

**AUTHOR'S NOTES TO THE NOVEL**  
**Trouble the Water**  
by **Rebecca Dwight Bruff**

This book is fiction. This story is inspired by history.

Rather than a biography, I've attempted to imagine the world in which Robert Smalls lived. I've wondered about the people who shared it, the political and theological contexts that informed it, and the inevitably complicated and challenging relationships therein. What were the hopes, fears, motivations, and aspirations of the enslaved, and the slaveholder? What was it like to be a young man or a young woman, a parent or a child, from a small community in South Carolina before, during, and after the Civil War? How did they navigate the confusing assumptions and expectations? How did they change or adapt or fail when the world changed beneath and around them?

Instead of trying to explore Smalls' military or political career, I've sought to explore his pursuit of courage and freedom, friendship and love, education and self-determination, hope and loss and redemption.

I've attempted to honor the perspectives of a few women and men, Black and White, enslaved and free, while recognizing the historical and cultural distances to be bridged. It is the work of human imagination and curiosity that carries our hearts over such a bridge and allows us, perhaps, to be touched by the lives of others. That's what I've sought to do here.

The man changed countless lives. Including mine.

There's a great deal of speculation regarding the identity of Smalls' father, but no conclusive evidence.

Robert Smalls did learn to read, if poorly, but we don't know how.

Smalls met Hannah in Charleston and negotiated to buy and marry her, but we know little of their courtship or early life together. Hannah had at least one child when they married, and together they had two daughters, and a son who died in early childhood. Smalls remarried, and his second wife, Annie Wigg, died in 1895, when their son, William Robert Smalls, was only three years old.

A rich legend holds that Mrs. McKee, late in life, returned to Beaufort when the Smalls family resided in her former home; the oral tradition says that she was old and suffering from dementia, and they took her in and cared for her until her death. I want to believe this beautiful story is true but cannot confirm it.

Even the provenance of the surname Smalls is something of a mystery. And his nickname, his "basket name," Trouble, is imagined.

But these things are known: Smalls did indeed commandeer the Confederate steamer the *Planter* and deliver her to the Union navy, serve as a Union pilot through the war, and have audience with Lincoln to advocate for the enlistment of black soldiers. He did return to Beaufort after the war and buy the house on Prince Street, and he had some wealth from the reward money and his salary while serving on the *Planter*. He did serve in the state legislature and five terms in the US Congress, and he not only provided for the education of his own children, but he wrote legislation resulting in free compulsory education for the children, *all* the children, of South Carolina.

Robert Smalls died on February 23, 1915, at his home on Prince Street. Born enslaved behind that very house, he secured his freedom and that of his family, and was instrumental in securing the freedom of countless others.

He was an American hero, and yet most Americans have never heard of this man, this courageous and brilliant unsung hero. I hope this book introduces him broadly.

## About the Other Characters:

Henry and Jane McKee had a daughter named Elizabeth Jane, who was, in historical fact, a month older than Robert Smalls. The McKees lost a son at age five (named Hank here), but we don't know the cause of his death. The McKees enslaved a man named George, who was their carriage driver. In the novel, his brother Ruben is entirely imagined.

The large Robert Barnwell Rhett family had no fifth son named Peter.

Peter Rhett, his fictional youngest son, is entirely imagined, and I hope that his character personifies the possibility of redemptive transformation in the old South. Robert Barnwell Rhett was born Robert Barnwell Smith, and lived most of his life in Charleston. Some sources say he was adopted by an uncle; others say he and his brothers (including a younger brother named Edmund, who lived in Beaufort) changed their surname to Rhett to reclaim their English roots. His own memoirs and his biographers reveal a deeply complicated man. The historical elder Rhett endorsed both slavery and secession, ferociously, and he and his brother Edmund were instrumental in writing the orders of secession. He and his son, Robert Rhett Jr., ran his newspaper, the *Charleston Mercury*, that so enthusiastically supported their views. In this novel, the character Robert Barnwell Rhett is a compilation of both Edmund Rhett and Robert Barnwell Rhett.

Smalls' first wife, Hannah, was enslaved by a family named either Kingman or Kingsman (the historical records show both spellings) and their words and actions in this novel are purely fictional; the stories about her mother are imagined as well.

To the best of my knowledge, and to honor them, I've used the actual names of the men and women who were part of the crew of the *Planter* the night of the escape.

The "Redshirts" were a highly organized white supremacist movement, thinly veiled as "rifle and gun clubs," active after Reconstruction, and instrumental in suppressing the rights of African-Americans.

As Reconstruction was dismantled and white supremacy regained its stronghold on the South, white political leaders worked hard to diminish Smalls' accomplishments and influence. In 1873, in an attempt to smear his name and diminish his popularity and influence, Smalls was accused of accepting a bribe while serving as a state senator. He was arrested and charged in 1877 and sentenced to three years of hard labor in a state prison. He was released from jail after three days on a pending appeal and returned to Congress. The South Carolina Supreme Court heard his appeal in 1879. Grounds for the appeal included unfair jury selection and the fact that the weak evidence for the case had come from a convicted felon who'd been granted immunity for his testimony. The state Supreme Court ruled against him, and Smalls appealed to the US Supreme Court. But before the Court heard the case, Governor William Simpson pardoned Smalls on assurances from the US district attorney that election fraud charges would be dropped against South Carolinians accused of voter violations in 1878. Smalls was never satisfied that justice had been served. The smear worked and his political reputation had been tainted.

The *Beaufort Gazette*, 100 years after Smalls' death, reported, "His brand of politics was more local than national. Known as the 'King of Beaufort County,' he secured the first funds for the purchase of what is today the Marine Corps Recruit Depot on Parris Island, raised money for Beaufort's first public school, and was a booster of economic development in a brief period when the county was a center of industry rather than agriculture. Smalls was sitting on the porch of his home when his extraordinary life came to an end at age seventy-six. By then, the political world had turned against him. Not a word of his death or funeral was reported in *The Beaufort Gazette*. The story of his heroic life, like so many others, was suppressed, but never fully silenced, and hopefully Robert Smalls will be given the honor due him as an American hero.

This story is inspired by his. Apart from the details above, the narrative is an imaginative work, and I hope it inspires readers to learn more of the man and his extraordinary contributions. The words and actions of the historical figures are imagined, and events referenced are not necessarily chronologically accurate.