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Robert Smalls of South Carolina and His Families

Andrew Billingsley

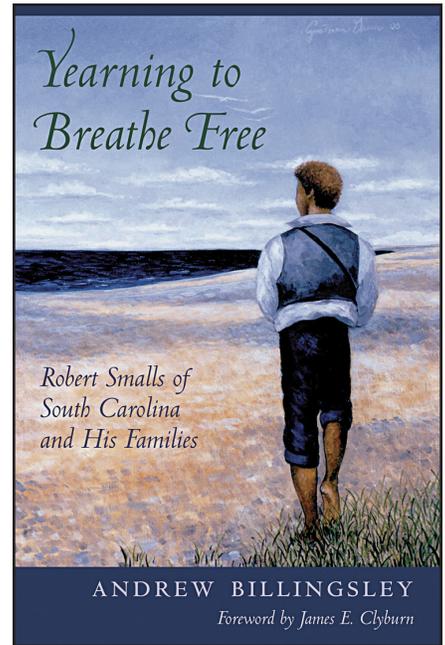
Foreword by U.S. Congressman James E. Clyburn

On May 13, 1862, Robert Smalls (1839–1915) commandeered a Confederate warship, the *Planter*, from Charleston harbor and piloted the vessel to cheering seamen of the Union blockade, thus securing his place in the annals of Civil War heroics. Slave, pilot, businessman, statesman, U.S. congressman—Smalls played many roles en route to becoming an American icon, but none of his accomplishments was a solo effort. Sociologist Andrew Billingsley offers the first biography of Smalls to assess the influence of his families—black and white, past and present—on his life and enduring legend. In so doing, Billingsley creates a compelling mosaic of evolving black-white social relations in the American South as exemplified by this famous figure and his descendants.

Born a slave in Beaufort, South Carolina, Robert Smalls was raised with his master's family and grew up amid an odd balance of privilege and bondage which instilled in him an understanding of and desire for freedom, culminating in his daring bid for freedom in 1862. Smalls served with distinction in the Union forces at the helm of the *Planter* and, after the war, he returned to Beaufort to buy the home of his former masters—a house that remained at the center of the Smalls family for a century. A founder of the South Carolina Republican Party, Smalls was elected to the state house of representatives, the state senate, and five times to the United States Congress. Throughout the trials and triumphs of his military and public service, he was surrounded by growing family of supporters. Billingsley illustrates how this support system, coupled with Smalls's dogged resilience, empowered him for success.

Writing of subsequent generations of the Smalls family, Billingsley delineates the evolving patterns of opportunity, challenge, and change that have been the hallmarks of the African American experience thanks to the selfless investments in freedom and family made by Robert Smalls of South Carolina.

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Andrew Billingsley is a professor of sociology and African American studies and senior scholar in residence at the Institute for Families in Society at the University of South Carolina. His previous books are *Mighty like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* and *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families*. Billingsley is the recipient of the DuBois-Johnson-Frazier Award from the American Sociological Association and the Distinguished Scholar Award from the Association of Black Sociologists.

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