

367 ROUNSAVELL, NATHANIEL

Printer & Publisher

Alexandria

Publisher of the *Alexandria Herald* (1811-22), initially with John Corse (106) and then with Henry Pittman (327).

Rounsavell was an energetic journalist who was forced out of his profession at an early age by illness, but who left a legal legacy behind him in respect to cases of contempt.

Born and raised in New Jersey, Rounsavell moved to Alexandria with his parents in about 1800; his father, Andrew Rounsavell (1761-1826), quickly became a part of the business community there, conducting a retail business initially, then a tavern off King Street through 1818 when he was appointed the city's jailor, a post he held until his death. It appears that his son learned the print-trade in Alexandria, though with whom and when is unknown.

Rounsavell emerged as a fully independent tradesman in the spring of 1811. At that time, he formed a partnership with a Delaware-born tavern-keeper named John Corse to publish a new twice-weekly Democratic-Republican newspaper, the *Alexandria Herald*. Corse was then fast becoming a major commercial figure in the port, developing his establishment into a dry-goods store first, and then to a "lottery & exchange" office, which eventually made him wealthy. The partners built a classic tradesman/financier newspaper concern that would last nearly ten years; Rounsavell was responsible for the trade side of their venture, while Corse took on the financial aspects; it was an arrangement that made their resulting *Herald* a successful venture. That success was fueled, in part, by links to the Madison administration; in 1816, the partners were granted a coveted federal license to publish the laws of Congress in their paper, a substantial windfall; this followed their production of a register of federal officials for Secretary of State James Monroe, who issued such licenses for the administration.

Still, the firm of Corse & Rounsavell did not go unchallenged during its lifetime; the partners encountering at least two considerable legal entanglements that established precedents that remain a part of the country's judicial legacy today. The first involved publication of Congressional "secrets," while the second was a civil suit filed against the pair 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 deemed secret. Charles Prentis (361), the once and future editor of Richmond's *Virginia Patriot* for Augustine Davis (119), 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 Rounsavell, who was also serving as a reporter, and 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 held by the House sergeant-at-arms for his defiance of their authority. A lengthy debate ensued in the House over the following two days, resulting in Rounsavell's release, but only after the reporter 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 the partners avoid a forced closure of their *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 what they claimed was 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 new directors; Rounsavell was one of those who served, demonstrating that his and Corse's concern had always been with the bank's management and not its assets. Unfortunately for all involved, the reorganized bank still did not survive the Panic of 1819.

That economic downturn also brought about the end of the Corse & Rounsavell concern. Corse had been speculating in the paper currencies of many American banks, and as they failed, his deteriorating finances required an infusion of new capital. In late 1820, he began negotiating with Rounsavell for a sale of his interest in the office. By early 1821, Corse had settled with his long-standing partner, dissolving their firm on February 10th. Rounsavell immediately brought in a practical printer named Henry Pittman (327) as his new partner, with Corse apparently loaning Pittman the funds needed for him to buy into the *Herald*. The rapid change suggests that Pittman probably worked in the *Herald* office already, making him a known quantity to Rounsavell and Corse alike. Moreover, Pittman was as energetic as was his new partner; shortly before joining with Rounsavell, he had bought the press of Samuel H. Davis (126), an Alexandria job-printer who had just taken over the press office of the *Alexandria Gazette* of Samuel Snowden (393); with printer Douglas Thomson (413), Pittman would use that 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 new assets being sold to the more-solvent firm of Rounsavell & Pittman.

Thus reinforced, the thirty-six-year-old Rounsavell seemed set for another decade-long run of success. But after just fifteen months together, he abruptly retired from the business in May 1822. His later obituaries indicate that his declining health was the cause, and that this ill-described disease eventually claimed Rounsavell's life. That end came in January 1826, evidently with a considerable outpouring of grief, as Pittman noted in his obituary:

He was distinguished at all times and in every situation of life by an entire exemption from ostentation of manners, and illiberality of opinion. Endowed with an eminently strong mind, he fulfilled, in the most excited period of politics, the duties of an

editor, with credit to himself, and respect to others. In his religious principles, he was cramped by no sectarian faith, but his views "looked through Nature up to Nature's God." An aged and worthy father, with other relatives and friends, lament his death. In refraining from elaborate elegy, an intimate knowledge assures the writer that he performs a duty, though at the expense of his own feelings, which was most desirable to the deceased while living.

Pittman acquired the *Herald* in his own right when Rounsavell retired and continued to conduct the journal until November 1826, when it closed, a result of his financial overreaching and pressure from his primary creditor, John Corse. In the end, a destitute Pittman tried to kill Corse by shooting him outside of his Alexandria home in December 1827; he was acquitted a year later because the only witnesses against Pittman, beside Corse (who could have been lying), were black and so not allowed to testify against the white tradesman; a chastened Pittman promptly left town, without paying Corse, never to return.

Personal Data

Born: In 1786 Hunterdon, New Jersey [baptized there].

Died: Jan. 31 1826 Alexandria, Virginia [then District of Columbia].

Died unmarried and without issue.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; *Artisans & Merchants*; Gales & Seaton, *Proceedings in the Congress* (1811-12); Davis, "Celebrated Case of U.S. vs. Henry Pittman;" advertisements & notices in *Alexandria Herald*, 1811-22 and *Alexandria Gazette*, 1811-26; obituary by Pittman reprinted in *Washington Daily National Journal*, Feb. 3, 1826; genealogical data from New Jersey Vital Records posted at Ancestry.com (February 2013).