**South Carolina General Assembly**

125th Session, 2023-2024

**H. 3893**

**STATUS INFORMATION**

House Resolution

Sponsors: Reps. Rivers, Alexander, Anderson, Bamberg, Bauer, Clyburn, Dillard, Garvin, Gilliard, Hart, Henderson-Myers, Henegan, Hosey, Howard, Jefferson, J.L. Johnson, W. Jones, King, McDaniel, J. Moore, Pendarvis, Rutherford, Tedder, Thigpen, Weeks and Williams

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Introduced in the House on February 7, 2023

Currently residing in the House

Summary: Robert Smalls (Black History Month)

**HISTORY OF LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS**

Date Body Action Description with journal page number

2/7/2023 House Introduced and adopted ([House Journal‑page 14](h:\hj\20230207.docx))

2/7/2023 Scrivener's error corrected

View the latest  [legislative information](https://www.scstatehouse.gov/billsearch.php?billnumbers=3893&session=125&summary=B)  at the website

**VERSIONS OF THIS BILL**

[02/07/2023](https://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess125_2023-2024/prever/3893_20230207.docx)

[02/07/2023-A](https://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess125_2023-2024/prever/3893_20230207a.docx)

A house RESOLUTION

TO RECOGNIZE AND HONOR ROBERT SMALLS, NATIVE SON OF SOUTH CAROLINA, FOR HIS MANY ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS GREAT STATE.

Whereas, on April 5, 1839, in Beaufort, South Carolina, Robert Smalls was born into slavery as the property of John McKee. As a young man, he was sent to work a number of jobs in the city of Charleston. There, he met his wife, Hannah Jones, and earned his most memorable position aboard the *Planter*, originally a Confederate Navy ship and later a Union ship; and

Whereas, on the night of May 12, 1862, the three white officers of the *Planter*, Captain C.J. Relyea, pilot Samuel H. Smith, and engineer Zerich Pitcher, disembarked, leaving the crew’s eight trusted slave members, including Robert, behind. Robert, who was a skilled navigator, had been developing a plan of escape for weeks. As the white officers left, he confided to the crew that they were going to commandeer the ship and sail it in an attempt to escape toward freedom. If caught, they would use the guns and ammunition onboard to fight, and if that proved futile, they would sink the ship, going down with it. For those onboard, it was a venture toward either death or freedom; and

Whereas, at two in the morning, Robert donned the wide brim straw hat of Captain Reylea to disguise himself and they eased out from the dock. They hoisted both the South Carolina and Confederate flags to act as decoys and sailed toward the West Atlantic Wharf, where they picked up Smalls’ wife and children, as well as four other women, three men, and another child. Shortly after three in the morning, they began their perilous maritime venture past Confederate forts Johnson and Sumter. Using the proper Navy signals and mimicking the mannerisms of Captain Reylea, they performed a dangerous but effective ruse that allowed them to pass without raising suspicion. It was only after the ship had passed out of gun range of the Confederate forts that the alarm was sounded; and

Whereas, the *Planter* soon reached the nearby Union blockade of ships. Smalls presented the ship and its armaments to the Union officers, explaining, “I thought they might be of some service to Uncle Abe.” As the sun rose, on May 13, 1862, Robert Smalls had delivered all seventeen passengers, including his family, from slavery into freedom; and

Whereas, on May 30, 1862, the United States Congress passed, and President Abraham Lincoln signed, a bill that authorized the Navy to appraise the *Planter* and award Smalls and his crew half its value. As his part of that reward, Smalls received fifteen hundred dollars, which he later used to purchase his former owner’s house in Beaufort following the end of the Civil War; and

Whereas, Robert’s civic career began as the Civil War continued to be fought. He joined free Black delegates in attending the 1864 Republican National Convention, the first of seven he would attend in his lifetime. After an incident on December 30, 1864, in which he was removed from an all-white streetcar in Philadelphia, he led mass boycotts of segregated public transportation. This effort led to a new city law that permitted integrated streetcars in 1867; and

Whereas, while he was in the North, Robert Smalls met with President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, successfully lobbying them to begin enlisting Black soldiers for the war effort. After much dedicated searching on his own part, Smalls is believed to have recruited five thousand Black soldiers, including the formation of the 1st and 2nd South Carolina regiments; and

Whereas, in October 1862, Robert was returned to the *Planter* to act as one of the first Black pilots in the United States Navy as a part of Admiral Du Pont’s South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. Throughout the war, he took part in seventeen military engagements, including the assault on Fort Sumter, and was promoted to the rank of captain for his valiancy under fire, becoming the first Black naval captain; and

Whereas, upon the war’s conclusion, Smalls received a commission as brigadier general of the South Carolina militia and was promoted to major general. On settling back into the city of Beaufort, he continued to expand upon the rudimentary education he had received in Philadelphia and embarked on a variety of business ventures. He opened a store and a school for Black children in 1867, and he published a newspaper, the *Beaufort Southern Standard*, in 1872. From there, Smalls began his efforts as a first-generation Black politician; and

Whereas, as a delegate at the 1868 State Constitutional Convention, he worked to make free, compulsory school available to all South Carolina children. Throughout the course of his life, he served in the South Carolina State Assembly and Senate and served five nonconsecutive terms in the United States House of Representatives; and

Whereas, Smalls fought tirelessly against segregation of the military, railroads, and restaurants and even against the relocation of Black individuals to Liberia. He served on numerous important committees and helped to pass legislation that created the Parris Island Marine Corps Base near Beaufort; and

Whereas, after his time working in Congress and the state Legislature, Smalls was appointed collector of customs in Beaufort. He managed to hold on to this lucrative federal appointment for nearly twenty years, despite increasing opposition from local politicians; and

Whereas, at the time of his death in February 1915 at the venerable age of seventy-five, Robert Smalls had spent his life struggling against many hardships, both for himself and for Black Americans throughout the country and this State. It is a fitting and proper tribute, then, during Black History Month, for the South Carolina House of Representatives to honor Robert Smalls, a true leader and reformer who took some of the greatest chances to obtain a greater life for himself and others. Now, therefore,

Be it resolved by the House of Representatives:

That the members of the South Carolina House of Representatives, by this resolution, recognize and honor Robert Smalls, native son of South Carolina, for his many accomplishments and contributions to this great State.

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