

Book **Review:** 'Two Captains from Carolina'

by Brett Yates

Elizabeth City native Bland Simpson has spent much of his career exploring the forgotten tributaries of eastern North Carolina's history. His excursions into bygone days have taken him to unloved islands of the Inner Banks and obscure corners of the Great Dismal Swamp, and his latest work, "Two Captains from Carolina: Moses Grandy, John Newland Maffitt, and the Coming of the Civil War," travels to the antebellum era to relive the state's maritime past.

This book, which sounds boring but remarkably is not, follows a pair of sailors who never met. The lives of Grandy and Maffitt, of Camden and Fayetteville respectively, neither intertwined nor ran parallel. Rather, they bore an inverse relationship. Grandy toiled in slavery until he purchased his freedom and moved to New England to join the abolitionist movement; Maffitt, a slave owner who was educated in New York and traveled the world with the U.S. Navy, had all the freedom he could ask for until the Civil War called him south.

Hired out by his master, Grandy captained freight boats during the War of 1812, earning small sums for himself before finally saving up \$600 to buy his freedom. But Grandy's owner pocketed the money and, instead of liberating him as he claimed he would, sold him to another white man, whereupon Grandy saved another \$600 and was cheated once more. Only on his third try did he gain his freedom – having ultimately paid more than \$1,800 for it. The sad irony of his life was that "freedom" granted him no rest from servitude: wearily he kept working, not on his own behalf but for others, in the hope of amassing enough money to free his wife and scattered family.

Maffitt, meanwhile, received at age 13 a naval appointment from President Andrew Jackson (a friend of his father's), becoming a midshipman; from there, it was cotillions at the Orton Plantation and dancing with the queen of Greece in Piraeus. Then, amid a successful career, Maffitt heard a rumor in 1861 that the Lincoln government was planning to arrest him. "His offense," writes Simpson, "could only be that he hailed from North Carolina." Reluctantly he offered his services to the Confederacy.

This small volume is plump with facts and anecdotes, yet it should be noted that, as a professor at Chapel Hill, Simpson teaches not history but English and creative writing, and here he sub-titles his book "A Nonfiction Novel." Although he seems hesitant to ascribe to his protagonists feelings beyond those that could be ascertained from their recorded actions, his prose is literary and, in fact, rather impeccable: detailed, sensitive, absent of sensationalism.

"Two Captains from Carolina" may look like the kind of book you'd buy as a birthday present for your grandpa – the one who watched those Ken Burns documentaries all the way through – more than something you'd read yourself. Indeed, I can think of no powerful reason why you need to know about these minor 19th-century personages, although that, too, is really one of the work's charms.

Even the long passages that Maffitt spends surveying the Southeastern coastline, mapping its inlets and channels, are fascinating. "Though the world may be described in so many ways – in a painting, a verse, or a song, even in the simple regard of birds, a count and report of Canada geese and their fellow flyers [...] – still and all, with all its numbers and its names, what a thing of beauty was a nautical map," thinks Maffitt, noting every rock. The task may sound tedious to us, but Simpson thinks as Maffitt does: our history is his ocean.

Brett Yates moved to North Carolina from Vermont in 2011. He lives in Durham and works in Chapel Hill.



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