In May 1862, Robert Smalls (1839-1915) committed an act that would lead to him being known as a daring hero during the Civil War.

The Confederates had commandeered into service the Planter, a transport steamer whose crew included Smalls and three other slaves. From the Planter in Charleston Harbor, the men could see the Union ships tantalizingly close as the Union Navy blockaded Fort Sumter. When all of the white crew went ashore for the evening on May 12, 1862, Smalls and the other slaves gathered their families on the Planter for a daring escape to freedom. Casting off, Smalls eased the ship into the current and headed out of Charleston harbor. Familiar with the waters and the Confederate routines, he steamed the Planter past five Confederate gun batteries, giving the correct signals for safe passage at each.

By dawn on May 13, 1862, Smalls had successfully cleared the harbor and surrendered the Planter to the Union forces.

“One of the most heroic acts of the war,” reported the New York Times on May 19, 1862. The commander of the Union Navy along the South Atlantic coast, Rear Admiral Samuel F. Du Pont, pronounced it “one of the coolest and most gallant naval acts of war.” Southern newspapers considered it “one of the most shameful events of this or any other war.”

In addition to providing the Union forces with the Planter, Smalls and the other former slaves provided invaluable intelligence, including information that allowed for the establishment of an important base on the Stono Inlet and Stono River for future military operations.

Photo courtesy of the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.