
Those familiar with Bland Simpson’s storytelling will easily recognize his voice and style in his new nonfiction novel, *Two Captains from Carolina: Moses Grandy, John Newland Maffitt and the Coming of the Civil War*. Drawing from historical records and using a narrative style, Simpson tells the story of two North Carolina men, Moses Grandy and John Newland Maffitt, who come from very different backgrounds, but both of whom are involved in the shipping business prior to and, in the case of Maffitt, during the Civil War.

Grandy, born into slavery in Camden County, North Carolina, begins his shipping career in the Dismal Swamp ferrying people and merchandise along the canal when he is not working as a field hand. Through his role as a river skipper, Grandy earns money and comes to have the idea and the opportunity to buy his freedom, only to be cheated twice. Later he finds himself in Boston where he learns of the anti-slavery movement and is introduced to its leaders.

Maffitt, on the other hand, is born on a ship travelling from Ireland. Because his father is a travelling evangelist, he is adopted at an early age by his uncle, Dr. William Maffitt, who lives near Fayetteville. There he lives a more luxurious life than Grandy to be sure, especially as he is white, and later goes to a boarding school in the North. He joins the navy at thirteen, travels to exotic locations, and has a range of experiences that includes such things as dancing with the Queen of Greece. He eventually becomes a blockade runner in the Civil War.

From what we know from the book, the paths of these two men never cross; they do however overlap. Simpson does a deft job of paralleling the two and charting their careers on the water. While the lives of the two men could not be any more different, the enjoyment they share in being ship captains is similar, as are the experiences they have in their personal lives. Simpson illustrates that while environments may be different, the human experience is often universal.

Simpson draws on historical documents about the two men, such as Grandy’s *Narrative*, available in *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, and Maffitt’s autobiographical novel, *Nautilus, or Cruising under Canvas*, to create a truthful foundation upon which he fleshes out this account of the two men. Simpson, Kenan Distinguished Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is a storyteller, a member of the Tony Award-winning Red Clay Ramblers, and author of numerous books about North Carolina. His writing, which is done in a storytelling style, is much easier to understand if one reads it as if listening to him performing the story. While all readers will enjoy this book and will be transported to this different era, it will be of particular interest to history buffs, especially those interested in the Civil War and just prior. This title is recommended for college and university libraries as well as public libraries with large North Carolina collections.

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