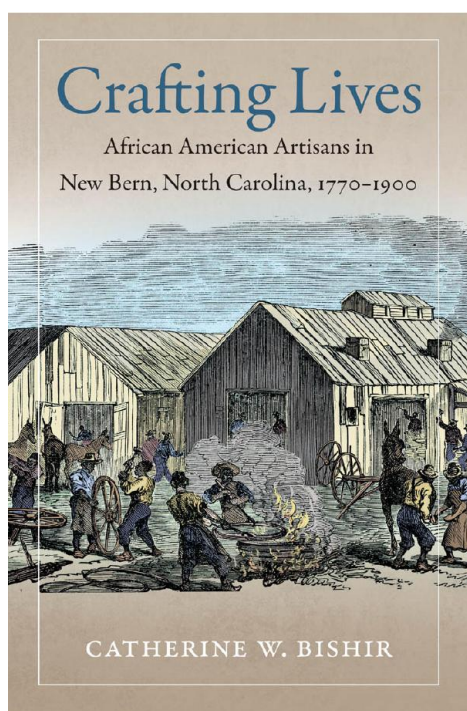


## Crafting Lives: African American Artisans in New Bern, North Carolina, 1770-1900

by Catherine W. Bishir. University of North Carolina Press, October 2013. 392 p. ill. ISBN 9781469608754 (cl.), \$30.00.

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Catherine Bishir, Curator in Architectural Special Collections at North Carolina State University, documents the growth and development of the city's thriving black artisan community in a meticulously-researched study of New Bern, North Carolina. From the immediate post-Revolutionary period to the turn of the twentieth century, both white and African-American, free and enslaved, were apprenticed in the art of carpentry, bricklaying, dressmaking and tailoring, furniture production, ship building, and numerous other artisanal trades. While social and racial lines still blocked full equality for free African Americans in the south, in New Bern this did not mean that personal and financial success for black artisans was impossible.

The post-Revolutionary Period in New Bern was something of a "golden age." Black artisans of both genders, both enslaved and free, often trained side by side with white apprentices and worked for both white and African-American customers. Although not accorded identical status with white citizens of the town, free black artisans who worked hard, were successful, and maintained the status quo were considered "orderly good citizens." Manumission was not uncommon for New Bern area slaves, who could hire themselves out and earn enough money to buy their freedom. With time, wealthier free black men and women were able to amass enough funds to free family members and/or assist others in their community in doing so.

The antebellum period put an end to many of African American artisans' hopes for a better future. In the 1830s and 40s, anti-abolitionist sentiment began to erode social conditions – free blacks lost suffrage, educational opportunities, and the ability to manumit enslaved relatives.

Some African-American artisan families chose to pursue better opportunities in the North and the Western frontier. Others remained in the city, drawing support from the strong community and family bonds forged in previous decades.

In the post-Civil War period, New Bern's population expanded significantly, owing to the influx of newly-freed skilled workers. The cohesiveness of the black artisan community, bonded more strongly together by shared war-time hardships, proved to be a powerful force against anti-Reconstruction backlash. Leading black artisans were voted into local offices and some, after pro-white legislators effectively blocked some of these public service opportunities, were appointed to national posts.

This is not a visually rich resource -- the illustrations are limited to photographs, maps and illustrations of the town, buildings, and genre scenes, with a few portraits of prominent citizens. The true value lies upon the compelling personal histories of New Bernian artisans who remained largely anonymous up to now. In addition to the finely drawn portraits in the text, the author has included an appendix of biographical summaries. The notes provide ample research source materials for students and professional scholars alike.

Highly recommended.