

Robert Smalls

Fearless Defender of Black America

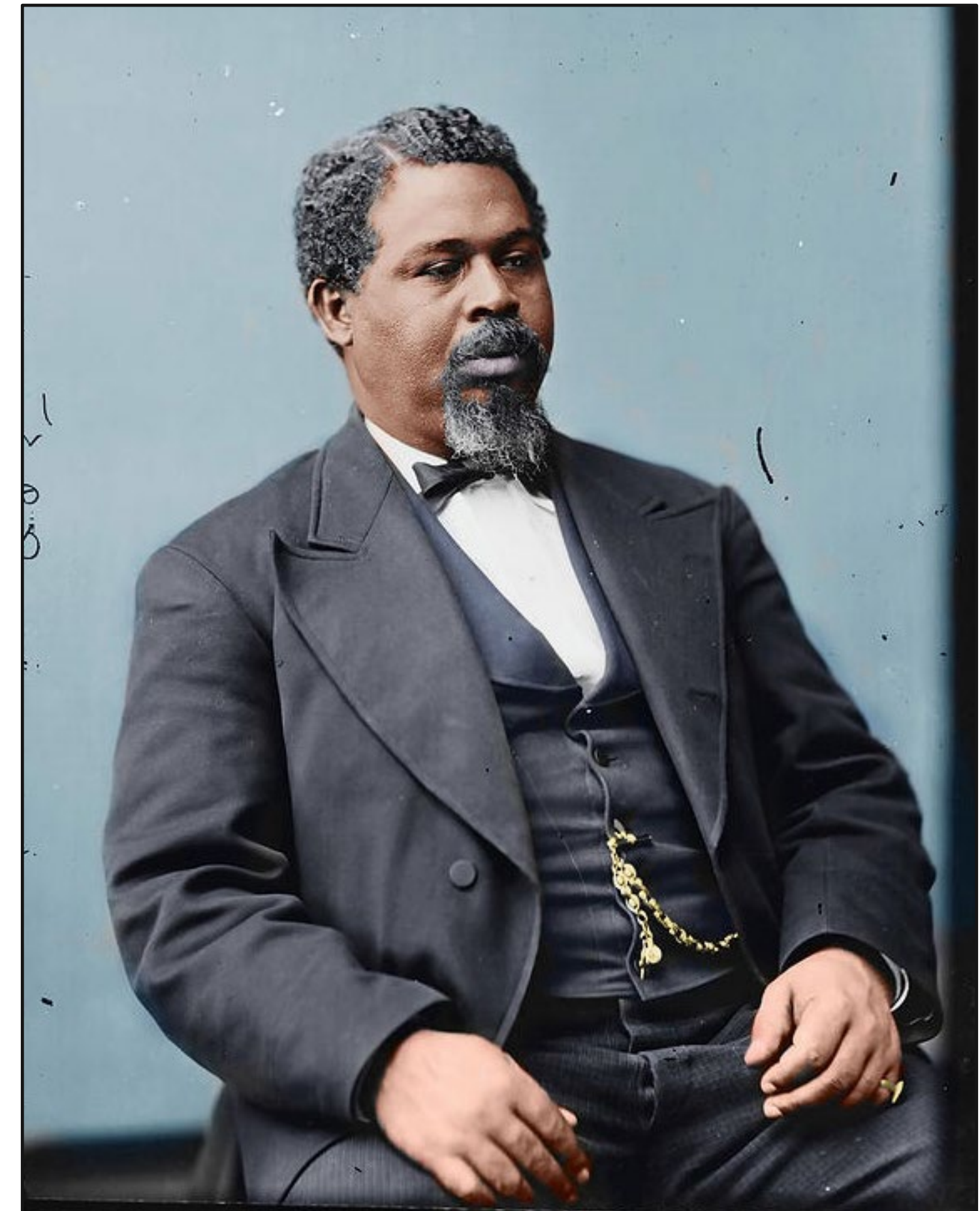
1839 – 1915

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.

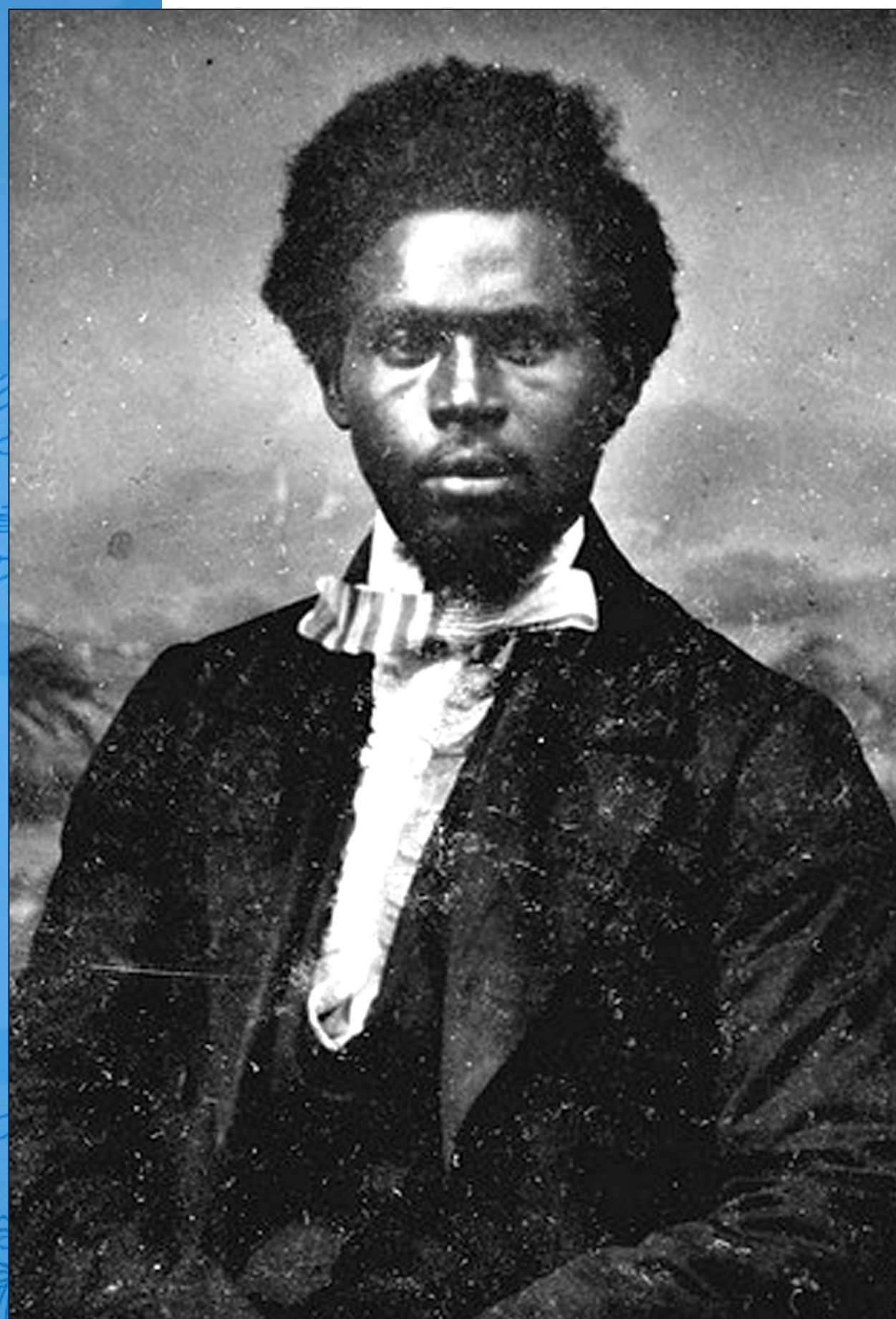
Have you ever heard of Robert Smalls? If so, what stories have you heard?

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 fought for the Union army – 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, Robert 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.

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, 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, 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 son witness the horrors of “the whipping post” at a young age.



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?

Why would Lydia insist her son witness slaves in the fields being whipped?

Growing Up Gullah



Map of the contemporary 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 Smalls' hometown of Beaufort.

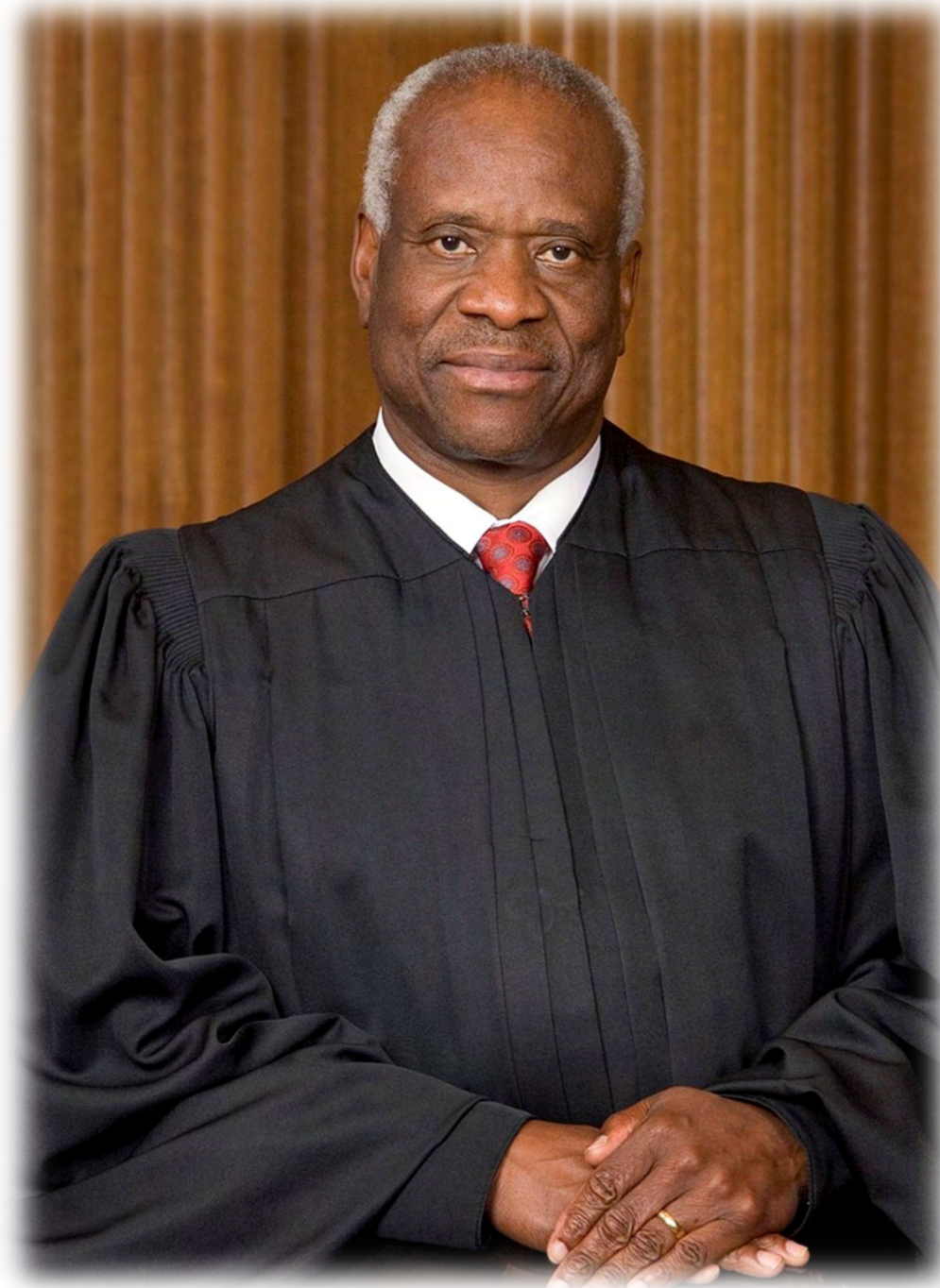
The **Gullah** are a historic African American community in the **Lowcountry** of the eastern U.S., stretching from the Carolinas to northern Florida. Their culture includes distinct folk beliefs, cuisine, and traditional crafts, and they speak an English **creole** language that includes words from a variety of African languages.

Smalls knew this language and culture well. Later in life, when Smalls ran for political offices, his ability to speak the Sea Island Gullah **dialect** made him a popular candidate.

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



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.

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.

What are the advantages to coming from such a distinct culture, as Robert Smalls did?

How do these cultures maintain their unique character in a world that’s always changing?

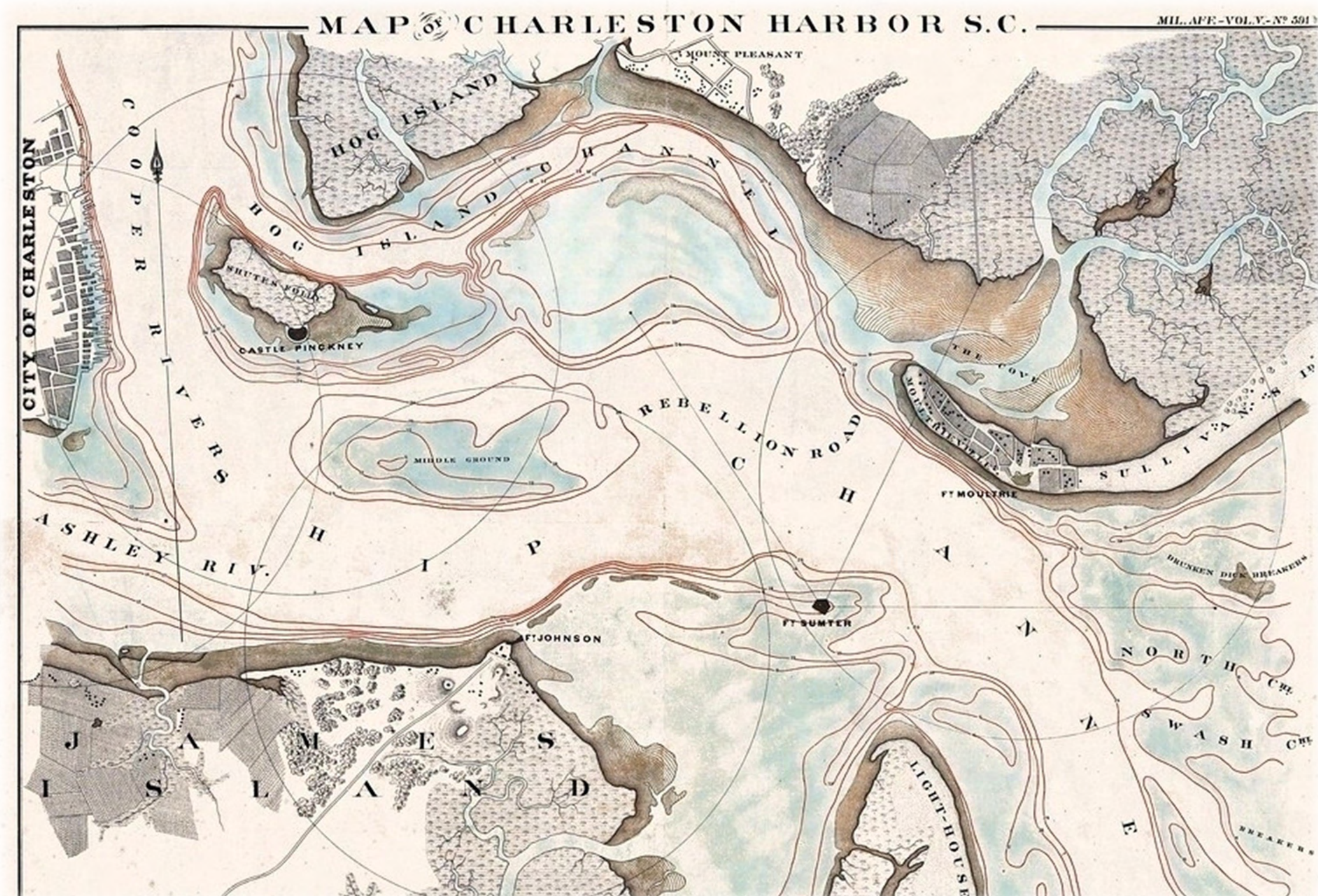
Charleston: A Dollar a Week

Smalls moved to the McKees' Charleston home in 1851, where he was hired out on the waterfront as a lamplighter, **stevedore** foreman, and sailor. He became an expert navigator of the South Carolina and Georgia coasts.

In 1856, he married Hannah Jones, a slave who worked as a hotel maid in Charleston. The couple had two daughters: Elizabeth and Sarah. A third child, Robert, Jr., died of smallpox as a toddler.

The Smalls lived separately from their owners, but were forced to send their income back to the McKees in Beaufort, keeping only a dollar a week for themselves.

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 Confederate attack on Fort Sumter occurring not far from the Charleston shore, where harbor opens onto ocean.

Smalls was forced into the Confederate Army and worked 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 that Smalls knew like the back of his hand.

In the outer harbor, visible from Charleston Harbor, was the federal blockade of Charleston. Smalls saw that this was his chance to escape – to commandeer the *Planter* and steer it right to the Union Navy.

*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.*

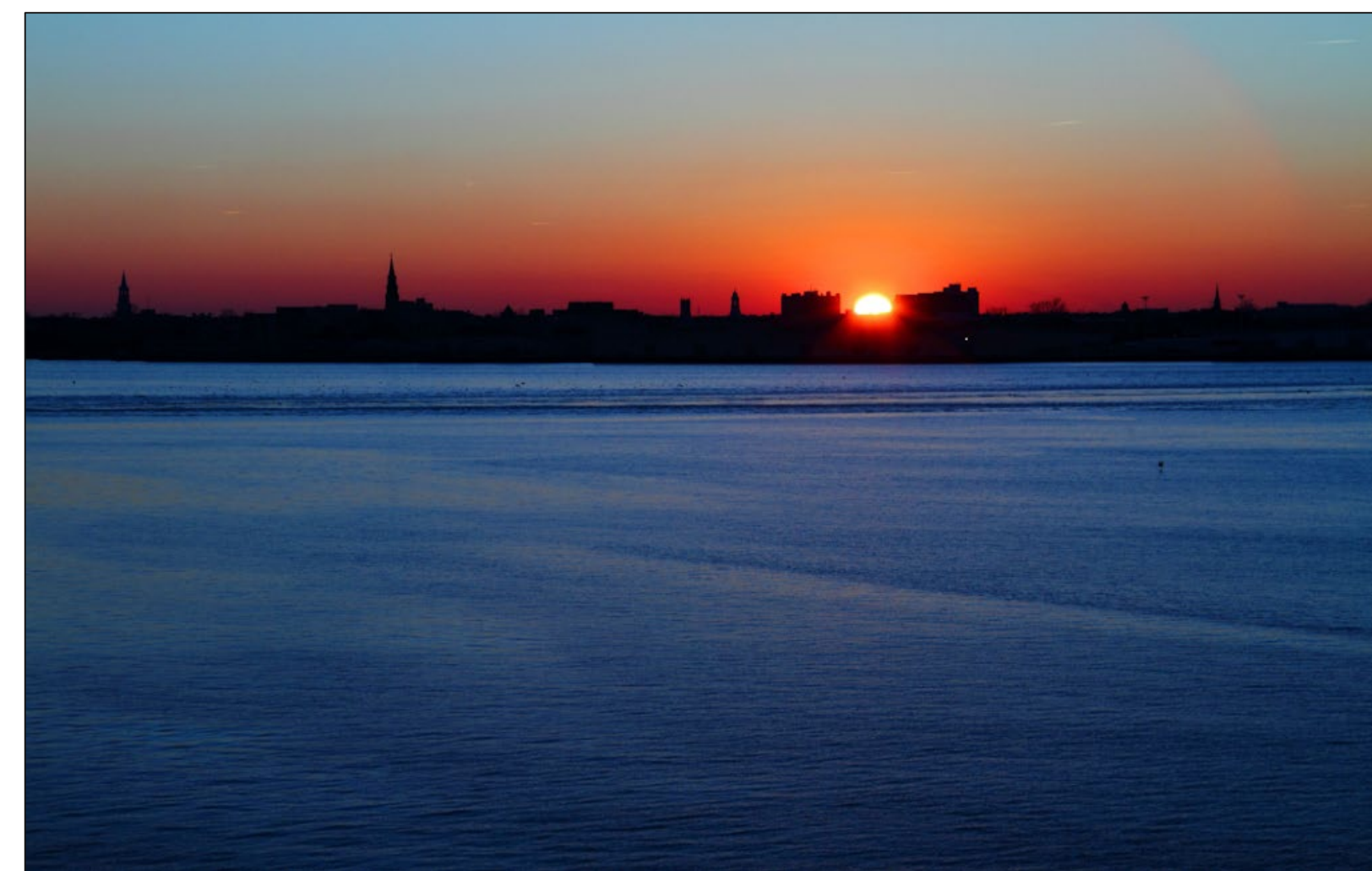


May 12, 1861: Seizing the *Planter*

On May 12, 1862, Smalls and other enslaved members of the crew had to load some heavy guns onto the *Planter* to be taken to a Confederate fort. They made sure they didn't finish their work before it was dark so that they would be expected to spend the night on the ship. When the captain and other White crew members went into town for the evening, Smalls put on the captain's straw hat and sailed the vessel to another wharf where the crew's family and friends were waiting.

Smalls and the others had waited until the last possible moment to tell their families about the plan. 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."

When all were aboard and in hiding, they left Charleston Harbor. Smalls signaled Confederate forts with the ship's steam whistle so no one would suspect anything.



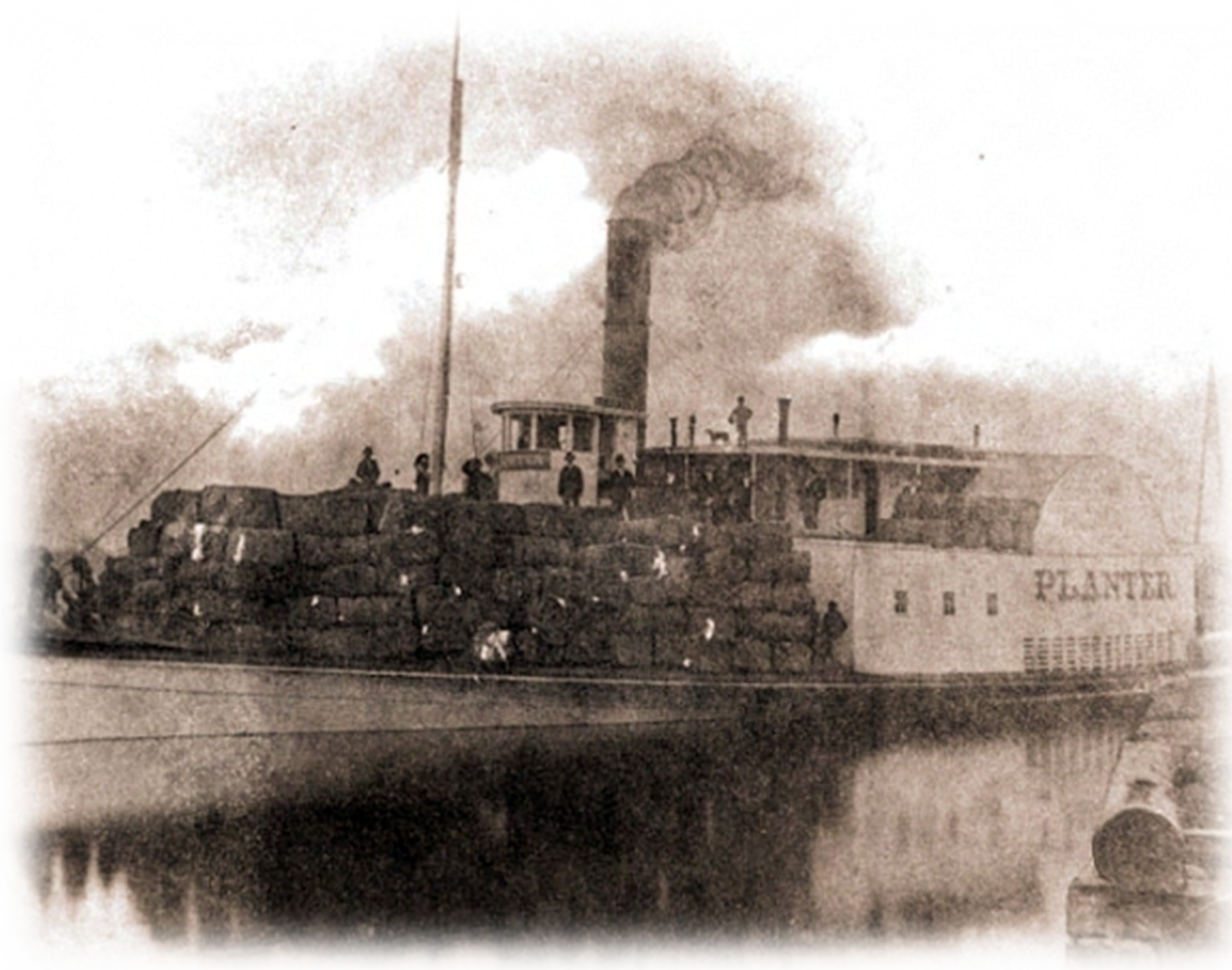
Sunset over modern Charleston, S.C. skyline.

May 13, 1861: Almost Free

The most dangerous moment came when Smalls sailed the *Planter* past heavily-armed Fort Sumter at 4:30 a.m. His fellow escapees were shocked when Smalls navigated close to the Fort. He knew that not following the usual route would look suspicious. Historian Cate Lineberry described the drama 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, 1861: Reaching the USS *Onward*

Then, just out of range of their guns, Smalls took down the rebel flags and raised the white flag of surrender (actually a bedsheet his wife had brought) and turned over the *Planter* and all the guns and military supplies on board to the USS *Onward*, part of the Union blockade fleet.

“Good morning, sir! I’ve brought you some of the old United States guns, sir,” Smalls declared.

The story of the bold actions of Smalls and his crew spread quickly. In addition to the ship and its weapons, Smalls gave the Union forces valuable information about the Confederate Navy that he had learned from his year serving on the *Planter*.

Illustration of Robert Smalls shortly after his escape, Harper’s Weekly (1862).



Celebrated Hero of the Union Cause

News of this daring escape spread through the country, and Smalls quickly became a national celebrity, with major magazines telling the tale.

He and his crew were awarded thousands of dollars in prize money. In recognition of his skill and bravery, Admiral Samuel Francis DuPont made Smalls captain of the *Planter*.

Smalls went on to pilot several Union vessels during the war, was wounded in battle and provided naval support of General Sherman's "March to the Sea" that was a key battle near the end of the war.

"HEROES IN EBONY: The Captors of the Rebel Steamer 'Planter'"
Illustration from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, June 21, 1862.



Life in Philadelphia

Smalls' political career began during the war. He joined free Black delegates to the May 1864 Republican National Convention.

Later that spring, Smalls piloted the *Planter* to Philadelphia for an overhaul. While in Philadelphia, he began to learn to read and write, something many slaves had not been allowed to do. He also learned about the kind of racism faced by free Blacks in the North.

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



Life in Philadelphia

While in Philadelphia, Smalls and a White companion were riding a streetcar one rainy day. At the time, streetcars were segregated, and the conductor told Smalls he would have to move and stand on the platform of the car.

Rather than submit to the humiliation, they both decided to get off and walk. The newspapers reported the story of the war hero who was put off a streetcar. It sparked a protest that eventually led to 1867 state laws against racial discrimination on public transit.



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

Postwar Business Ventures



Smalls continued his studies after settling in Beaufort. With business partner Richard Gleaves, a Haitian-American from Philadelphia, Smalls opened a store that catered to freedmen, as well as a school for Black children in 1867. He also published a newspaper, the *Beaufort Southern Standard*, starting in 1872.

Smalls and other prominent Black politicians formed the Enterprise Railroad, an 18-mile horse-drawn railway line that carried cargo and passengers between the Charleston wharves and inland depots. Except for one White Northerner, the railroad's board of directors was entirely African American.

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

Radical Grace in Action

Smalls didn't just invest in opportunities for the betterment of newly freed Blacks. After the Civil War, many former slave owners faced financial ruin. Smalls' former enslavers, the McKees, were almost **bankrupt**.

With prize money he received for capturing the *Planter*, Smalls bought the McKee house at 511 Prince Street in Beaufort where he and his mother had been enslaved before the war. His family lived in the house for the next 90 years.

In a startling act of mercy and “radical grace,” Smalls allowed Mrs. McKee, the aged and impoverished wife of his former enslaver, to reside at the house in her old bedroom until her death.



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

Reconstruction in America



“The First Colored Senator and Representatives,” 1872.

U.S. Senator H.R. Revels of Mississippi; Reps. 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.

From the end of the Civil War to 1877, America went through an era known as Reconstruction. During this time, society went through many changes as newly freed slaves took their place in society. Black Americans held national office and measures against racial discrimination were implemented across the nation.

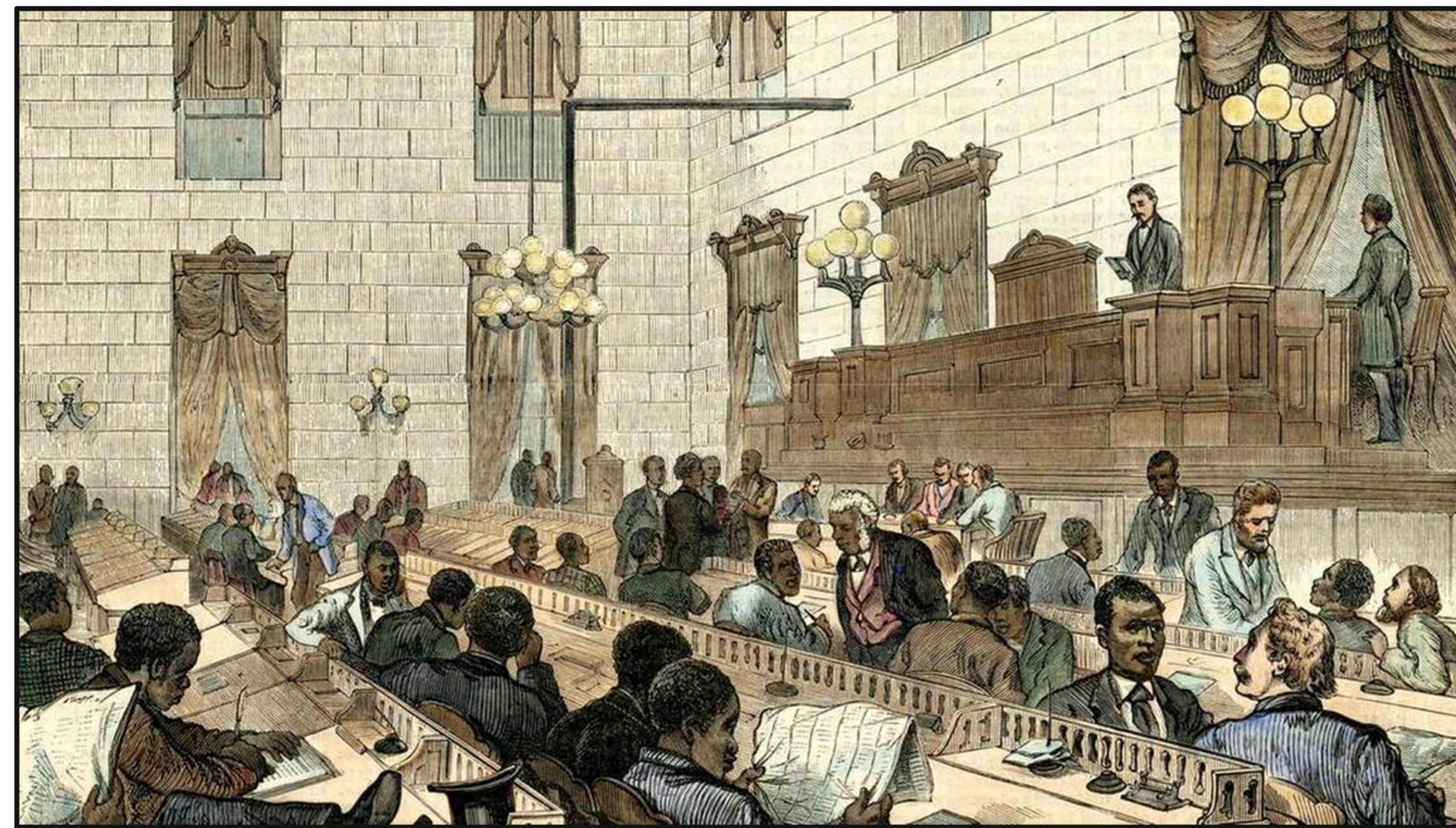
Changes were most strongly felt in the South, with the government placing restrictions on those who had recently rebelled against the Union.

Thousands of Republicans travelled south for new business ventures and to work in politics. Most White Southerners opposed Reconstruction. They were unwilling to share social and political power with Blacks and resented Northerners who they saw as profiting for their suffering.

Reconstruction in South Carolina

Under the leadership of “Radical” Republicans, a new state constitution was established in 1868 that abolished all racial barriers to property, voting rights, and public services. With 400,000 former slaves now legally full citizens, Black Americans were the voting majority in South Carolina. 73 of the 124 delegates who ratified this constitution were men of color, among them Robert Smalls.

From 1870-74, Smalls served in the state House of Representatives, then set his sights on national office.



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

How did Smalls’ experiences in the Civil War qualify him for public service?
What Woodson Principle does this represent?

Congressman Robert Smalls

In 1874, Smalls ran for the U.S. Congress in a new southeast district where Blacks were 68 percent of the population. Many of these Black voters were part of Smalls' own Sea Island Gullah community. Their local hero won easily, with almost 80 percent of the vote.

Smalls worked to provide federal investment in the Sea Island and Lowcountry area, 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



1876 cartoon showing a Black voter threatened with death by “redeemers” if he doesn’t vote Democrat.

The 1870s saw waves of terrorism and corruption that sought to end multiracial government.

White Democrats, often former Confederates, who overturned Reconstruction governments were known by supporters as “Redeemers.”

As “Redeemers” sought to destroy Reconstruction, the Northern press warned that former Confederates were “winning” elections by threatening Black voters.

George Tillman and the “Red Shirts”

Robert Smalls’ Democratic opponent in the 1876 election was George D. Tillman, a veteran of the Confederate Army. Tillman focused on racial anxieties and prejudices of the state’s poor, uneducated Whites.

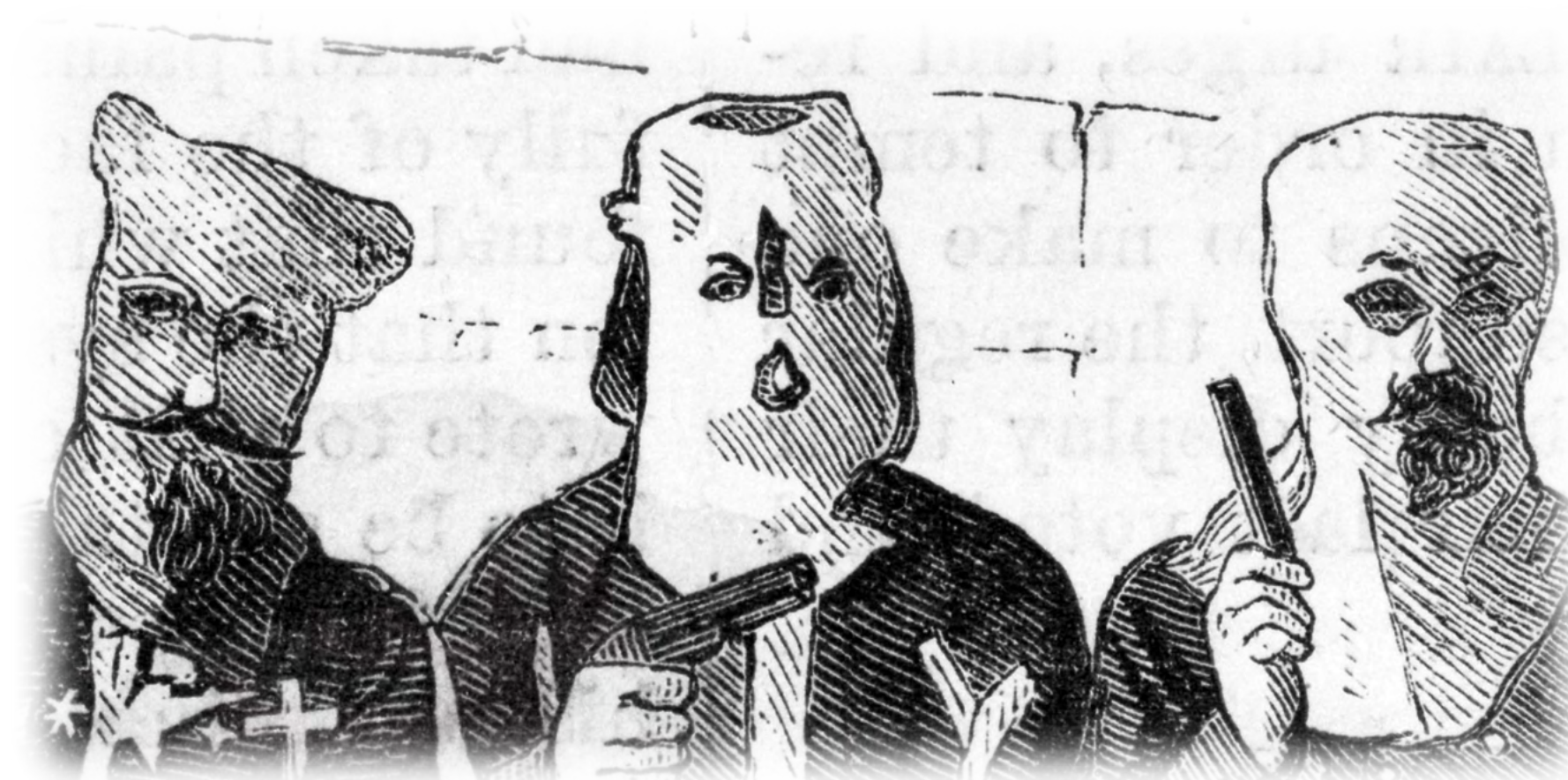
Several times during the campaign for the election Smalls, his supporters, and other Republicans were met with riots. The most brutal of Tillman’s supporters were the Red Shirts, who used intimidation, mob violence, and even murder to try to end Reconstruction.

Smalls lost the election by a thin margin – though he would return to Congress in 1881.



Above: George Tillman.

Below: Hooded paramilitaries, Ku Klux Klan and Red Shirts among them, used violence 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 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 leaders elected by the state’s Black majority under its 1868 constitution.

Meanwhile, before he left office, Smalls attempted unsuccessfully to add an antidiscrimination amendment to an army reorganization bill. His amendment would have integrated army regiments and ensured that race was not a factor in promotions.

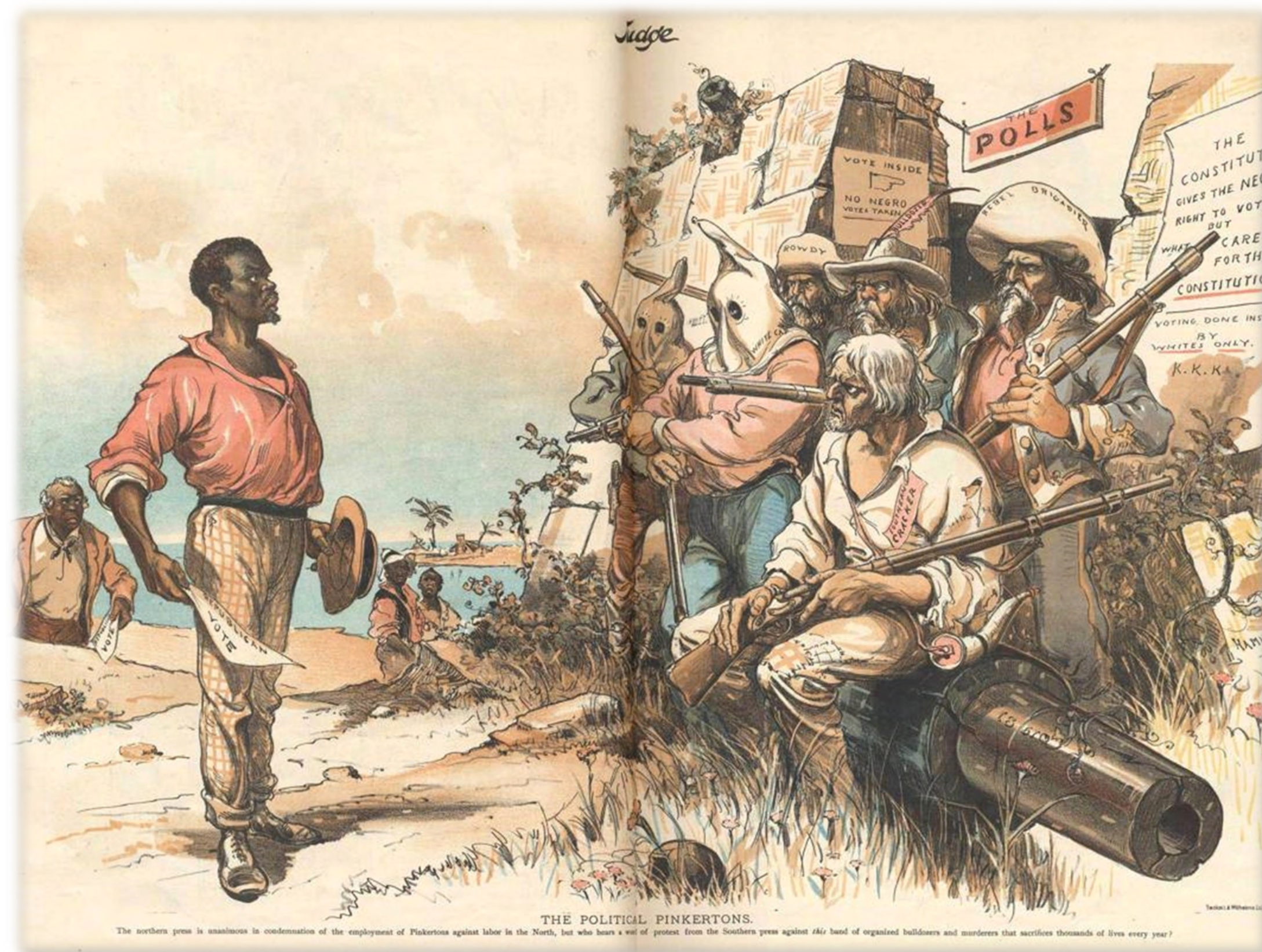


*Typical uniform of a Red Shirt militia member.
Source: South Carolina State Museum.*

Final Return to Congress

In 1884, Smalls was again elected to the U.S. Congress. Though both Smalls and his opponent, Confederate veteran William Elliott, expected 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 increasing power of White supremacist Democrats.

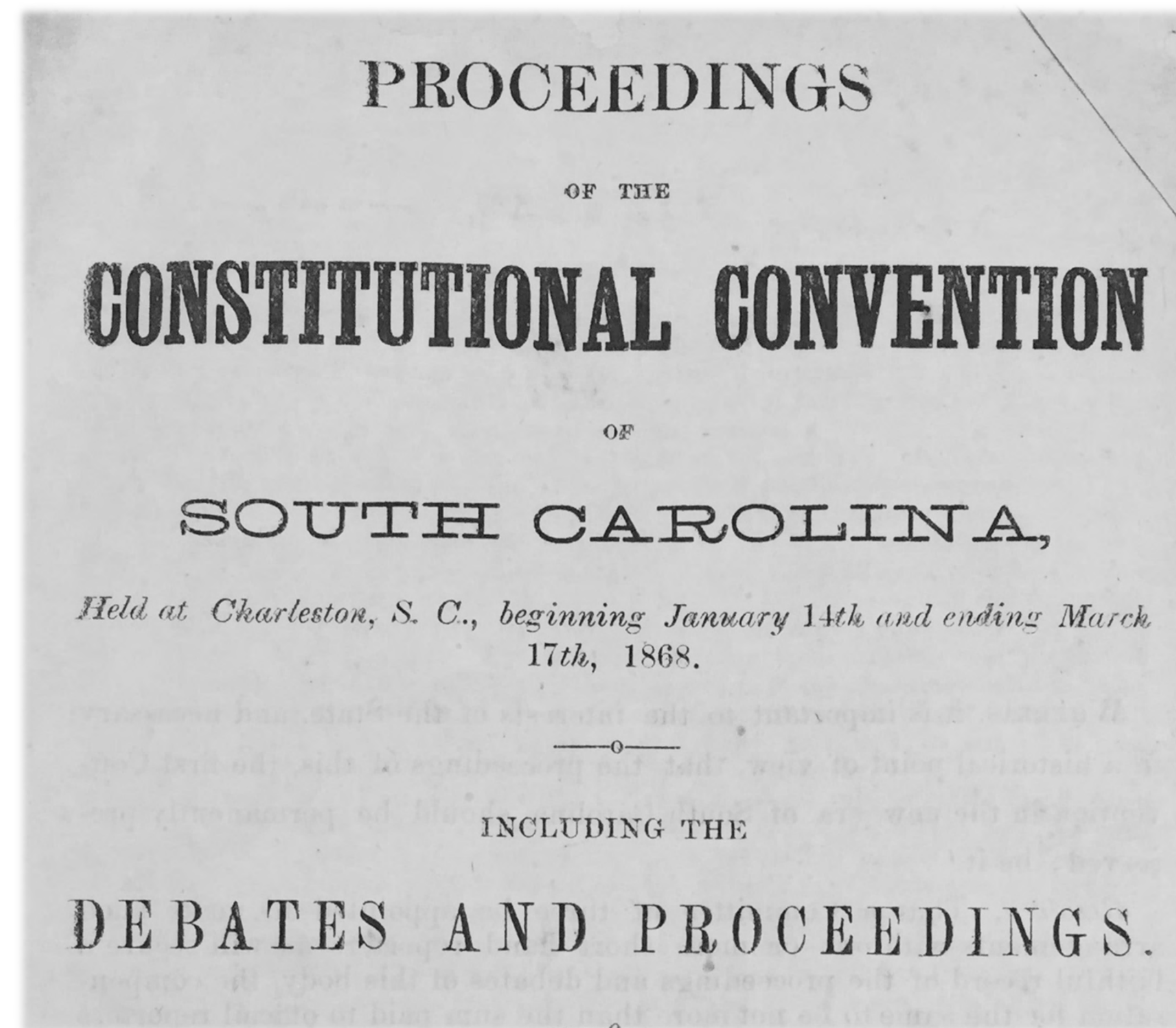


July 1892 comic from New York-based satirical magazine *Judge* shows a Black voter being denied access to the polls by hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan and other armed “rebels” and “rowdys.”

1895: One Last Battle with the Enemy

In 1894, Democrats in South Carolina got just enough votes to put a constitutional convention on the ballot. In an election full of violence and fraud, the constitutional convention was approved by only 2000 votes.

The state's 1868 constitution had granted voting rights to all men, regardless of race, and (at least on paper) integrated 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.



1895: One Last Battle with the Enemy



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

This new convention's main supporter was Benjamin Tillman, younger brother of Smalls' congressional rival, George. A vicious racist, Tillman openly bragged about having killed 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 determined. He remained involved in local Beaufort politics, including successful efforts to stop at least one lynching.

In 1889, Republican President Benjamin Harrison had appointed him the collector at the Port of Beaufort. He held the post until Republicans lost the White House in 1892 – a pattern that would continue until 1913, when Southern Democrat Woodrow Wilson stripped Smalls of this appointment for a final time.

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



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 began to be known again, especially the brave escape on the *Planter*.

Smalls attended Tabernacle Baptist Church in Beaufort, which today hosts a monument to his legacy. On it are these words from Smalls' 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."

Vocabulary

Appomattox
bankrupt
commandeer
creole
coup d'état
dialect
disenfranchise
Gullah
Lowcountry
Reconstruction



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.



WOODSON
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BLACK *History* *and* EXCELLENCE