

**040 BONSAL, CALEB****Bookseller & Publisher****Norfolk**

Bookseller in Norfolk for nearly fifty years (1803-51), originally as resident partner for the Philadelphia bookselling concern of John Conrad & Co. (103).

Bonsal came from Quaker roots in Delaware. His immediate family was a branch of the Philadelphia Bonsalls who had been among the first to settle in William Penn's city in 1683; their descendants spread throughout the adjoining Delaware River valley over the next century. His father, Philip Bonsal, was a grocer in Wilmington when the Revolution erupted; thus his family was a part of the large Quaker exodus from that town in September 1777 when British forces under Lord Howe arrived enroute to their occupation of Philadelphia. Though that exile was brief, these Bonsals were ardent nationalists from then on.

After the war, several print-tradesmen emerged from this Wilmington branch, all spelling their names with one 'l' at its end. By 1794, one "V. Bonsal" was an established printer and publisher in Wilmington, likely an uncle, brother, or cousin to Caleb; this Bonsal formed a series of partnerships over the next decade, the last one in 1799 with a still-young Hezekiah Niles. Through Niles's recent Philadelphia training, as well as Bonsal's prior press work for publishers there, their firm fronted for the Philadelphia businesses behind the fast-growing national book trade from its start. Caleb was brought to the book trade with them.

In 1803, one of those nearby firms – John Conrad & Co. – targeted Virginia as an outlet for the books they published and exchanged there. By 1800, the Conrad family had already established branches in Baltimore and Washington; this new expansion was their second effort. The key to their success in such stores came from finding reliable and knowledgeable booksellers to conduct those stores, vesting that chosen person in the venture by making them a partner in that store. In Petersburg, the Conrads found John Somervell (394), a Marylander who had established a bookstore there in 1800. But for their new store in Norfolk, they chose the untested Caleb Bonsal. It proved to be a discerning choice.

Bonsal would sell books and stationery in this port town until his death in April 1851, finding a clientele that appreciated his trade as much as he did their patronage. When he arrived, Bonsal found two main competitors, one operating a conventional job-printing and bookstore combination – Augustus C. Jordan (244) – with the other staging a circulating-library business – Thomas Rainbow (347) – where one could rent or buy his books. Bonsal offered Norfolk a dedicated retail bookstore that stocked the latest publications alongside a large backlist of old and new editions of books that had sold steadily for years. At the outset, the Conrads were an essential conduit for the store's stock, but over time, Bonsal grew less dependent on them; he came to understand his customers better than could his distant suppliers and found alternatives to them. In 1811, he terminated his contractual link to the Conrads, relying instead on the range of connections he had built over the preceding eight years to carry him forward. One memoir of this period reports that Bonsal always kept the best bookstore in Norfolk right from the start of his business there.

This is not to say that Bonsal went unchallenged in business. Following the War of 1812, book publishers in New York – the Philadelphians' principal rivals – set up a branch-store of their own in Norfolk, sending Christopher Hall (198) to manage it. Other specialty stores in the port began offering books related to their businesses – medicine, music, school books, and such – procured from specialized suppliers on both sides of the Atlantic. And then there was misfortune. In August 1816, his store was burglarized at night; he lost considerable cash and books to the perpetrators. More difficult to overcome was the fire in January 1825 that destroyed neighboring stores and damaged his; as was common practice then, onlookers hurriedly entered his store to remove its stock and furnishings before they were burned; many of those items left undamaged in the piling of them haphazardly in the street outside simply disappeared into the night along with his "helpers."

Still, Bonsal was a respected figure in town, both for his energy and his knowledge. Faced with water-quality issues as the town grew in size, he demonstrated a solution by installing a cistern in his home, the town's first. He served on several private boards and in appointive public positions; as a result, he was overwhelmingly elected in 1833 to Norfolk's Common Council and served as its vice president. In the years that followed that he brought his sons Stephen and Caleb Jr. into the business and began to lessen his daily involvement. His end came in April 1851 at age seventy-six. Bonsal died on the same day as Commodore James Barron, once commander of the Gosport Navy Yard. Together they were mourned in the next day's papers as the two "most respected citizens" in Norfolk.

### ***Personal Data***

Born:	---	1775	Wilmington, Delaware
Married:	Feb. 11	1813	Sarah Dawley of Prince William @ Norfolk
Died:	Apr. 21	1851	Norfolk Borough, Virginia
Children:	Ellen H., Caleb Jr., Stephen, Sarah, and possibly others.		

Sources: Imprints; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*, Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*, Norfolk newspaper advertisements, 1803-51. Hezekiah Niles (1777-1839) is best known as proprietor of the influential *Niles' Weekly Register*; Wilmington was his first post-apprenticeship home, his business with Bonsal was his second there.