



POWELL CENTER FOR  
ECONOMIC LITERACY

## *Lesson Plan*

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# Economics of Freedom

## Time Required

15 Minutes

## Grade Level and Subject

American History, Civil War period

## Keystone Principles

Principle #1 – We All Make Choices

Principle #3 – All Choices Have Consequences

Principle #4 – Economic Systems Influence Choices

Principle #8 – Quantity and Quality of Resources Impact Living Standards

## Economic Concepts

**Choice** - *A selection among alternatives. Scarcity requires individuals, businesses and nations to make choices.*

**Entrepreneur** - *One who draws upon his or her skills to start a new business with the aim of making a profit. Often a risk-taker, inclined to see opportunity when others do not.*

**Human Resources** - *The health, education, experience, training, skills and values of people. Also known as human capital. A skilled and educated workforce.*

**Scarcity** - *The condition that occurs because people's wants and needs are unlimited, while the resources needed to produce goods and services to meet these wants and needs are limited.*

## Overview

This lesson interweaves an understanding of economics with the story of Robert Smalls (1839-1915) who was born into slavery in South Carolina. Even in the restrictive economic system of American slavery, Smalls looked for opportunities to grow and learn

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in new ways. Because of the extraordinary skills he had acquired, he was able to take advantage of circumstances to win freedom for himself, his wife and his entire slave crew. He lived a life of service as a war hero and a Congressman. The story is a dramatic illustration of the way in which carefully considered choices to grow our own human capital can prepare us to take advantage of opportunities when they strike.

## Objectives

Students will understand that

- Slavery vastly diminished choices available to all parties.
- The development of one's human resources improves the range of available choices and, subsequently, one's living standard.
- The willingness to assume risk is an essential component of an entrepreneur.

## Materials and Handouts

Handout:

1. **Robert Smalls' Choices.**
2. For more information on Robert Smalls, please see  
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/freedom/spotlight.html>  
<http://www.robertsmalls.org>
3. There are many other internet sites with information about Robert Smalls which can be accessed through your search engine.

## Background Information

Robert Smalls grew up on a South Carolina plantation. At the age of twelve, his master brought him to Charleston, where he was rented out as a laborer on the docks for \$15 a month to businessmen who needed workers.

Robert Smalls' master received \$15 a month to rent his slave's services, paying Robert one dollar from this amount. Robert did very well and quickly became the leader of a work group that consisted mostly of grown men.

Smalls used the dollar that his master gave him to buy tobacco and other products that the slaves at his plantation wanted, and sold these goods for a profit. He risked his money to have the opportunity to earn a higher profit. (entrepreneurial activity)

Smalls then made another entrepreneurial move. He took a risk in seizing the opportunity for higher profits for his labors, and to have more control over the human capital he developed. He asked his master to rent him to himself. He would pay his master \$15 dollars a month and he would take the risk of renting himself out on the docks for a higher wage than \$15. His master agreed to this.

During this time Smalls took jobs that helped him to develop many seamanship skills. Eventually he learned the highly technical skills needed to be a ship's pilot.

While working in Charleston, Smalls met, fell in love, and married a woman. He planned

to earn enough to buy their freedom.

Smalls' last job as a slave was on the important Southern ship, *The Planter*. Smalls knew all aspects of sailing *The Planter*. At night, the Southern troops left *The Planter* in the charge of an all slave crew led by Smalls. He and his mates planned to load their families under the cover of darkness, sail out of Charleston Harbor past Fort Sumter, and surrender *The Planter* to the Northern ships blockading Charleston Harbor.

On the appointed night they left Charleston, made the proper signals to the guards at Fort Sumter, and turned the ship over to the Northern navy. Smalls later joined the U.S. Navy and became the first African-American to command an American ship.

After the war, Smalls returned to South Carolina. He opened a Freedman's store, selling goods to the newly freed slaves who were not welcomed in white-owned stores. He served for a number of years in the South Carolina House of Representatives and in the State Senate. He was subsequently elected to five terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, retiring to serve as the collector for the Port of Beaufort, S.C. This narrative can be supplemented by reading the suggested website information.

## Teaching Activity

1. Teach your class the economic concepts defined above.
2. This lesson should be presented in the context of the Civil War period of American History, so your students should already be familiar with the limited economic choices available. If not, review that aspect with your students.
3. Tell your students you want to tell them a story about a slave in South Carolina. Read or tell the narrative above once or twice and ask your students to explain to you what Smalls did.
4. Ask your students to think about this story. Robert Smalls grew up as a slave; he was legally owned by another person. His mind, however, was not enslaved. He was alert to the circumstances surrounding him, and was willing to work hard to improve himself. It has been said that success occurs when opportunity meets preparation. Ask students to explain in their own words what that means. Provide them with prompts if necessary. What opportunities came to Smalls? How has he prepared for them?
5. Pass out the worksheet, **Robert Smalls' Choices**. Discuss briefly that we all make choices and that all choice involves positive and negative consequences. Have students list the choices Smalls' made, the entrepreneurial skills he showed, and the consequences of his choices.

## Lesson Extension

Some other people made choices that had important consequences in this story. Ask your students to consider them. (*Smalls' owner, Mr. McKee, who was willing to rent Robert to himself; the people on the dock who taught Smalls to be a ship's pilot; the troop*

*commander who regularly left Smalls in charge of the Planter during the night.)*

In lieu of using the chart, Robert Smalls' Choices, you could instruct students to write a paragraph about Smalls after discussing the narrative. I also like to illustrate the economic concept that people respond to incentives by giving out Jolly Ranchers to students who explain Smalls economic choices to me well.

<b>Robert Smalls' Choices</b>		
Developing His Human Capital	Demonstrating His Entrepreneurial Skills	Consequences