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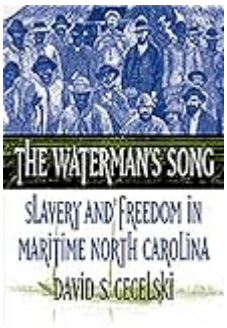

David S. Cecelski. *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. Xx + 288 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-4972-9; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2643-0.

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Slavery in a Watery World

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Where does the Atlantic World begin and end? On the coasts rimming that ocean? Where salt water meets fresh? As far as is navigable up rivers? As deep into the physical interior as information about another world or foreign-produced trade goods penetrate? The matter is of some debate among scholars of Atlantic World since the answer implicitly defines part of the field's domain. David Cecelski makes a valuable contribution to the discussion by shedding light on the extensive maritime activities in nineteenth-century eastern North Carolina and highlighting the crucial roles that free and enslaved African American watermen played. Maritime historians and scholars of slavery alike will appreciate his insights.

Cecelski begins by introducing readers to the geography of eastern North Carolina, a place where land and water merge in the area's extensive sounds and swamps. In this watery world, watermen were vital, since they linked and fed communities, propped up commerce, manned fisheries, and formed the transportation infrastructure. Sounds, estuaries, and rivers were the highways for transporting plantation goods to market, but also annually and seasonally provided vast bounties of oysters, crabs, herring, shad, mullet, and menhaden that were economically important in their own right. A prologue briefly covers the colonial period that plugs black North Carolinians into the transnational maritime networks sketched by Jeffrey Bolster, Marcus Rediker and Ira Berlin and notes eighteenth-century slave resistance and the pockets of maroons sheltered within area swamps.

The first half of the book surveys the astonishing array of nineteenth-century regional maritime employments, including deep water seafaring and whaling, piloting, inshore fishing, and lightering. Cecelski emphasizes the seasonal and volatile nature of these various sectors, noting that the skills, autonomy, and mobility required produced "a segment of African American life that shares little with conventional views of slavery" in the plantation South (p. 27). Chapter 1 follows slave Moses Grandy's life-course to explore a wide variety of black work and labor conditions as well as physical changes in the area between 1790 and the 1830s, as commercial fish-

eries emerged, trade patterns altered, and canals opened up routes to the Chesapeake Bay and drained swamps for agricultural development. Watermen frequently hired themselves out for much of the year, kept part of their wages, and gained important advantages from their occupations. Most were their own masters while on the water, beyond the gaze of masters, overseers, and other white authorities.

The author makes important distinctions between the two types of fishing in the region. Most slaves in the area fished casually during slack times or at night for sustenance and leisure. Plantation slaves and watermen alike intimately followed the rhythms of season and tide to harvest fish and shellfish. This general but opportunistic fishery was a significant component in the region's largely hidden slave economy, often involving whole families in catching and retailing fish. On an entirely different scale was the massive commercial shad and herring fishery that emerged in the 1820s and 1830s to rival that of New England in size. This fishery occupied an intense period of six to eight weeks in early spring. It employed more than 3,500 slaves, who hauled seine nets often more than a mile long that regularly took in 100,000 fish per net. Cecelski draws intriguing parallels with the gang labor, constant work, and massive participation typical of agricultural harvests, noting how women and children were also pulled into the round-the-clock processing of fish in base camps. Acute labor shortages during the short but highly profitable season produced material incentives for slaves and high wages for free blacks. Slaves from all over the region mixed in the area's seventy fishing camps in the 1840s amidst a festive atmosphere.

The sociability of the fisheries stand in sharp contrast to the nightmare of canal building, which Cecelski deems "the cruelest, most dangerous, unhealthy, and exhausting labor in the American South" (p. 109). It was a job so brutal that investors turned directly to Africa for laborers in the 1790s. Profound isolation, brutal discipline, noisome insects, deadly snakes, and the tremendous labor of hacking out dense forest while often chest-deep in water made canal work a punishment to be feared by area slaves. Canal building progressed at a feverish pace in the 1820s (part of the national craze set off by the Erie Canal), aimed at opening routes to deepwater ports like Norfolk, Virginia, and draining new agricultural land. Railroads and westward expansion caused most canal projects to fail by the 1850s, their tortured slave builders having died in vain.

The second half of *The Waterman's Song* turns to patterns of slave resistance: black watermen and sailors who helped runaways escape to the north and black coastal participation in the Civil War. As conduits for spreading local information and abolitionist ideology to slave communities deep in the interior, black watermen played a crucial role in combating slavery. "Slave watermen lay like a gangplank between the two worlds" of the isolated plantation and the open sea (p. 136). Black and white mariners risked their lives to smuggle scores of slaves northward, mostly out of New Bern and Wilmington but also out of interior ports like Edenton (as in Harriet Jacobs's case). State authorities legislated to stop the flow of runaways but regulations were often ignored or impeded normal commerce too greatly to be strictly enforced.

Slave agency was far more crucial in helping the Union navy capture and hold Southern ports in 1861-1862. Slave pilots were instrumental in capturing Beaufort by guiding boats full of Union troops in the dead of night around the Confederate Fort Macon to take the town. The capture had a tremendous impact on the war; in one stroke, Union forces bottled up all the interior sound ports, provided a potential back door into Richmond, denied the Confederacy rich agricultural produce, and gained a base for supporting the blockade of Wilmington and Charleston to the south. Black pilots, ferrymen, fishermen, and ship carpenters supported the Union war effort in the region in vital ways by guiding and repairing Union ships and shuttling and feeding Union garrison troops. Many more enlisted in the Union navy.

The Union foothold in Beaufort sparked a massive water-borne exodus to freedom; more than 10,000 slaves ran to Union positions on the coast in the months after the invasion. Black schools, churches, and mutual aid societies sprang up in the shanty towns surrounding Beaufort. The social mixture of die-hard Confederates, racist Northerners, tolerant abolitionists, and proud, self-assertive ex-slaves produced volatile race relations foreshadowing things to come in Reconstruction, but Cecelski notes that eastern North Carolina had a three-year head start on the rest of the South in dealing with race and labor issues and produced some of Reconstruction's most influential black leaders. Chief among them was Abraham Galloway, who was variously a Union spy, black community spokesman, Union army recruiter, civil rights agitator, and North Carolina state senator. Cecelski closes by charting the disappearance of black watermen from eastern North Carolina by the 1930s, driven out by Jim Crow laws and white intimidation from the wa-

ters that had sustained them through two centuries. As a boy, Cecelski recalled hearing of Davis Ridge, an African American fishing community that vanished with the hurricane of 1933. A recorded interview with an elderly inhabitant fleshed out the lives of the settlement's racially integrated "saltwater farmers" who blended fishing and agriculture with child labor to make ends meet. Through *The Waterman's Song*, vanished communities like this one and a long-lost complex of maritime traditions come back to life to round out our understanding of the contours of antebellum slavery and nineteenth-century maritime history alike.

Cecelski's book is elegantly written and beautifully produced. An illustrated glossary of local nautical craft helps readers form a clear image and understanding of the vessels he discusses. Although the author focuses narrowly on North Carolina, it is clear there is nothing narrow about the diverse range of waterways, activities, and maritime occupations addressed. The colonial period gets short shrift, which is especially disappointing since Cecelski provocatively asserts that Virginia's seventeenth-century free blacks fled to northeastern North Carolina in the 1710s as racial laws became increasingly discriminatory (p. 90). He also perhaps too readily subscribes to stereotypes of eighteenth-century mariners who were allegedly subject to constant, severe discipline for "measly wages" (p. 17). "Drunken and mutinous crews were commonplace" (p. 28), he asserts, but were they? Actually, maritime wages were usually higher (sometimes many times higher during wartime) than farmers' and laborers' wages, mutinies extremely rare, and discipline at sea apparently commensurable to labor relations on land. Severe cases of abuse and even murder did of course occur, but their frequency is very much open to question. The final chapter on Abraham Galloway is very interesting, but its connection to the rest of the book seems tangential. Galloway was never a waterman and the chapter's loose connection with the rest of the book stems mainly from Galloway's probable use of watermen in his spy network and his political support base in port towns. These observations in no way detract from the book as a whole, which ambitiously reveals slave sailors to be merely one sector of a larger, diverse maritime labor population. This richly nuanced study exposes the many, overlapping facets of maritime life and slavery in this significant corner of the Atlantic World.

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