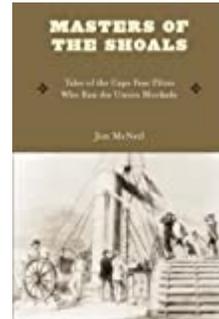




Jim McNeil. *Masters of the Shoals: Tales of the Cape Fear Pilots Who Ran the Union Blockade.* Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003. xviii + 188 pp. \$18.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-306-81280-4.



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Unsung (and Largely Unknown) Heroes of the Confederacy

When scanning the pantheon of Confederate heroes one would not likely come across names such as Thomas Brinkman, Thomas Dyer, the Burriss Boys, or Christopher Columbus Morse. However, these men and others like them were in many cases more important to the Southern war effort than were most of the lesser-known generals of the Confederate armies. These men were Cape Fear pilots who guided blockade runners filled with supplies through the Federal blockade and into the port of Wilmington, North Carolina, the lifeline of the Confederacy. Those same pilots in turn guided the same ships back out with valuable cotton cargoes. Therefore, Jim McNeil's study of these pilots is a welcome contribution filling a gap in Civil War historiography.

By mid-war, when all other major Southern ports were effectively closed to blockade running, Wilmington became the most important city in the South, save Richmond. Wilmington was the perfect blockade running seaport. Its location was twenty-six miles upriver from the mouth and approximately nine miles inland from the sea, making it impossible for Federal warships off the coast to bombard it. It was the closest seaport

to the Virginia front and had very good rail connections to that point. There were two inlets into the Cape Fear River nearly fifty miles apart, separated by the treacherous Frying Pan Shoals, which made blockading an extremely difficult task. These inlets offered blockade runners nearly a direct line from either Nassau, Bahamas, or from Bermuda, each about three days travel. Finally, Northern attention was focused on the seedbed of secession, Charleston. For these reasons, blockade running was a very effective endeavor at Cape Fear.

Blockade running may not have been so successful without the expertise of the men profiled in Jim McNeil's book. The story of these Cape Fear pilots is little known, yet fascinating, engaging, and ultimately important. The author brings these pilots and their stories to life. The book offers captivating first hand accounts of what it was like to run the blockade, which are all intricately linked and put into context by the author. The genealogist's skills are put to good use in making the multitudes of family connections among these men. Almost all of the Cape Fear pilots hailed from either Smithville (now Southport) or Federal Point, home to Fort Fisher,

the largest earthen fort in the Confederacy. The author does a solid job of placing the pilots within the realm of Cape Fear pilotage from as early as the late seventeenth century. Many of the pilots of the 1860s came from a seafaring lineage traceable to the colonial period and the Cape Fear waters were in their blood. Expertise gained through long generations of experience was the most valuable asset they possessed.

From this starting point the author explains the workings of the Federal blockade and "The Trade"—his term for the art of blockade running. As is the case with the first chapter, the second and third chapters help place the Cape Fear pilots in context to their surroundings. Anyone familiar with naval history of the Civil War or with the history of the Cape Fear will find these chapters to contain some very familiar material.

After establishing the basic storyline, the author launches into a series of stories about individual pilots and ships that covers the next nine chapters of the book. This is the real meat of the book, where the reader encounters the majority of first hand accounts and thrilling tales of adventure. Some of these narratives, such as that of Confederate spy Rose Greenhow, are well known. Others are more obscure, for instance the tale of James William Craig, the pilot who became a preacher after the war. No matter how recognizable, all of these stories are told with vivid details and will interest both the novice and the knowledgeable reader.

In the final two chapters, the author relates the fate of the blockade-running pilots after the war and concludes his history of the Cape Fear pilotage. He carries the story well into the twentieth century, when long-time Cape Fear pilots were employed to help bring the battleship memorial USS North Carolina to her current mooring on

the opposite bank of the river from downtown Wilmington in the 1960s, a century after the Civil War. This feat alone stands as a testament to the value of good pilots on the Cape Fear River.

Masters of the Shoals is a very well organized and well-written book. The author maintains a lively pace in all but a few spots. He certainly makes the most of the available genealogical resources. Particularly useful and interesting are the numerous sidebars and insets throughout the book, and the appendix. The problem faced by anyone writing about blockade running is the paucity of primary source material. Because of the illicit nature of the trade, good records were not often kept, or were destroyed after the war to avoid incrimination. For this reason, McNeil must rely on secondary sources in sections of the book. Nevertheless, the author uses the best secondary source material available.[1] This book will appeal to both professional and popular audiences, and will enlighten readers about the role these individuals played in keeping the Confederacy alive.

Note

[1]. Stephen R. Wise, *Lifeline of the Confederacy, Blockade Running During the Civil War* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); Chris E. Fonvielle Jr., *The Wilmington Campaign: Last Rays of Departing Hope* (Campbell: Savas Publishing Company, 1997); Robert M. Browning Jr., *From Cape Charles to Cape Fear, the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron During the Civil War* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993); and, James Sprunt, *Chronicles of the Cape Fear River* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing Company, 1916) are the most important secondary sources used throughout the book. Wise's work is generally considered to be the standard on blockade running.

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