

- 101 CONRAD, ANDREW** – (as C. & A. Conrad & Co.)
- 102 CONRAD, CORNELIUS** – (as C. & A. Conrad & Co.)
- 103 CONRAD, JOHN** – (as John Conrad & Co.)
- 104 CONRAD, MICHAEL** – (as Michael Conrad & Co.)

Booksellers & Publishers

Norfolk, Petersburg

Non-resident proprietors of bookselling firms in Norfolk (1803-10) & Petersburg (1803-11).

The Conrad family was one of Philadelphia's largest publishing firms in opening years of the nineteenth century; they also overextended themselves in the process, initiating a massive bankruptcy case that touched all of the city's printing trades in 1813. John Conrad was the architect of their empire, embracing the new model of American publishing that rose in that city in the 1790s. With a plethora of print-trade establishments there, entrepreneurs like Conrad and Mathew Carey could divide book production into discrete elements – editorial, printing, gathering, and binding – and then contract for the completion of each step. John Conrad brought his brothers Michael, Andrew, and Cornelius into his plan about 1800. Using the firm of John Conrad & Co. as a producer and supplier, they established a chain of outlets in Wilmington, Baltimore, Washington, Norfolk, and Petersburg for their product. Initially, one of the brothers was dispatched to the satellite location, but by 1803, when they moved to establish stores in Virginia, they identified a proven junior bookseller and job-printer that they could send to the new location as a partner vested in the new business's success.

Caleb Bonsal (040) was a young tradesman in Wilmington, Delaware, working in partnership with the later-celebrated Hezekiah Niles in a traditional press and bookstore business when the Conrads offered him their store in Norfolk. The new firm of Bonsal, Conrad, & Co. found quick success in that port city, with Bonsal eventually being able to buy out his partners in 1810, by then an arrangement headed by Michael Conrad; he continued as a bookseller and stationer there until his death in 1851.

John Somervell (394) was a Maryland bookseller who had established a store in Petersburg in 1800; although competing with at least two other bookstores there, he had proved that he could profitably manage such a difficult situation. The Conrads offered him a partnership in 1803 that represented a significant improvement to Somervell's source of supply, thus the new firm of Somervell, Conrad, & Co. quickly built on an established foundation. Like Bonsal, Somervell was eventually able to buy out his Philadelphia partners in early 1811, as the later firm of C. & A. Conrad & Co.

With this network of sales outlets in place the Conrads increased the pace of production of their own books, purchased greater quantities of others' imprints, and launched a new literary magazine edited by novelist Charles Brockden Brown. Over time, however, these ventures stretched their resources thin, especially with the economic disruptions generated by the Embargo of 1807. The existing partnerships were reorganized under new forms embracing the brothers' names, but not John's. Yet those too came to an end eventually, as

the buy-outs by Bonsal and Somervell infused capital into the family's publishing business, so keeping it alive. Those changes marked the beginning of the end for all the Conrads; their balancing act collapsed with Andrew Conrad's death in 1812; through the settling his estate, the insolvency of the larger enterprise was revealed, and bankruptcy soon followed. The family did not again forge a partnership with anyone outside of Philadelphia.

Personal Data

John Conrad (1776-1851), Andrew Conrad (d. 1812),
Cornelius & Michael Conrad probably born in 1780s.

Sources: Imprints; "Conrads of Philadelphia," *PMHB*; Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital*; business notices in Philadelphia newspapers, 1799-1814; advertisements in *Norfolk Herald*, 1803-10, and *Petersburg Intelligencer*, 1803-11.