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FREEDOM OR DEATH

During the dark days of war, **Robert Smalls** risked everything to free his family from slavery

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Taking Risks As you read, look for details that tell you why Robert Smalls chose to take a dangerous risk.

LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S 10 WORDS IN BOLD



Before dawn on May 13, 1862, a ship steamed through the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. The ship was called the *Planter*.

The mood on the water was tense. For more than a year, the Civil War had been raging in the United States. The states of the North were fighting the states of the South. Southern ships filled Charleston harbor, guarded by armed soldiers. Just outside the harbor, Northern ships waited with loaded cannons, ready to destroy any Southern ship that dared approach.

The *Planter* carried ammunition (like cannon balls) for Southern ships. The harbor guards thought it was making a delivery. The guards recognized Captain C. J. Relyea (rel-YAY). They saw his familiar gold-trimmed jacket. They saw his wide-brimmed straw hat, tilted low over his face. The

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captain waved as he approached each of five checkpoints. Each time, he gave the proper signal with the ship's whistle—three long, sharp toots followed by one hiss. Each time, the guards let the *Planter* pass.

Then something changed. The *Planter* picked up speed and headed out to sea. The guards at the last checkpoint watched in **astonishment**. What was Captain Relyea doing? Why was he heading toward the Northern ships? They would surely blast the *Planter* to bits.

In fact, it was not Captain Relyea at the wheel of the *Planter* that morning. The man

in charge was Robert Smalls. Robert was a 23-year-old slave. Huddled in the **hold** of the ship were his wife, Hannah, and their children.

Robert was leading a daring mission. Within moments, he and his family would be free. Or they would be dead.

A Life of Slavery

In many ways, Robert had been preparing for this moment since he was a boy. His mother, Lydia Polite, was one of many slaves that belonged to Henry McKee of Beaufort, South Carolina. Lydia was a “house slave.” She helped care for the McKee children. She and Robert lived in a shack behind the McKees’ home. Compared with most slaves, Robert and his mother were lucky. The McKees were kind to them.

But Lydia made sure that her son knew what it meant to be a slave. She told him about the millions of slaves who worked on cotton and tobacco **plantations** throughout the South. Those slaves worked all day long with no rest. If they slowed down or asked



A BRUTAL LIFE

Above: Enslaved families like this one lived in constant fear of being split up.

Right: Children as young as 7 worked alongside adults in the fields. They worked all day long in the hot sun.



for a drink of water, they were whipped.

Lydia sometimes took Robert to watch slave auctions. “Look around,” she’d say, pointing to the men, women, and children lined up on a wooden stage to be sold. One day, Robert watched as a young boy was inspected by interested buyers. They checked the boy’s teeth and feet like he was a horse. Nearby, the boy’s mother stood and cried. Once he was sold, she would never see him again.

“Thank goodness that’s not you,” Robert’s mother said.

Robert knew that Mr. McKee would never send him away from his mother. But he also knew that as a slave, he would never have any say over his own life. According to U.S. law, he wasn’t even a person. He was a piece of property, like a cow or a chair.

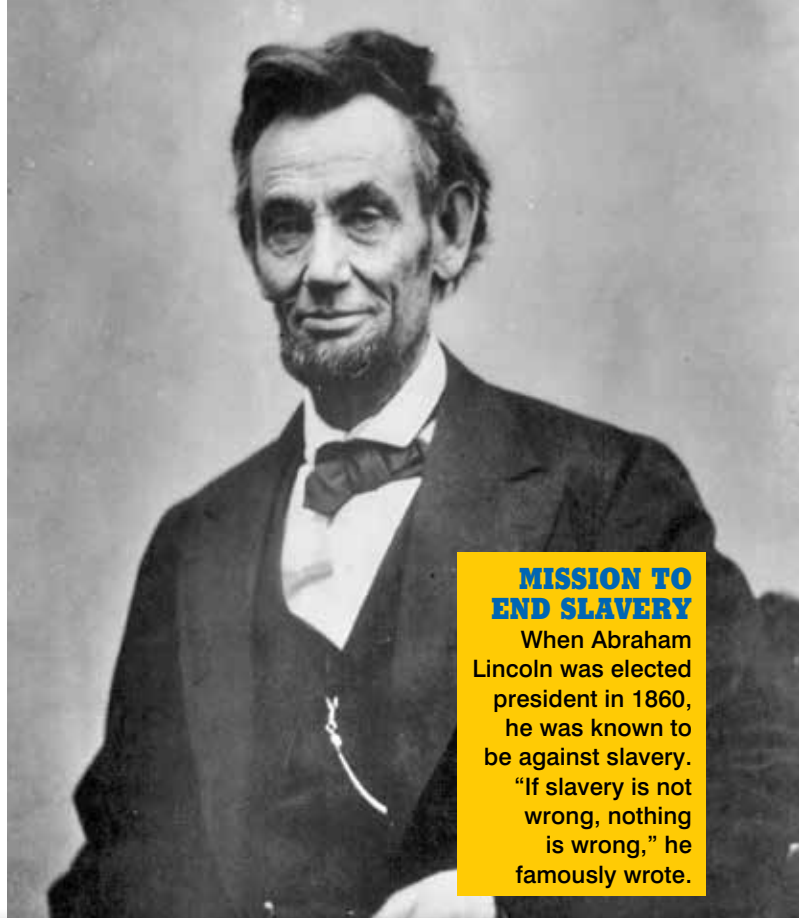
He told his mother that they should escape to the Northern states, where slavery was banned. He’d heard about slaves who’d made the journey, hiding in forests and caves, dodging slave catchers and bloodhounds.

His mother explained that for every slave who managed to escape, hundreds more died or were caught and punished. Robert should be grateful, she said. Their owners were kind. As long as the McKees were alive, she and Robert would be well cared for. “Promise me,” she said to Robert, “you will never run away.”

Haunted by Memories

So Robert tried to make the most of his life. When he was 12, he was sent to Charleston to work. It was common for slaveholders to hire out their slaves. The money Robert earned legally belonged to McKee.

But Robert and his owner had a deal. Robert paid Mr. McKee \$15 a month from



MISSION TO END SLAVERY

When Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860, he was known to be against slavery. “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong,” he famously wrote.

FREEDOM TO SLAVES!

Whereas, the President of the United States did, on the first day of the present month, issue his Proclamation declaring “that all persons held as slaves in the designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforth shall be, free;”

his earnings. The rest was Robert’s to keep.

In Charleston, slaves worked alongside white people and free black people. Robert got a job on the *Planter*, a ship that carried cotton up and down the South Carolina coast. He impressed the owner. Soon he learned to pilot the ship.

Robert fell in love with a **vivacious** woman named Hannah Jones. Hannah was a slave. She worked as a hotel maid. Slaves could not legally marry, but Mr. McKee and Hannah’s owner let the couple live together. Soon, Robert and Hannah had a daughter and a son.

The family was happy. But when Robert



FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM

To this day, the Civil War remains the bloodiest conflict in U.S. history. There were thousands of battles and deadly fights. Nearly 180,000 African-American soldiers (like the man at right) took part in the fighting on the Northern side, eager to help put an end to slavery.



looked at his children, he was haunted by the thought of the boy at the slave auction, who had been sold away from his mother. By law, their children did not belong to Robert and Hannah. They belonged to Hannah's owner. They could be taken away at any time.

A Bloody War

Meanwhile, slavery was tearing the country apart. Many people believed that President Abraham Lincoln planned to **abolish** slavery all over the U.S. The Southern states did not want that to happen. By February of 1861, leaders of seven Southern states had announced that they

would split off from the rest of the country rather than give up slavery. On April 12, Southern soldiers attacked a military base in Charleston called Fort Sumter. With those shots, the Civil War began.

The fighting was brutal. Charleston was in the middle of it. Southern commanders took over the *Planter* and used it as an ammunition ship. Robert and some other black crew members were forced to fight against the U.S. government, against President Lincoln, and against those who wanted to end slavery.

To Robert, this was **intolerable**. He longed for freedom for himself and his family. So he broke his long-ago promise to his mother. He decided to try to escape.

A Bold Plan

Robert made a plan. He would **commandeer** the *Planter* and turn it over to the Northern ships outside the harbor. It was not just stealing. It was **treason**. If he was caught, he and his crew would be put to death. There were other dangers too. They could be shot at by Southern ships during the escape. Or they might be killed by the



Northern fleet before they had a chance to surrender.

But Robert had made up his mind. On May 13, 1862, he and his crew put the plan in motion. Captain Relyea had gone to shore for the night. He had left Robert in charge of the ship. In the quiet predawn hours, Robert ordered his crew to fire up the ship. They moved **stealthily** through the harbor, stopping first at a dock where Hannah and the children were hiding. If their plan worked, the whole family would be free. If it failed, Hannah had said, it would be better that they die together.

Robert wore Captain Relyea’s hat and jacket. He hoped to fool the guards at each checkpoint. It worked—until the *Planter* raced out to sea.

At any second, the Southern ships could attack the *Planter*. Just one cannon ball would smash it to bits. But soon the *Planter* was out of range. It was safe among the Northern ships. The Northern commander was amazed when he met the *Planter*’s

crew: all slaves.

Except they weren’t slaves anymore. Robert, his family, and the crew were free.

The End of Slavery

Robert was a hero. The ship, filled with ammunition, was a prize for the North. Newspapers praised Robert, and he met President Lincoln. Northern commanders were impressed with Robert’s skills. They hired him to lead secret missions.

The Civil War raged for three more years. More than 750,000 soldiers died. But the U.S. survived as a nation. And in 1865, slavery was outlawed throughout the land.

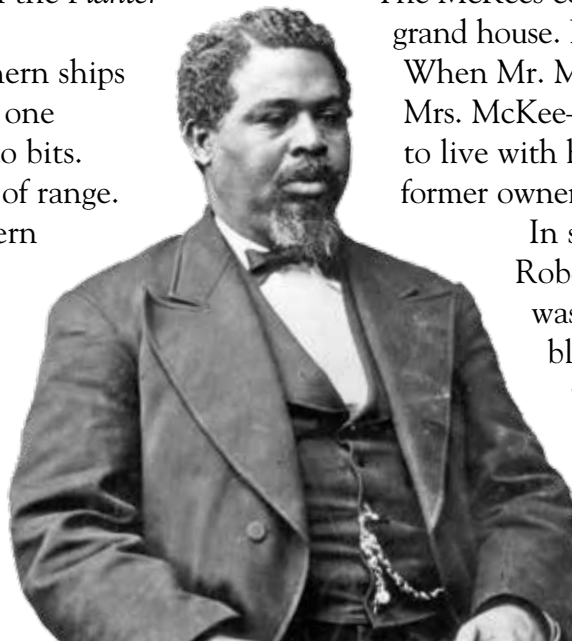
After the war, Robert and his family went back to Beaufort. Robert did well in business. He was also elected to the U.S. Congress.

Many white Southerners lost everything.

The McKees could no longer afford their grand house. Robert bought the house.

When Mr. McKee died, Robert invited Mrs. McKee—then an old woman—to live with him. He took care of his former owner until she died.

In spite of his success, Robert faced hardships. There was great **prejudice** against black people, especially freed slaves. Yet Robert remained a strong voice for his people. “All they need,” he famously said, “is an equal chance in the battle of life.” ■

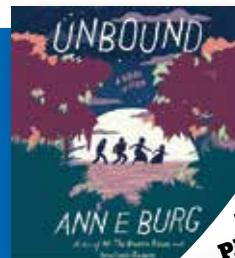


A RESPECTED LEADER

After the war, Robert Smalls was elected to Congress five times. He died in 1915, in the same house where he had been born a slave.

WRITE TO WIN

Use evidence from the text to explain why Robert Smalls risked his life to commandeer the *Planter*. Send a short, well-written essay to “Freedom Contest” by May 1, 2017. Ten winners will each receive a copy of *Unbound* by Ann E. Burg. See page 2 for details.



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TURN THE PAGE TO READ ABOUT ANOTHER BRAVE HERO.