

Storyteller

(dressed as a slave)

In 1619, Virginia was just an isolated British settlement on the Chesapeake Bay. It was sparsely populated by men trying to make money off of the land, but they faced hunger, disease and raids by Native Americans. One day, a badly damaged Dutch slave ship arrived carrying 20 kidnapped Africans and the colonists bartered food and services for the human cargo. With no model for slavery, the Africans joined poor white Europeans who worked as indentured servants. The deal was that they would earn land and freedom in exchange for 7 years of hard labor. As the colonies prospered and as exports grew more profitable, the colonist didn't want to lose their labor. The colonist still citizens of their own countries had certain rights. Africans, on the other hand, were not subject to English common law, they were workers without rights. In 1641 slavery was legalized. Africans became chattel, personal property that could be owned for life. Slave labor enabled the colonies to become so profitable that in 1660 England's King Charles the second established the Royal African company to transport humans they called "black gold" from Africa to the Americas. England finally outlawed its slave trade in 1807, and America developed it's own internal slave trade. By 1860 over 1 million humans were being moved and sold in the colonies. Families were torn about. Traders and owners wanted a self reproducing labor force and they put their slave cargo into categories. Bucks and breeding wenches were sold at auctions along with prime hands to work the fields. Fancy girls were graceful light skinned women who were sold into prostitution or to be mistresses to their masters. To keep slaves under control there was legally authorized violence, whippings and public floggings. Owners were fined if they did not punish recaptured runaway slaves. But as the slave trade grew so did the opposition and America soon became a country divided against itself.

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Excerpt from Maya Angelou's poem, Still I Rise

(spoken off stage to music, words shown on screen)

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear - I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave. - I rise

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Storyteller

What is the hope of the slave? What gave courage to the man who was beaten into submission? What gave resolve to the woman separated from her children? How on earth when faced with the constant threat of danger, punishment, dismemberment, and death can a people find within themselves the strength to rise up and say no more, to rise up and say I'm more than a slave, to rise up and say, I'll take my chances, to rise up and say although I'm nothing to you, no price will be able to purchase my worth. This spirit of saying no to the oppression, the tyranny and the domination is the spirit we are acclaiming today. Take for instance this man, many may have never heard of him. His name was Robert Smalls, listen to his story.

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Speaker (Robert Smalls)

I was born a slave in April 1839 out in back of the big house. My mama worked inside. Nobody would say who my daddy was, said it could be the master or his son, they just knew I was lighter than the rest. Well master did favor me a bit and Mama thought I was gettin' a little too high and to bring me down a notch or two she sent me out to the fields to work with the other slaves. Didn't like it one bit, complained about it just about everyday, I guess you can say I rebelled and got into trouble. Finally, when I was 18, the master 'lowed me to go to Charleston to work as a waiter and a sailor, cuz like I said, he favored me, plus he could see I was smart. Course he took almost all of my money I made working but allowed me to keep some. Well life was okay, I got married and had a daughter too. Worked so hard cuz I wanted to buy my wife and daughter's freedom from they owner. Next thing I know we had a son. So I had me 2 chirren. Now, when I was around 22, I was hired on the federate ship, it was called, The Planter, captained by General Roswell Ripley. We delivered weapons to the federate forts. Well I learned everything bout that ship, I mean I knew every move of Captain Ripley, knew all the signals and everything he did. I was very smart although they didn't know it. You couldn't let whites folks know how smart you was. I also knew that being owned by another man was not

how I was willing to live my life, not never knowing if my family was going to stay together or if my chirren would be sold away from me. How is one human goin' to own another? Both of them are humans ain't they? I told you I was smart, and I hatched a plan. A plan to escape to freedom. People might have thought I had it good, I was on a ship not in the fields, I had a family and the master liked me. But we worked like dogs on that ship and I knew I wasn't free as long as someone considered me their property. For me it came down to 2 thangs, death or freedom. Now you gotta understand how this thang worked. When we went to the ports to deliver the weapons, we had to let them know we was federate ships from the south and not union ships from the north. If we got caught up in union territory, we had to surrender. There was a certain whistle you had to do so they know you was part of them. I tol' my wife many times, always be ready because the day is comin' when we gettin' way from here. Well one night the captain left us in charge of the ship. It was time. I knew all the signals so I could pass through the forts, I knew how the captain stood and even how he wore his hat. So, once we was ready, I put on that hat, told you I was smart, pretended like I was him and we set out. When we got to the first fort, I could feel the sweat from my brows runnin' down my face but, I hoisted the flags and blew the right whistle and they let us through. Then I picked up my wife and other slaves who was waitin' and kept moving. Now we were really worried about Fort Sumter, that's where the war started, and we knew if we could just make it past there we was on our way to freedom. Everyone began to pray and as we approached Fort Sumter, my hands were shaking so badly as I pulled that whistle cord. Next thing I know, they gave us the signal we was through. We was on our way to the union ship! We were going to surrender the Planter to the Union. We had outsmarted the captain and the guards. Then we took down the 'federate flags and hoisted a white bed sheet in surrender and as we approached, I knew they seen our flag. As night gave way to dawn, I needed to think quickly as we got close to them – what was I gonna say, what was they gonna do when they seen a colored man? So I said to the captain of the union ship in my best voice, Good morning sir, I've brought you some of the old United States guns sir, they was for Fort Sumter sir." They was happy to see us. We was free. Told you I was smart.