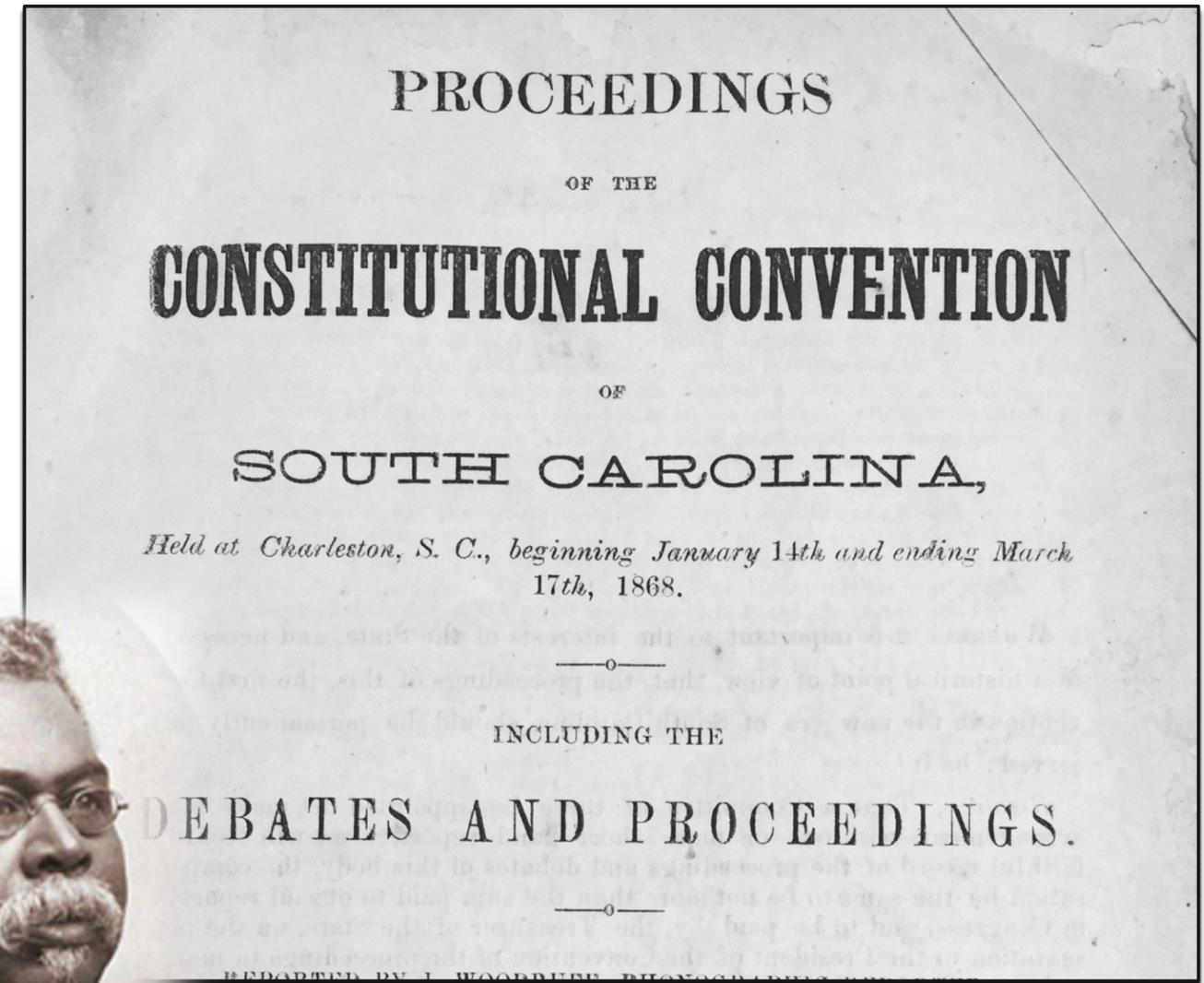
July 1892 comic from Judge, a New York-based satirical magazine. It shows a Black American voter being denied access to the polls by hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan and other armed “rebels” and “rowdys.”



1895: One Last Battle with the Enemy

In 1894, Democrats narrowly succeeded in getting a referendum for a state constitutional convention on the ballot, to be held the following year. The measure passed by merely 2,000 total votes in an election marred by violence and fraud.

The state's 1868 constitution had granted voting rights to all men, regardless of race, and (at least on paper) integrated all public schools. Everyone knew that a new constitution had one purpose: to finish what the "Redeemers" had begun in the 1870s and completely disenfranchise Black voters in South Carolina.



1895: One Last Battle with the Enemy



United States Senator from South Carolina Benjamin R. Tillman, c. 1910.

The chief architect of this new constitution was Benjamin Tillman, younger brother of Smalls' congressional rival, George. A vicious white supremacist, Tillman openly bragged about killing Black men as a "Red Shirt" militiaman and advocated violence to crush Republicans in the South.

"We of the South have never recognized the right of the negro to govern white men, and we never will!" he declared later, in 1900. "I would to God the last one of them was in Africa and that none of them had ever been brought to our shores." Tillman served as Senator until his death in 1918.

Despite the efforts of Smalls' Black delegation, the new constitution was ratified. As the new century approached, similar efforts succeeded throughout the South. Thirty years after Appomattox, former Confederates had staged a *coup d'état* against multiracial democracy – and won.



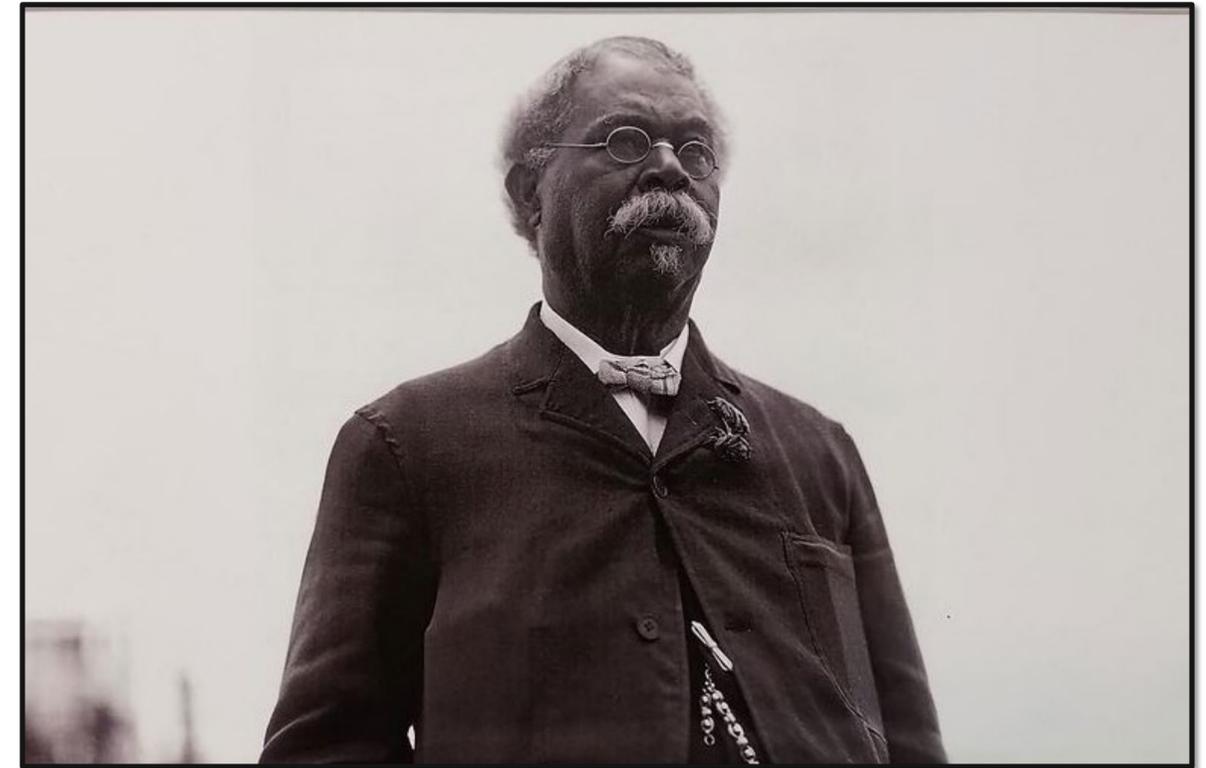
Later Years in Beaufort

The new constitution established “Jim Crow” law in South Carolina, a situation that would not begin to change until the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

But Smalls was undeterred. Throughout the early 20th century, he remained involved in local Beaufort politics, including successful efforts to stop at least one lynching.

In 1889, Republican President Benjamin Harrison had appointed Smalls the collector at the Port of Beaufort, a post he held until Republicans lost the White House in 1892. This pattern continued until 1913, when Democrat Woodrow Wilson stripped Smalls of his appointment for a final time.

On February 22, 1915, Smalls died peacefully at age 75, in the house where he had lived as both slave and **statesman**.



*Robert Smalls in Beaufort, S.C., April 23, 1904.
Source: American Museum of Natural History.*



Family and Legacy



Grandchildren of Robert Smalls in Charlotte, North Carolina, c. 1930. Source: International African American Museum.

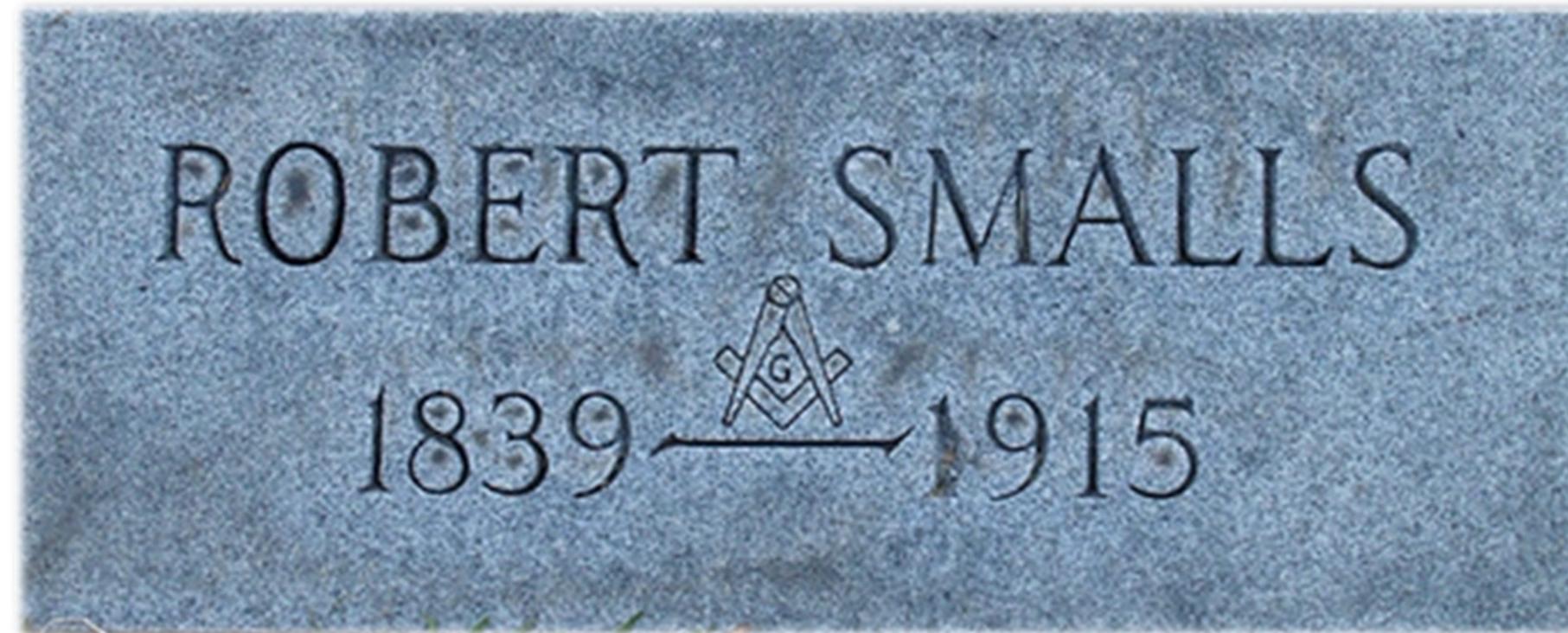
Smalls' many descendants have helped keep the statesman's memory alive, even as he was largely forgotten by mainstream historians in the twentieth century. Gradually Smalls' story was restored to public knowledge through scholarly and popular works, especially those covering the *Planter* escape.

Smalls attended Tabernacle Baptist Church in Beaufort, and today it hosts a monument to his legacy. The pillar is inscribed with these words from his speech to the 1895 constitutional convention:

"My race needs no special defense, for the past history of them in this country proves them to be the equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life."



Family and Legacy



Gravestone of Robert Smalls. The image of a compass in the center is a common symbol in Freemasonry – Smalls was a Prince Hall Mason, an African American branch of Freemasonry founded by Black patriot and abolitionist Prince Hall in 1775.





Vocabulary

Appomattox
carte de visite
commandeer
conscripted
contraband
coup d'état
Creole
dialect
diaspora
disenfranchise
Lowcountry
Pinkertons
Reconstruction
statesman
stevedore



Monument to Robert Smalls outside of the Tabernacle Baptist Church, where the Smalls family worshipped, in Beaufort, South Carolina.