Smalls, Robert

(b. April 5, 1839, Beaufort, S.C., U.S.--d. Feb. 22, 1915, Beaufort), Negro slave who became a naval hero for the Union in the American Civil War (1861-65) and went on to serve as a congressman from South Carolina during Reconstruction (1865-77).

The son of plantation slaves, Smalls was taken by his master in 1851 to Charleston, S.C., where he worked as a hotel waiter, hack driver, and rigger. Impressed into the Confederate Navy at the outbreak of the war, he was forced to serve as wheelman aboard the armed frigate "Planter." On May 13, 1862, he and 12 other slaves seized control of the ship in Charleston harbour and succeeded in turning it over to a Union naval squadron blockading the city. This exploit brought Smalls great fame throughout the North. He continued to serve as a pilot on the "Planter" and became the ship's captain in 1863.

After the war, Smalls rose rapidly in politics, despite his limited education. From 1868 to 1870 he served in the South Carolina House of Representatives and from 1871 to 1874 in the state senate. He was elected to the U.S. Congress (1875-79, 1881-87), where his outstanding political action was support of a bill that would have required equal accommodations for both races on interstate conveyances. In 1877, however, he was convicted of having taken a $5,000 bribe while in the state senate; sentenced to three years in prison, he was pardoned by the governor. In 1895 he delivered a moving speech before the South Carolina constitutional convention in a gallant but futile attempt to prevent the virtual disenfranchisement of blacks.

A political moderate, Smalls spent his last years in Beaufort, where he served as port collector (1889-93, 1897-1913).