

106 CORSE, JOHN**Publisher****Alexandria**

Publisher of the *Alexandria Herald* (1811-21) with Nathaniel Rounsavell (367).

Corse built a considerable career in business in Alexandria in the first half of the nineteenth century. A native of Delaware, he was apparently operating a tavern there before 1810, as was his like-named father. But by 1818, his main business was a dry-goods store; over time, though, the paper currency that his store accepted became his main focus; after 1820, his advertising as exchange agent for currency and loans gradually replaced that for his store; by 1823, he no longer advertised any dry goods and had leased out the building used for his old store. Shortly thereafter, he began advertising lottery sales with increasing frequency, finally adopting the business title of "Lottery & Exchange Broker" in 1842. This changing set of business interests suggests how much his wealth grew over forty years of commerce in this merchant center. Growing prestige soon followed that new wealth. Corse was a regular part of the city's Whig political committees from 1824 on. He was also the secretary of Alexandria's Mechanics Relief Society from 1823 on, and served on various committees in St. Paul's Episcopal Church all of his adult life. In 1838, he was chosen by the city's Common Council as election commissioner for the ward encompassing the town's business center; Corse held that post until 1844, when he was himself elected to that council. His life was a record of commercial and civic success in an era when such was just what most young men sought but did not quite achieve.

His career as a publisher came early on in Corse's residence in Alexandria, but it would have a lasting effect on his life. In early 1811, he formed a partnership with Nathaniel Rounsavell, himself a son of an Alexandria tavern-keeper, to publish a new twice-weekly Democratic-Republican newspaper, the *Alexandria Herald*. In the prospectus for that paper, the pair presented themselves as printers, though that statement is the only evidence known for Corse's training as such. Rather, the two men built a classic tradesman/financier newspaper concern; Rounsavell was responsible for the trade side of their venture, while Corse took on the financial aspects. Their affiliation continued through 1820, though encountering at least two considerable legal entanglements. The first concerned their publishing of Congressional secrets, with the second a suit filed against them for their supposed role in a bank failure.

In April 1812, as a House special committee on Foreign Relations considered whether a war with Great Britain was advisable, an account of its "secret" proceedings appeared in the Washington newspaper of James B. and John M. Carter (084), the anti-Madisonian *Spirit of Seventy-Six*. The subsequent investigation revealed just how porous the veil of secrecy was in reality; it was just a simple prohibition placed on the attendant reporters not to discuss or publish what they heard in Congress when it was declared "secret." Charles Prentis (361), later editor of the *Virginia Patriot* for Augustine Davis (119) in Richmond, was one of those reporters in 1812; he reported that he had given the Carter brothers an account based on a conversation he had had with Nathaniel Rounsavell, not from any first-hand knowledge. The committee summoned Rounsavell to discover from where he had acquired the account; the editor testified that he had been told of the committee's proceedings from a member of

Congress, but when pressed to identify that member, he refused to answer; the committee ordered him detained by the House sergeant-at-arms for his defiance of their authority. A lengthy debate ensued in the House the following day, resulting in Rounsavell's release, but only after the editor apologized to them and revealed the source of the story, the Virginia representative John Randolph of Roanoke. In Randolph's absence, his peers presumed that his disclosure had been an inadvertent one, and that Rounsavell had no way of knowing of the secrecy injunction as a result. Thus did Corse avoid the loss of his fiscal investment by a forced closure of the *Alexandria Herald*.

The partners' next legal problem resulted from a story that they published concerning the solvency, or lack thereof, of the Mechanics Bank of Alexandria in 1818. In short order, a run in the bank ensued and it failed. The administrators of the remaining assets filed suit against a long list of the Alexandria's merchants, apparently for their devastating withdrawals, and Corse & Rounsavell for publishing an "inaccurate" story that triggered the collapse of an otherwise "sound" bank. The suit went on until late 1825 when the plaintiff administrators finally gave up trying to recover their losses. In the meantime, the bank was reorganized, with several of the named defendants serving as its directors; Rounsavell was one of those who served, demonstrating that his and Corse's concern had always been about the bank's management and not its assets. Unfortunately for all involved, the reorganized bank did not survive the Panic of 1819.

Corse was evidently pressed by that economic downturn, especially as he was speculating in the paper currencies of many American banks. In late 1820, he began negotiations with Rounsavell for his withdrawal from their arrangement. By February 1821, he had settled with his long-time partner, who brought in a practical printer named Henry Pittman (327) as a partner. That alliance lasted just fifteen months; Rounsavell retired from the business in May 1822 as a result of his declining health, leaving Pittman to carry on the *Herald* alone. Pittman demonstrates grand plans in these successive transactions. Shortly before buying into the *Alexandria Herald* in 1821, he had bought the press of Samuel H. Davis (126), an Alexandria job-printer who had just taken over the *Alexandria Gazette* of Samuel Snowden (393); with fellow printer Douglas Thomson (416), he would use that second press to issue a weekly literary journal called *The Alexandrian*; but that venture failed after four months, as many such journals did in that era, with Pittman & Thomson's assets being sold to the firm of Rounsavell & Pittman.

Behind all this maneuvering was Corse; he evidently financed these transactions by taking promissory notes from both Rounsavell and Pittman, so retaining a financial interest in the *Herald*. When Rounsavell withdrew in 1823, Corse apparently also financed Pittman's solo acquisition of the *Herald* and its office. But over the next four years (1822-1826), Pittman found it ever more difficult to balance the ongoing expenses of his paper with his significant indebtedness to Corse; in November 1826, he was compelled to close the *Herald* because of those mounting financial pressures. Two months later, on January 18, 1827, a fire swept through the heart of Alexandria's central business district, taking Corse's business with it. The entrepreneur now pressed his debtors for payment of their notes, as a way to acquire the means he needed to rebuild. Evidently, Pittman was unable to make any payment on his debt; not surprisingly, relations between the two quickly became bitter,

with Corse frequently demanding payment and Pittman repeatedly rejecting his entreaties. The destitute printer even moved across the Potomac into Washington City proper to avoid daily contact with Corse, but that did not help deter his litigious creditor; Corse soon filed suit against Pittman.

This sordid affair came to a head on December 27, 1827 when Pittman tried to kill Corse. The printer shot his financier in the darkened entry to Corse's Alexandria home in the midst of a fierce storm. Corse survived the attack, promptly identifying his assailant as Pittman, who was arrested and held without bail in the District of Columbia's jail in Washington. Over the next few days, the two men provided conflicting stories to local newspapers that turned the scandalous event into one of claim and counter-claim: Corse said Pittman shot him, while Pittman proclaimed his innocence, saying that Corse blamed him for the shooting out of personal animus. Corroborating witnesses would be needed to verify either man's story, and Pittman benefitted from that need. When he was tried in December 1828, it turned out that the only witnesses the prosecuting attorneys had found were Africans, one enslaved and one free; under the rules of evidence of the day, no black person could give testimony against a white person in the District of Columbia's courts; they were "secluded by color." Absent any eyewitness testimony, Pittman could not be convicted; he immediately left the area at trial's end, his debt to Corse unpaid, dying in New Orleans some five years later.

As we have seen, Corse survived and prospered. But he never again invested in a publishing venture, whether as a partner or a financier. He died in Alexandria in December 1845, just four months after the death of his wife. Their eldest son continued Corse's business until the Civil War disrupted the country's system of financial exchange on which it was based.

Personal Data

Born: In 1782 Kent County, Maryland.
Married: Nov. 13 1813 Julia Talbot @ Alexandria, Virginia (then D.C.).
Died: Dec. 3 1845 Alexandria, Virginia (then D.C.).
Children: Virginia, Montgomery (b. 1816), John D. (b. 1821); 1830 census suggests four more children under twenty.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *Artisans & Merchants*; Gales & Seaton. *Proceedings in the Congress* (1811-12); Davis, "Celebrated Case of U.S. vs. Henry Pittman;" advertisements & notices in *Alexandria Herald*, 1811-20 and *Alexandria Gazette*, 1818-45; on fire, *Washington Daily National Journal*, 25 Jan. 1827; obituary, *Alexandria Gazette*, 5 Dec. 1845.