

# Letter to the Editor

## Comment on a Long-standing Error

**From Dean S. Bird**

*Mr. Bird wrote in October 2007 to correct errors contained in the Studies in Intelligence Winter 1998-1999 Unclassified Edition article by P.K. Rose "Valuable Sources--The Civil War: Black American Contributions to Union Intelligence" (pp. 73-80). Mr. Bird is a retired history teacher and Civil War reenactor at Fort Clinch, in Fernandina, Florida, a location erroneously connected to a historic figure mentioned in the Rose article, Robert Smalls.*

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Robert Smalls was a popular Civil War hero of the times. He was a slave and a ship pilot in Charleston, South Carolina, who in May 1862 with 16 people on board, including his wife, brother, and their children sailed the ship on which he worked (The Planter) past the Confederate-occupied Fort Sumter, and surrendered it to the blockading Union navy. He also delivered important information about Confederate dispositions in and around Charleston Harbor. Smalls would go on to serve as a pilot for both the navy and the army during the remainder of the war. After the war, he was elected to the US House of Representatives multiple times. In September 2007, a ship named in honor of Small was commissioned. Fittingly, it is an Army vessel, the logistic support ship Major General Robert Smalls (LSV-8). After Smalls handed The Planter to the navy, it was turned over to the Union army because it was a wood-burning ship--in 1862 the US Navy had committed itself to the use of coal.

While Mr. Rose's summary of the Planter story, as it was told by Benjamin Quarles in *The Negro in the Civil War* is generally correct-- Smalls did sail the ship to the US Navy, but he was not, as described, "a free black American," nor did he receive a share of the value of the ship the month he delivered it (the payment was only authorized that quickly)--he misses most seriously by wrongly attributing to Smalls an earlier event off Fernandina involving an unnamed slave described by Quarles. In March 1862, when Union navy flag officer Samuel Francis DuPont and his fleet of 27 ships approached Fernandina, this slave rowed a small boat out to the fleet and informed DuPont that the Confederates had evacuated Fort Clinch. Most sources do not name this slave-- some have named him "Louis Napoleon"--and extant descriptions of him do not match descriptions of Smalls. In addition, at least one source has Smalls becoming the Planter's pilot in Charleston the day before the incident in Fernandina, more than 200 miles to the south.

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