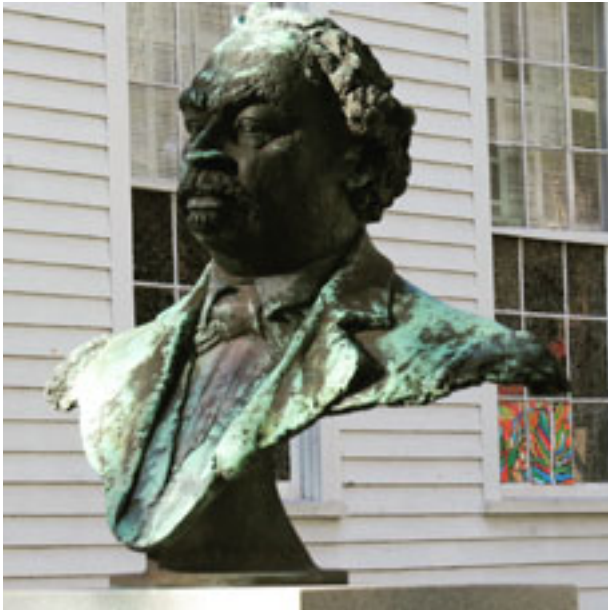


Illuminating the Life of Robert Smalls

Written by Patricia Denkler
Monday, 15 February 2021 07:26



Fortitude: the strength of mind that enables a person to encounter danger or bear pain or adversity with courage – Merriam-Webster

"Before this decisive night, I'd not fully appreciated the subtle line between inspiration and insanity. But now, with all of our lives at risk, I found myself navigating that most perilous edge.

"Only the enslaved can fathom the price and the cost of freedom – life or death itself. Not only my life, but that of my wife, our children. And not just my family's, but those of my crewmates. Would we live an unknown future of freedom, or perish to the dark and watery depths? Men. Women. Babies. Fifteen lives hanging in the balance, entrusted to me.

"Every moment, every experience, every longing led here. Every work-weary day, every sorrow-soaked night, every step on every road, every hurt and every hope, every echo of the cry of every slave I'd known, every whisper of every distant dream.

"Tonight. Now. Or never"

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So begins the story of Robert Smalls as told by Rebecca Dwight Bruff in *Trouble the Water*, an award-winning historical novel that illuminates this exemplary life personifying fortitude.

While on a brief visit to Beaufort years ago, Bruff learned of Robert Smalls' historic significance, then hit the library and local bookstores in search of more material. "I was looking for the book I wanted to read," she says. "When I couldn't find it, I decided to try to write it."

"At first I was inspired, then curious, then intrigued, then obsessed," she says. So much so that she and her



husband Tom moved to Beaufort from Texas in 2017 to answer this calling, to research and write this most important story – one that needed to be told on oh, so many levels.

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Inspired by the extraordinary true story of Smalls' life journey – from enslavement to Civil War hero to US Congressman – *Trouble the Water* is a narrative of many threads, beautifully and profoundly woven together by Bruff.

“Rather than [write] a biography,” notes Bruff, “I wanted to imagine the world in which he lived. I was interested in his relationships and motivations, the influence of his mother Lydia Polite, his hurts and his hopes. I was curious about the things that are simply absent from the historical record, like the provenance of his last name, how he met his wife – so many things that we just don't know. And I was interested, too, in the broader cultural context – the influences of religion and economics and the experiences of women – all in this messy stew of power and human rights. My background in education and theology really feeds and informs my interest in the interior lives and complex relationships of all the characters.”

The power of storytelling cannot be overemphasized, as we are drawn into this most significant time in American history with an awareness of contemporary relevance. “Knowing our history, knowing these individuals that brought so much to our current lives through their heroism and courage long ago... these are things that we need to know, need to learn from, need to inspire us,” says Bruff. “Ultimately, the fight and struggle for the reality of a dream through perseverance will resolve, strengthen, empower us to be who we are.”

Rebecca's voice changes, excitedly passionate, when discussing Smalls' fortitude: “His courage was a visionary courage. He seemed to have understood, as not everyone did, from various perspectives, from a big-vision perspective, what his own actions might mean beyond his own life and his family's life,” she says. “He seemed to understand that his courage would have a ripple effect – life changing for others, long beyond his own life – that would live through the centuries. His story is larger than life . . . his courage larger than life . . . his risks were larger than life.”

“In writing *Trouble the Water*,” says Bruff, “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. Robert Smalls changed countless lives. Including mine.”

Trouble the Water by Rebecca Dwight Bruff is available at local bookstores and on Amazon.

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Patricia Denkler is a former Navy pilot and Retired Delta Air Lines International Captain. She serves on the Advisory Board of the Pat Conroy Literary Center, Advisory Board of AMIkids Beaufort, and the Beaufort County Open Land Trust Board. This is her first contribution to Lowcountry Weekly representing Magic Time Literary Publicity.

Pictured Above:

Bust of Robert Smalls outside Tabernacle Baptist Church in downtown Beaufort. Photo by Donna Bearden

Writer Rebecca Bruff at the Robert Smalls House in downtown Beaufort. Photo by John Wollwerth