Maffitt, May 1861–September 1862
An excerpt from Two Captains from Carolina: Moses Grandy, John Newland Maffitt, and the Coming of the Civil War

by Bland Simpson
Bland Simpson’s *Two Captains from Carolina* tells the story of Moses Grandy (ca. 1791–ca. 1850) and John Newland Maffitt Jr. (1819–1886), two accomplished nineteenth-century mariners from North Carolina. The story of these captains—one African American, one Irish American—is a vivid tale of race and maritime culture in the antebellum and Civil War–era South. In this excerpt, North Carolina has seceded from the Union and distinguished naval officer Maffitt enlists in the Confederate navy, going on to become a legendary blockade-runner and raider.

**Maffitt, May 1861–September 1862**

**Montgomery, Alabama**

**May 7, 1861**

By nightfall on May 2, Maffitt, carrying only a small valise, his compass, and his spyglass, stopped, talked quietly and spoke a few calm words with a fellow officer on the District side of the Potomac River (“Let us hope there’ll be no war,” he said), then crossed the Long Bridge over to Alexandria, Virginia. For four days he endured thick smoke and cinders playing down onto the train cars, in through their windows and doors, as they went crawling from Alexandria to Richmond, Danville, and Greensboro to Columbia, Augusta, and Atlanta, the cars drawing ever southward to Montgomery, Alabama.

There John Newland Maffitt presented himself to President Jefferson Davis, offering his services to the South’s navy. And then, even as it was transpiring, his short visit with the Confederacy’s new leader suddenly struck him like something from a dream. “Our friends in the North,” said the President, “advise us that there will be no war.”

Maffitt was aghast at the ignorance in the room. The men with whom he was meeting, Jefferson Davis and Stephen Mallory—Mallory, of all men he should least like to see, creator of the old Retirement Board that had sought to cashier Maffitt, Mallory now a secessionist and at Davis’s elbow, his secretary of the Navy—seemed in no way to grasp just what he was telling them: No war? I have come to you directly from Washington City, where the caissons are rolling, where a great army has been gathering, where Lincoln is planning for war. Whether you are or not. And what do you have for a navy? Two tugboats from South Carolina, frail riverboats in Louisiana that you could knock to pieces with a pistol shot? A nation with three thousand miles of shoreline cannot do without a real navy. Not in peacetime, let alone in a war.

They appreciated his coming (did they really? Maffitt sorely wondered, noting closely how nervous and suspicious of him Mallory acted). They would find a place for him.
In just a few minutes’ time he saw these men as worse than mad, possessed of an invincible ignorance, compounded by vanity and pride. A military man with exquisite training and judgment could not stand to be long in their presence, and so Maffitt, bristling, left quickly.

To his hotel room he strode, walking so briskly, so fueled by pure ire that he was nearly at a run. He packed his trunk, his emotions in riot of anguish, preparing to leave: he would head for Mobile and from there, as best and as soon as he could, sail to England and go to work there and sit out whatever came to pass. He would have no more truck with Davis and Mallory.

Yet there had been friends in the Montgomery room where Maffitt met Davis, men who dared not let him get away—Robert Toombs, Georgia’s former U.S. senator, now Davis’s Confederate secretary of state, was one of them, Georgian Ben Hill, too, and they had followed close behind Maffitt to the hotel and now stood pounding on his chamber door, till Maffitt admitted them and somberly listened to Toombs’s direct, ardent plea.

“You cannot leave the South,” Toombs implored him. “Not in her hour of need. You simply cannot.”

A man must weigh his life against his losses, John Maffitt thought, the ones already assessed and taken, those not yet incurred but quite imaginable. Maffitt had lost two wives, one to inconstancy and one to death, and in these past two weeks he had left his navy, his life’s work, and his Washington home, what property he could lay claim to, all behind him now, probably lost forever. His children awaited him elsewhere in the South. Toombs and Maffitt spoke at length, the traffic of carriages clattering below and the sound of horses’ hooves echoing up through the open window. Maffitt again laid out his clear, sensible fear, for he understood entirely the full import of Lincoln’s order to blockade the coast: the Union would move sooner than not to close Southern ports and, were there no navy to oppose this, the Union would simply choke the South. Toombs well understood, he said, and warranted the others would, too, in time. As Maffitt listened he heard beyond words the abject earnestness in Toombs’s voice, and the timbre of it raised every bit of provincial pride and love in him. Much as he feared the astonishing lack of awareness he had just encountered in Jeff Davis, he feared even more that Toombs was right.

Reared in North Carolina, trained in Pensacola, married in Mobile and then again, and for better, in Charleston, having charted half the Southern coast and sailed it all, Maffitt felt deeply that, the Federal government having failed him, his land was the South and that he might well fail her, as Toombs suggested, should he react in kind to Davis and Mallory and, on the basis of one brief meeting, simply sail away to England.

Toombs had successfully steered the captain from his reason to his heart. John Maffitt could not, and did not, leave his country.
On the next day, the 8th of May, from Jeff Davis's new nation John Maffitt received a lieutenant’s commission, and by the 9th of May, Maffitt was in Savannah, Georgia, assuming command of the Savannah, till recently a passenger boat—A more absurd abortion for a man-of-war was rarely witnessed, he thought. By the 6th of June, he was on the way to Norfolk, Virginia, there to collect three dozen thirty-two pounders for Commodore Josiah Tatnall in Savannah, whose command covered the coast from Port Royal to Charleston. Maffitt, thoroughly aware of the full resources and assets of the U.S. Navy, scorned the South's slow movement toward anything resembling a navy of its own. Nothing but passenger craft and old tugs, and cattle boats lightly armed.

Though it was a summer of fevers among the men of Tatnall’s squadron, Maffitt wanted to move boldly, and he proposed a host of strategic notions: to destroy the New York Naval Yard; quickly to import huge quantities of guns, clothes, all manner of supplies before a Federal blockading squadron was fully in place; to build a fleet of gunboats; and to convert the twelve-hundred-ton prize ship Thompson into a floating battery for Port Royal Sound. All of his proposals were quashed, all but the last, which, he later noted wryly, was “agreed to when too late.”

In October, President Davis got word from the North that Union Navy commodore Samuel Dupont was sailing south toward Port Royal with a huge fleet. Earthworks were thrown up hastily, belatedly, on Hilton Head Island, and by the 3rd of November, Maffitt’s man in the crow’s nest of the Savannah shouted down to him: “The ocean is full of ships and steamers!”

Hydrographer Maffitt raised his glass and surveyed his former comrades as, for the next several days, the U.S. Navy sounded and buoyed the approach channel before sailing into the sound in force, which Maffitt knew was inevitable.

Though there was nothing he could do but watch.

On November 7, three Union frigates and fifteen sloops-of-war—Maffitt’s old sloop, the Vandalia, from the late 1830s among them—moved upon Port Royal Sound and met the resistance of the South’s tiny mosquito fleet. Maffitt’s Savannah, the St. Johns River steamer with a thirty-two-pounder fore and an eighteen-pounder aft, was the best armed of the lot, making it the flagship. When the Union frigate Wabash fired what Maffitt could tell was only a partial broadside, the mosquito fleet scattered, his own craft taking an eleven-inch shell, which mercifully did not explode, in its mailroom.

The small Confederate craft beat down the coast and ran upriver to Savannah. The whole engagement was over in four hours.

The Federals now owned Port Royal Sound.
NOVEMBER 1861–JANUARY 1862

John Newland Maffitt had shown his mettle, no doubt, yet Commodore Tatnall had not wanted Maffitt to meet the enemy at all, and after a sharp exchange between them, Tatnall relieved Maffitt of his command of the Savannah and reassigned him.

Four days later, on November 11, Maffitt appeared at the headquarters of General Robert E. Lee in Coosawhatchie, South Carolina, where he would spend the next two months helping Lee map roads, build forts, and obstruct the upper Coosaw River. There he was stationed and there he stayed—until January 1862, when the Charleston Mercury was deeply lamenting the South’s “utter want of strength on the water” and declaring “that a navy is absolutely essential,” and when his old Charlestonian friend, the merchant, financier, and shipper George Alfred Tren-
holm came to the aid of the Confederacy by giving the South’s fledgling government an unusually swift freighter, a steamboat filled with seven hundred bales of cotton and waiting at the wharf in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Her name was the *Cecile* and the man chosen to captain her was Maffitt, now a blockade-runner, his charge being to take her down to Nassau in the Bahamas and trade that cotton for guns.

Which he did.

**Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico**

*LATE SUMMER 1862*

In Nassau John Maffitt took command of the *Oreto*, a sleek two-stacked vessel built in England to be a raider for the Confederacy, after some severe legal jousting. First, a Federal navyman seized her as a prize, but a day later the British admiralty court freed her. She was reseized, then refreed. In early August, Maffitt sailed her out of the harbor, slipping out quietly after midnight, and anchored next afternoon at the remote islet of Green Cay, ninety miles south of Nassau. Another craft, the schooner *Prince Albert*, had surreptitiously slipped in and sailed alongside and brought the necessary martial goods, or so its commander had thought. The heat there was punishing, killing even, and Maffitt’s few men (he had 22 when he wanted 130) stripped off all their clothes and loaded the *Oreto* with weapons, with cannon, and transformed her into a warship.

Yet, though Maffitt’s pivot guns were complete, the *Prince Albert*, loaded hurriedly and secretly back in Nassau, had failed to bring the *Oreto* any rammers, sponges, sights, locks, and the like—her cannon for the time were useless, unable to fire.

Maffitt rechristened the ship the *Florida*, and he very soon realized he had taken on more than a shorthanded crew and cannon that could not fire: yellow fever had also shipped aboard with him.

The *Florida* sailed for Cuba, and the men started falling away. Maffitt was now not only commander of the craft but also her doctor, her nurse. After several days, his stepson, Laurens Read, who had volunteered for this mission, came down with the fever, was wracked by black vomit, and slipped away into the sleep from which he would never awaken. Then the exhausted Maffitt himself collapsed, saying, even as he fell out, “I don’t have time to die,” and was in the rough grip of yellow fever for a week, while his ship sailed slowly for the Gulf of Mexico.

When Lieutenant Maffitt recovered, he rose weakly to command the *Florida*, many of her guns still either unplaced or unmanned. He resolved nonetheless to break through the Union blockade of Mobile Bay.

Maffitt made Mobile Light, and as he approached the bar about 6:00 p.m. on
September 4, flying British colors, he was discovered and chased by a pair of swift Union craft, while off to his starboard, U.S. Navy commander George Preble, an old friend of his youth from the Constitution, maneuvered his ship, the Oneida, close in. The Florida gave no answer to the Oneida’s hail, maintained her course after the Oneida fired one shot across her bow, still steady on after two shots across her bow.

Maffitt was betwixt and between Union ships at three hundred yards’ distance, yet for a moment he had the Federals vexed—vigorous fire from either side, missing the Florida, might strike an allied vessel. Still sick with fever and sitting upon his deck because he was too weak to stand (and there on deck alone except for his helmsman), Maffitt ordered the turn of his bow directly at Preble’s Oneida and steamed at her as if to run her down.

The Florida coming hard at him, Preble backed the Oneida.

Just a bit, yet still just enough.

Maffitt swerved from the Oneida at the absolute last moment and was away with the Florida, calling his men on deck and aloft to make sail, and now the cannon and grapeshot flew ferociously at him, “a perfect hailstorm of shrapnel,” one of the men said, his topmasts and rigging quickly shredded and blasted away. An eleven-inch shell blew a hole in the Florida’s side, wounding several men and carrying engineer James Hall’s head away. The Florida moved forward, northward, Maffitt scarcely giving her a prayer of a chance of getting through. And should she not, well, what else, what more did he have to lose?

Yet get through she did. The Federals—the Oneida, the Winona, and the Rachael Seaman—in their fusillade tore him up badly, though they left his sleek, fast hull intact, if full of shrapnel shot, fourteen hundred balls by Maffitt’s later count. The Florida was a goer such as they had yet to see. Hard on him as they were, dead-fevered sick as he was, Maffitt still ran quickly out ahead of the Union blockaders and steamed on into Mobile Bay, two hours and eighteen minutes to safety under Fort Morgan, where the men thronged the walls and cheered.

Maffitt had dared the devil, had won the bluff that was no bluff, and had made the most astonishing naval escape yet seen in the Civil War, a feat topping even Matthew Gooding’s daring running of the Federal blockade at Beaufort, North Carolina, with the steamer Nashville. The Confederacy, the country whose president had once declared little interest in any navy, now had her first naval hero, and Lieutenant Maffitt was toasted across the South, from the Chesapeake Bay to Chickasaw Bluffs.
