

State Museum Exhibit Examines Heroic Civil War Escape

Written by Staff Writer
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Columbia, S.C. - The life of a South Carolinian who was born in slavery and eventually became a United States Congressman is examined in a new exhibit opening July 7 at the South Carolina State Museum.

The Life and Times of Congressman Robert Smalls, began as a part of the museum's Traveling Exhibits Program. The museum traveled the exhibit for three years and through 12 cities, including Boston, Philadelphia and Huntsville, Ala., before bringing it home to open at the venue that helped create it with the Avery Research Center at the College of Charleston.

"The exhibit was on view at libraries, universities and museums presenting the remarkable story of Robert Smalls to more than 65,000 people." said Jeff Powley, manager of the exhibit.

On May 13, 1862 during the Civil War, Smalls, a 23-year old slave, made history when he stole the Confederate ship CSS Planter from under the noses of Charleston Harbor guards, past Fort Sumter and steamed his way to freedom, turning the ship over to Federal forces.

This feat won him an audience with President Abraham Lincoln and a chance to lobby for the enlistment of black men to fight for the Union. The exhibit features detailed models of the Planter and the Keokuk, a ship Smalls later piloted.

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Smalls entered politics at the dawn of the Reconstruction era. He became a leader in Beaufort County, was elected to the South Carolina legislature and in 1874 he was elected to the U.S. Congress, where he served five terms. Congressman Smalls wrote legislation creating the public school system in South Carolina and dedicating land for the Parris Island Naval Station.

Smalls ended his career as collector of customs at the Port of Beaufort, where he died in 1915. A wealthy man, Smalls purchased many homes in Beaufort, including the home of his former master, Henry McKee. Furniture from this home is included in the exhibit, along with photographs, models, copies of letters, artifacts and text panels.

"Robert Smalls left an indelible legacy of bravery, leadership and public service for all Americans," said Powley. "His life exemplified what many former slaves could aspire to achieve with their freedom. This exhibition honors his extraordinary life and legacy."

A series of in-gallery experiences will accompany the exhibit. The museum's Web site, southcarolinastatemuseum.org, will have information on Robert Smalls programs for families each Saturday during September, Powley said.

The Life and Times of Robert Smalls can be seen on the museum's fourth floor through Jan. 6, 2013.