

Griffin, Moses ^[1]

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Griffin, Moses

by Gertrude S. Carraway, 1986

ca. 1753–14 Mar. 1816

Moses Griffin, founder of Griffin's Free School at New Bern, one of the first trade schools for poor girls, if not the first, was a native and lifelong resident of [Craven County](#) ^[2]. His father, Solomon Griffin, a Craven County farmer and landowner, bequeathed property to his daughter, Alie (Aley), and three sons: Solomon, Jesse, and Moses. At an early age Moses Griffin aided royal Governor [William Tryon](#) ^[3] and colonial militiamen during the [War of the Regulation](#) ^[4] and was wounded in the [Battle of Alamance](#) ^[5]. With only a little formal education, he worked diligently at his mercantile and real estate businesses, lived alone quietly and frugally, and invested well his profits. A bachelor, he had few personal friends and seldom mingled with his neighbors, although he had frequent contacts with attorneys and bankers.

In addition to extensive properties in New Bern, Griffin owned a plantation, as evidenced by a notice on the front page of the *North Carolina Gazette* on 2 Jan. 1796: "All persons are forwarned from trespassing on my plantation called the BLUEROCK on Trent River, about five miles from Newbern, as they will otherwise be prosecuted to the utmost rigor of the law. Moses Griffin."

Known as an eccentric miser, Griffin is reported to have become fatally ill from eating too many [shad](#) ^[6] when the fish were plentiful and cheap. He was buried in Cedar Grove Cemetery, New Bern. The tombstone erected there later referred to him simply as "Founder of Griffin's Free School."

His lengthy will, signed on 13 Sept. 1807 and probated in June 1816, left a small bequest to a minor nephew. Five African-American slaves were designated for freedom under specific conditions of time, their wages, and "the law." Named as executors, trustees, and managers of his estate were five prominent New Bernians: Edward Graham, [William Gaston](#) ^[7], [John Devereux](#) ^[8], [Francis Hawks](#) ^[9], and John Oliver. They were directed to invest all of his "ready money" in bank shares or to lend it out at interest; and to rent, not sell, his houses and lots "to the best advantage." As soon as funds might be sufficient from the income of his principal, they were to purchase two acres of land "in some convenient and healthy place" near New Bern and build there a 1 1/2-story brick building, 30 feet long and 20 feet wide, with a large space on the first floor suitable for a schoolroom; the "plain" remainder of the structure was to be made "fit for the accomodation of indigent scholars, which house shall be called Griffin's Free School." When enough money became available afterward from his estate, "a proper schoolmaster shall be employed for the purpose of teaching and educating . . . Orphan Children or the children of such other poor and indigent persons as are unable to accomplish it with their own means and who in the judgement of my trustees are best entitled to the benefit of this Donacion." Besides being housed and taught, the pupils were to be maintained and clothed. At age fourteen they were to be assigned as apprentices "to trades or other suitable occupations."

Griffin's numerous relatives brought suit between 1818 and 1820 to break his will and void its trust fund, claiming they should get the money as "heirs at law and next of kin." Chief Justice [John Louis Taylor](#) ^[10], a former New Bernian, officially praised the trust as "purely benevolent" and dismissed the case.

The school was incorporated in 1833, and two years later land for its building was purchased on George Street across from and slightly to the northwest of Cedar Grove Cemetery. In 1838, John Devereux was reported as the sole "surviving executor and trustee of the late Moses Griffin." His son, [Thomas Pollock Devereux](#) ^[11], and the latter's son, [John Devereux II](#) ^[12], then "executors of the will of Moses Griffin," bought four adjoining lots on 21 July 1840. Plans then began to go forward for the construction of the schoolhouse. Because various trades were open to poor boys, the trustees decided to educate poor girls, especially orphans. Selected as headmistress was Arete (pronounced Areta) Sitgreaves Ellis, the daughter of George Ellis, New Bern's representative in the 1800 and 1801 House of Commons, and of Amaryllis Sitgreaves Ellis, sister of Judge [John Sitgreaves](#) ^[13].

Strict rules and regulations were drafted for the care and training of twenty girls. Lists of the pupils for some of the years through 1859 are extant. Not only were they housed, clothed, and fed, but also they were given medical treatment. Among the bills was one dated 1 Oct. 1847 from Dr. Peter Barton Custis (1823–63), who charged four dollars for extracting the teeth of eight children. Besides classes in the three R's, the girls were taught sewing, knitting, spinning, weaving, cooking, milking, housework, and gardening. Every afternoon, weather permitting, Miss Arete, accompanied by her St. Bernard

dog, took the girls on walks through the woods to study and collect wildflowers. On Sunday she led them, all dressed alike in their uniforms of blue and white during summers and blue and gray during winters, in a dignified procession about a mile through town to attend services at Christ Episcopal Church. Many of them she sponsored for baptism, and all of them she instructed in the Bible, religion, and morality. During occasional social events "curtsey cotillions" and grab-bag prizes were featured.

A photograph of Miss Arete hangs in the Vestry Room of Christ Church, and in its sanctuary are large twin stained-glass windows memorializing this "devout religious worker and home missionary." The Reverend William Nassau Hawks, grandson of [John Hawks](#) ^[14], supervising architect of the original [Tryon Palace](#) ^[15], who later became rector of the church, was for some time a teacher at the Griffin school. Indeed, the school was so closely associated with Christ Church that it was considered practically a church institution.

During the Civil War the school had to be closed, and the pupils were placed in local homes. Some attended classes in the parochial school held in the remaining west wing of Tryon Palace, and others later studied in a schoolroom in the rear of All Saints Chapel. After the war Thomas and John Devereux continued to serve as trustees; however, on 25 Mar. 1868 they asked that other persons be appointed to represent "Griffin's Friends." When Thomas died in 1868, John again appealed to the court to be relieved of responsibility for "the public charity." From then until 1908, other trustees were named from time to time. The last trustee was William Hollister Oliver, whose daughter, Mary Taylor Oliver, had succeeded Miss Arete Ellis as "Chairman" for the Griffin school.

With the Griffin school inactive, its property on George Street was sold to become the site for a knitting factory and Stewart's Sanatorium. Game, fish, and oyster fairs were also held on the grounds. The school building was shown on a map of New Bern about 1881, but it was burned in 1922. For some years, the income from the Griffin estate had been divided between the parochial school and the [New Bern Academy](#) ^[16]. Later the entire amount went to the academy.

A final accounting was held on 6 May 1908. As recommended by District Solicitor [Charles L. Abernethy, Sr.](#) ^[17], approved by the superior court and signed by Judge [William R. Allen](#) ^[18], the Griffin trustees were discharged and the assets in the Griffin school fund, amounting to approximately \$4,500, were transferred to the New Bern Graded Schools, which in 1899 had succeeded the New Bern Academy.

In memory and appreciation of Moses Griffin, the "new" high school building, which was built in 1904 and enlarged in 1907 and again in 1930, was officially named the Moses Griffin Building in 1909. It is still standing but is no longer used for school purposes. Plans are being considered by its new owner, the Historic New Bern Foundation, Inc., for its eventual restoration. When a colonial front was added in 1930, a large marble plaque was taken down. It is still stored inside the building. Its inscription reads: "In Memorandum. Moses Griffin died 1816. In Grateful Remembrance of his Generous Provision for the Education of the Children of New Bern, N.C. Hunc Semper Meminisse Juvabit. 1904-09." Translated literally, the epitaph means: "The Man Should Always Be Kept Fresh in Our Remembrance."

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