

# Wheelman

watch as history unfolds



through the eyes of  
Civil War hero

## Robert Smalls

Homecourt  Publishers

■ Greenville, SC

# Wheelman

**the story of Robert Smalls**

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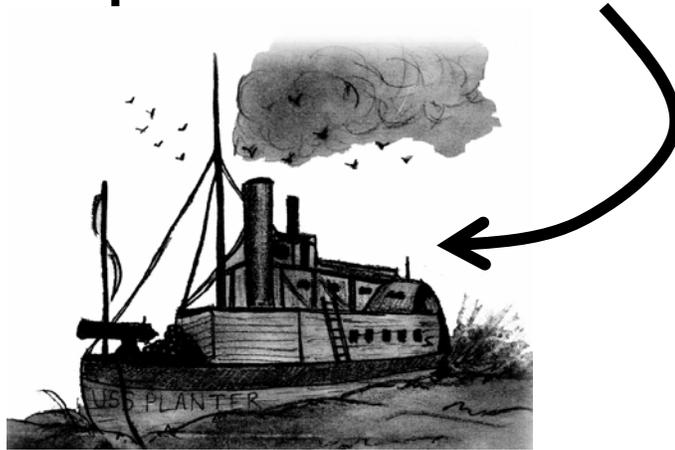
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I work on a Confederate  
ship named the *Planter*.



## 1 — *An Idea*

Alfred adjusts the compass to make sure it is reading correctly.

“Robert,” he says, “you can sail this ship as good as any white man. Maybe we should just take it for a ride around Charleston Harbor when nobody’s looking.”

I smile. “You mean when the entire Confederate Army is out to lunch? I’m sure they’d be happy to know that a crew of slaves has stolen their ship.”

2 — *Wheelman, Robert Smalls*

Alfred begins walking to the starboard side of the boat to inspect the sidewheel propeller. I follow him with a handful of rigging.

“Well, I bet President Lincoln would be proud,” he says.

Alfred pauses a moment, as if he’s considering his idea. “We could always sneak back onto the ship at night,” he declares. “You know just as well as I do that those soldiers like to spend their nights in the city – even when they’re supposed to be on the boat.”

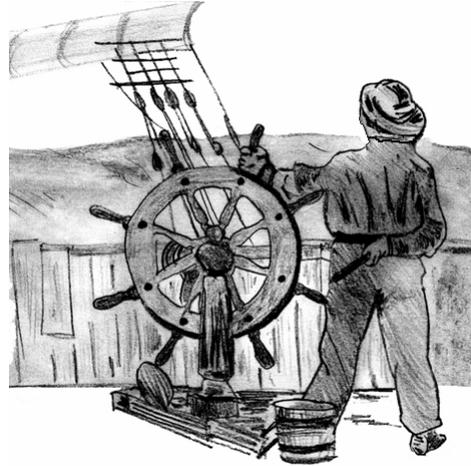
“Easy, Alfred,” I warn. “I’m not sure a couple of colored folks like us need to be talking this way. There might be a crazy war going on... but that doesn’t mean *we* need to act crazy.”

Alfred laughs, “I’m only joking, Robert. I’m just saying that it *could* be done.”

He’s right. I know that he is only joking. Alfred is a quiet and cautious person. He’s not the type to invent such a risky plan.

But he’s also right about something else. *It could be done.* We’ve been working on the

I pilot the ship in and out  
of the harbor... and could  
easily take it  
wherever I  
wanted to go.



*Planter* for weeks, and I know this ship inside and out. I could pilot it right out of the Charleston Harbor and into the Atlantic. And from there...

I need to stop. This type of thinking will only cause trouble. I've got a good job working as the wheelman on this boat, even if I have to send away most of my paycheck because I'm a slave. It would be crazy to let Alfred's silly joke start trouble.

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4 — *Wheelman, Robert Smalls*

“Look at these maps,” says Captain Relyea, waking me from my daydream. “We’ll be taking her out in a few days.”

“Yes, sir,” I say. I look down at the map. Clearly marked are Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie. I think about how many times I’ve sailed past these forts, always with the Confederate flag flying over me.

These forts are armed with cannons and heavy artillery, and can sink a Union ship with just a few well-aimed shots. But these strongholds would never harm a Confederate ship. They will let them sail by with no questions...

I drop the map and walk onto the deck of the ship. Alfred, Abraham, and Samuel are all working and cleaning, trying to get the *Planter* ready for her next voyage. They are slaves like me, hired by the Confederate Army to care for the ship.

“Do you remember what we talked about earlier?” I ask Alfred.

He thinks for a moment and says, “You mean about stealing...”

I raise my hand to stop him. “Let’s not repeat that joke while we’re on the deck of this ship. I think we should all meet and talk about it in private at my house.”

Alfred nods slowly, and I can tell he’s a bit worried about the serious look on my face. He knows what I’m thinking... and he knows I’m not joking.