

SHINING A LIGHT ON HISTORY

a review by *Amanda M. Capelli*

Kianna Alexander. *Carolina Built*. Gallery Books, 2022.

AMANDA M. CAPELLI lives and writes in New York. She holds a PhD in literature from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and was a recipient of the Global South Research Fellowship from Tulane University. Currently, she is a clinical associate professor in the Expository Writing Program at NYU. Her research and writing interests include Southern women writers, female madness, poetics of place, and the intersections of objects and memory. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *Cagibi: A Literary Place*, *Talking Writing*, *NCLR*, *The Routledge Companion to Literature of the U.S. South*, and elsewhere.

North Carolina native **KIANNA ALEXANDER** has been publishing across romance, women's fiction, and historical genres since 2009. [Watch](#) a discussion of *Carolina Built* hosted by North Carolina Humanities for the 2023 North Carolina Reads program.

If you ever find yourself in Edenton, NC, walk down Broadstreet and pause to look at the J.N. Leary building, a two-story Colonial Revival storefront built in 1894 and now home to the *Chowan Herald*. Josephine Leary, nee Napoleon, was born into slavery in Williamston, NC, in the 1850s. After emancipation, she married, moved to Edenton, NC, and began to build a name for herself as a savvy businesswoman and real estate entrepreneur. During her lifetime, Leary operated a successful barbershop and purchased six different properties in Edenton's historical district. The 2022 novel, *Carolina Built*, by Kianna Alexander, offers readers a romantic revisioning of Leary's life story. Leary's is an important story to tell and one that Alexander recognized immediately as worthy of novelization. She recounts her decision to do so in the preface, highlighting the significance of re-establishing Leary's presence in the American timeline:

[T]he accomplishments of African Americans have so often been minimized, overlooked, or outright dismissed to serve a narrative that relegates us to the status of second-class citizenship. I decided to be a part of the solution, by putting my efforts into a project that would shine a light on someone who would otherwise be forgotten by history. (x)

OPPOSITE The J.N. Leary Building in Edenton, NC

It's a thread we find throughout the body of the story as well. For example, after giving birth to her first child, a daughter, Josephine's mother and grandmother help her convalesce. Four generations of women in one room represent a spectrum of history, at once suggesting a new and bright future for the Napoleon/Leary family and highlighting an unfillable chasm of loss:

When Mama says "home," I know she doesn't mean the old Williams spread. She means our true home, Africa. Ghana, more specifically. Grandma Milly can trace our people back there, through the stories she heard from her mother, *Amina*. . . . As I gaze at my new daughter, the weight of my mother's words settles over me like a sturdy blanket. My child may never lay eyes on the land where our family originated, but she will know from whence she came. (55)



PHOTOGRAPH BY KIP SHAW

Alexander's novel straddles the line between rose-colored romance and historical justice, making some parts of the narrative feel uneven. But Leary's story is bigger than a single novel. In her retelling and rebuilding of parts of Leary's

life, Alexander begins the work of bringing her back into the American consciousness, shedding light on a story that has been buried for far too long, work that this reviewer hopes to see continued in the future. ■

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