

394 SOMERVELL, JOHN

Bookseller, Bookbinder

Petersburg

Bookseller and bookbinder in Petersburg (1800-18), in part with the Conrad brothers (101-104) of Philadelphia (1803-10).

Somervell was a trained bookbinder who conducted a bookstore and bindery in Petersburg in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. Despite that trade longevity, he remains an enigmatic figure of uncertain origins and indefinite endings.

Surviving bookplates indicate that Somervell began his Petersburg business in 1800, though he evidently worked elsewhere before that date. The incidence of his surname in Maryland suggests that he came from there, but no conclusive evidence of such an origin has yet been found. It is clear, however, that Somervell soon had the wherewithal to invest in property in adjacent Chesterfield County. In June 1802, he was compelled to dispose of at least a part of his holdings to settle a judgment against him from a suit brought in the U.S. District Court in Richmond; that property neighbored the Chesterfield plantation of James Hayes (207) and likely had been sold to him originally by Hayes in order for the one-time public printer to finance building a new home in Richmond in 1800. That original sale further supports the suggestion that Somervell came from Maryland: Hayes had come from Maryland in 1781 and his older brother John was a Baltimore printer had recently ended a lengthy tenure as Maryland's public printer, so implying a prior acquaintance among them.

Still, Somervell proved that he could profitably manage his affairs in the longer term, even as he competed with at least two other bookstores in Petersburg. That stability induced the Conrad brothers of Philadelphia to offer him a partnership in 1803 when they launched an effort to expand their publishing business into Virginia and Maryland; between 1801 and 1803, they established branch offices in Washington, Baltimore, Norfolk, and Petersburg by forging partnerships with a resident bookbinder and bookseller; Caleb Bonsal (040) was their choice for Norfolk, and Somervell for Petersburg. The new firm of Somervell, Conrad, & Co. built on his established foundation by providing him a larger selection in his stocks.

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 names, but these new arrangements came to an end eventually as well. By 1810, Somervell and Bonsal were both able to buy out their Philadelphia partners when the Conrads attempted to infuse capital into the family's publishing business, so keeping it alive – at least until their empire collapsed in 1812 into the largest bankruptcy in the country to date.

Somervell was not significantly affected by that collapse, having built supply and exchange relationships independent of the Conrads during his seven-year-long alliance with them. Richmond publishers became an important part of his local network – a crucial feature considering the 1810 arrival in Petersburg of Richard Cottom (108), a brother of and partner

to the major Alexandria bookseller Peter Cottom (107); by 1811, he had forged bonds with both Samuel Pleasants (331) and Thomas Ritchie (360) there. Such relationships sustained Somervell until he withdrew from the trade in 1818. Some sources suggest that he retired in 1813, but bookplates from 1815 show he was still in business at that date. Moreover, the size and scale of his supplies and stocks seen in an inventory of Somervell's estate taken in March 1819 indicates that he was still an active tradesman until shortly before his death.

That court-ordered inventory resulted from Somervell dying intestate, probably in January 1819. The ensuing estate settlement devoured nearly all of his wealth, leaving his young wife destitute. Hence she became one of the first recipients of aid offered by the Petersburg Mechanics Benevolent Association when it was formed in 1826; Somervell's contemporaries provided assistance to his widow until her death in 1853.

Personal Data

Born: late 1770s Maryland?
Married: May 4 1807 Elizabeth DeGraffenreid @ Petersburg, Virginia
Died: early 1819 Petersburg, Virginia
Children: No record of off-spring yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; MESDA Index no. 36701; Seagrave, *Artisans & Mechanics*; Wyatt, *Petersburg*; "Conrads of Philadelphia," *PMHB*; notices in the *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1800-15).