



**Classroom Guide for**  
**SEVEN MILES TO FREEDOM:**  
**The Robert Smalls Story**  
 by Janet Halfmann  
 Illustrated by Duane Smith

**Reading Level**

\*Reading Level: Grades 3-4

Interest Level: Grades 1-6

Guided Reading Level: S

Lexile™ Measure: AD870

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

**Themes**

History (Civil War), Heroism, Slavery and Freedom, Leadership, Overcoming Adversity, African/African American Interest

**Synopsis**

Growing up a slave in South Carolina, Robert Smalls always dreamed of the moment freedom would be within his grasp. He and his wife, Hannah, made an agreement to save enough money to buy her freedom and that of their baby daughter. However, as the Civil War moved closer to Charleston, Robert saw that freedom might be won not with money, but with an escape.

Because Robert had been trusted as a wheelman of the ships, he knew his way around the waterways, and even knew the secret whistle codes that would allow boats to pass checkpoints. On the night of the planned escape, Robert Smalls stood proudly at the *Planter's* wheel. Only seven miles of water lay between the ship in Charleston harbor and freedom in Union territory. With precision and amazing courage, he navigated the *Planter* past the Confederate forts in the harbor and steered the ship toward the safety of the Union fleet. Just one miscalculation would be deadly, but for Robert, his family, and his crewmates, the risk was worth taking for the chance of freedom. When the ship finally made it to Union territory, Robert raised a white flag and surrendered. He was welcomed as a hero by

the Union navy. He had brought his family and crew safely to freedom.

### **Background**

Robert Smalls was born in the slave quarters on the McKee family's property in Beaufort, South Carolina, in 1839. During and after the Civil War, Smalls was a ship's pilot, sea captain, and politician. After working as a pilot for the Union, he later became a politician, serving in both the South Carolina State legislature and the United States House of Representatives. Smalls was a driven politician. He authored legislation that created the first free public school system for all children in South Carolina, convinced President Abraham Lincoln to accept African American soldiers into the Union army, and introduced a petition that would give women the right to vote.

More detailed information about Robert Smalls and his career can be found at the [Robert Smalls official website](#).

### **Teaching Tip**

*Seven Miles to Freedom* would be useful as part of a unit on slavery and/or the Civil War. It may also be used during Black History Month (February) to highlight the achievements of a relatively unknown African American hero.

## **BEFORE READING**

### **Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing the book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation with questions such as the following:

1. What do you know about slavery in the United States?
2. What do you know about the Civil War? What were the two sides called? What regions of the country did they represent?
3. Have you ever been on a ship or boat? What was the experience like? Where did you travel?
4. Can you tell me about a famous African American you have learned about?
5. What does it mean to be courageous? Tell us about a time when you or someone you know needed to be courageous.

### **Exploring the Book**

Write the title and subtitle of the book on the chalkboard. Ask students what they think they mean. What do they think the story is about?

Have students look at the illustration on the front cover and the map on the back cover. Discuss what they notice in the images. How might these images relate to the title/subtitle?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: title page at the beginning and afterword, quotation, author's sources, dedications, and acknowledgments at the end. Discuss why so much additional information is included.

### **Setting a Purpose for Reading**

Have students read to learn about the story of Robert Smalls. Also encourage students to read the Afterword at the end of the story, to find out more about Robert Smalls.

### **VOCABULARY**

Have students use a thesaurus to find synonyms for these words from the story. Then have them work in pairs to create sentences for each word and its synonym. Let students share their sentences and decide as a group if the words are used correctly.

kind	trust
elegant	opportunity
routine	trick
earn	promise
dedication	anxious
skill	hope

### **AFTER READING**

#### **Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop understanding of the content. Encourage students to refer back to the text and photographs in the book to support their responses.

1. Who was Robert Smalls? Why is his story important?
2. Where did the story take place? In what year did the story start? In what year did it end?
3. Which area of the country was known as the Union? Which area was known as the Confederacy? Which area was pro-slavery? Which area was anti-slavery?
4. What was Robert's life like on the McKee's property? What experiences during his childhood affected his feelings about slavery?
5. Why did Robert like the waterfront, listening to the workers on the ships in the harbor, and the shipyard?
6. What did you learn about the character of Robert Smalls? What kind of person was he? Find passages in the book to support your ideas.

7. When Robert and Hannah were first thinking about freedom, what was their plan? How much would it cost?
8. What kinds of things did Robert Smalls have to consider in planning the escape? What circumstances affected the timing of the escape?
9. How did Robert's crew prepare for the escape? How did their families prepare?
10. What risks did Robert, his family, and his crew take when they escaped? Why were they willing to take such risks?
11. When do you think Robert Smalls showed the most self-control during the escape? Find the passage in the story that supports your choice. What might he have been thinking about to help him stay calm?
12. What happened once Robert crossed into waters occupied by the union? What resources did he bring to the Union side?
13. How did Robert serve the Union after his escape?
14. What did Robert Smalls accomplish after the Civil War ended?

### Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for phrases or passages that suggest how the main characters are feeling at different points in the story.
- The **Illustrator** might create an illustrated timeline of events in the story. Smalls's accomplishments noted in the Afterword may also be included.
- The **Connector** might find information about other daring escapes from slavery, either during the Civil War or before the war.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the life of Robert Smalls.
- The **Investigator** might find more information about what life in the North was like for escaped and freed slaves.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *Getting Started with Literature Circles* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *Literature Circles: Voice And Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

**Reader's Response**

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion.

1. What does the word "freedom" mean to you? What did the word mean to Robert Smalls? How are your definitions the same as and different from each other?
2. What most impressed you about Robert Smalls or his escape? Why?
3. What are some words you would use to describe the escape and how Robert, his family, and the crew might have felt during and after their ride to freedom in the *Planter*?
4. How do you think Robert's and Hannah's owners felt about their escape? Why?
5. How did being enslaved influence Robert Smalls's choices about the many things he devoted his time to after the Civil War ended?  
Note: Information about his later accomplishments is contained in the Afterword at the back of the book.

**Other Writing Activities**

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. Have students write a brief television news report about Robert Smalls's escape. Be sure students use news vocabulary and create a way to greet viewers at the beginning of the broadcast and sign off at the end.
2. Working in small groups, ask students to write up a checklist for Robert to use to double check that everything was ready for the escape. Encourage students to think beyond the story to imagine all the preparations that would be necessary to ensure success. When they are finished, let groups compare their checklists.
3. Have students write a list of questions they would ask the captain of the *Planter* in an interview after Robert Smalls escaped with the Confederate boat.

**ELL Teaching Strategies**

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. After the first reading, go back through the story page-by-page and have students orally summarize what happens, using the illustrations to provide clues to the action.
2. Teach ELL students simple phrases such as “I don’t know that word.” “I have a question.” “Speak more slowly.” “Please repeat that sentence.” Encourage ELL students to use these phrases to communicate their needs while reading.
3. Have students write a caption for each illustration in the book. This may be done individually, with partners, or in small groups.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

#### **Social Studies**

1. Have students research the events that took place leading up to the day that all slaves were freed, including the Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the Civil War, and Juneteenth. Then have students write a short report on their findings.
2. Have students study the map of Charleston Harbor on the back cover of the book. Using the story as a guide, have them trace Robert Smalls’s route of escape. Then let students research each of the three forts shown and make a list of historic events that occurred at each place.
3. Have students research more about the legislation Robert Smalls introduced while he was a politician. Then let students choose an issue that they feel strongly about and write their own legislation to present to Congress. Extra resources for this activity are available online at [Congress for Kids](#).

#### **Language Arts**

1. Have students research other documented escapes by enslaved African Americans and write either a completely factual report or a narrative nonfiction story (using dialogue) about the person and his or her escape. Researching the Underground Railroad or “stories of slave escapes” online will lead students to many interesting and exciting resources.
2. Introduce students to the griot tradition of storytelling in which history is passed along orally. A griot’s stories may include a song, a poem, or even a riddle. Dance may also be a part of the storytelling experience. Have students work in small groups to tell the story of Robert Smalls’s escape using one or more of a griot’s methods.

#### **Math**

It took Robert Smalls from 3 AM until dawn to travel seven miles in the *Planter*. First have students look up the time of sunrise on May 13 in Charleston, South Carolina, to determine how long it took Robert’s boat to travel the seven miles and its average miles per hour. Then let students pick a few modes of transportation (for example,

walking, bicycling, running, driving in a car, and so on) and figure out how long it would take to travel seven miles at various speeds. The results could be compared on a class graph.

### Art

Using the book and other resources that are available, have students create an artistic representation of the *Planter*. This could take the form of drawings, paintings, a mural, a three-dimensional model, computer-generated images, and so on.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Janet Halfmann** is the author of more than thirty books for children, including several nonfiction and natural science titles. After researching African American achievements during the Civil War, she was inspired to write about Robert Smalls, “a person who used his talents to help others and make the world a better place.” Halfmann has four grown children and lives with her husband in South Milwaukee, Wisconsin. To find out more about Janet Halfmann, visit her website at [www.janethalfmannauthor.com](http://www.janethalfmannauthor.com).

### ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Duane Smith** is an artist, an illustrator, and a graphic designer with a degree from Pratt Institute in New York City. His wide-ranging works have been featured in periodicals, books, movie storyboards, and galleries. An art instructor for several after-school programs, Smith inspires children to think conceptually and independently. He splits his time between homes in Brooklyn and Albany, New York. Visit him online at his [website](#).

### Book Information

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### RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *Seven Miles to Freedom* at

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/173/hc/seven\\_miles\\_to\\_freedom](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/173/hc/seven_miles_to_freedom)

### Crossword Puzzle for *Seven Miles to Freedom*:

[http://www.leeandlow.com/images/pdfs/activities/crossword-seven\\_miles.pdf](http://www.leeandlow.com/images/pdfs/activities/crossword-seven_miles.pdf)

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