

**473 BRANDA, CHARLES** – [Charles Louis Branda]

**Engraver, Copperplate Printer      Norfolk**

Engraver and Copperplate Printer in Norfolk (1810-28).

Branda was primarily a metal-smith and engraver who did printing from copper plates as a sideline. While there are many surviving examples of his handicraft, the details of his life as a tradesman are limited to newspaper notices, with only a bare outline of his personal life in public records.

Branda was born in France and arrived in America in the company of his mother sometime before the fall of 1805. That September, at the age of fifteen, his mother consented to binding him out as an apprentice to John Bannerman (1776-1809), a Baltimore engraver and copperplate printer, so setting her son on a path to independence as a tradesman. While Branda was under Bannerman's tutelage, he was also exposed briefly to the work and person of Charles B.J.F. de St. Mémin, (522), the itinerant French portrait-engraver, who lived in the Bannerman household for a time in 1807. But his days in Baltimore apparently came to an abrupt end in 1809 with the unexpected death of his master at the relatively young age of thirty-two. He was now an independent journeyman.

From the newspaper record, it appears Branda relocated to Norfolk sometime in 1810, following the liquidation of Bannerman's shop in November 1809. There he moved into the realm of the master, establishing a business that sold jewelry, and braided hair with such items ("platted"), alongside his primary services as an engraver and copperplate printer. In early 1811, he moved that business to a more prominent location on Market Street, and then brought in a seasoned watchmaker that July to both make and repair clocks and pocket-watches. This mix of products and services marks Branda's business for as long as it existed. It also appears, from one brief account of his life from the 1850s, that Branda came to Norfolk in the company of his brother Auguste, who became a major merchant-trader in the port; he may also have been accompanied by a second brother, as one Francis Branda died there in 1817 while serving as a mate on a Norfolk-based trading brig. Then, during the War of 1812, the established Branda became a naturalized U.S. citizen in the borough court.

In August 1814, Branda announced his attention to leave Norfolk for Philadelphia; evidently, that intent was real, and not the debt-collection ruse often employed by merchant-tradesmen, as he also sold his copperplate press and tools to one Lewis (or Louis) Robert (512) at that time. But whether Branda actually left the port city at that time is unclear. One week before that notice, Branda was assigned a twelve-year-old orphan, William Mattheyay, as an apprentice goldsmith; that assignment would have limited Branda's travels until the indenture was completed. So too would his military obligations; at that time, he was a private in the Second Regiment of Virginia Militia; that regiment was formed by Col. William Sharp from local militia units in the spring of 1813 in response to British attempts to land and occupy territory near Norfolk; in the summer of 1814, he was still subject to a call-to-arms, and one came shortly after the indenture was issued, when the British appeared again in the Chesapeake, this time determined to destroy Washington and Baltimore.

When Branda finally reappears in the newspaper record in April 1816, he was acting as a dry-goods merchant in Philadelphia; that advertising notice suggests that he did not actually move north until after the war, but that he had formed a business partnership with his merchant-trader brother as the firm of Charles Branda & Co. How long this arrangement continued is unclear as notices for his store were published only in that spring and not thereafter. What is clear is that Branda was back in Norfolk in April 1818. On his return, he resumed his jewelry & engraving business, as before; but alongside the newspaper notices announcing his return were ones seeking the quick disposal of a large shipment of dry-goods; that circumstance suggests Branda returned to Norfolk only shortly before the notices were published and that this shipment had been destined for his Philadelphia store; if so, the sale notice indicates that had he been supplied from Norfolk by his brother, and that the brothers' accounts now needed to be reconciled; thus, whatever he could not sell in that shipment would be consigned elsewhere in very short order to raise cash.

Once back in Norfolk, Branda set up a new shop in a two-story brick structure at 86 Main Street, not far from his former stand. But just a year later that building was destroyed in the conflagration that consumed most of Norfolk's business district in April 1819. Fortunately, he suffered just the loss of the building and not his goods, as a group of residents saved the contents of his shop before the fire finally reached the structure; as a result, his business continued almost uninterrupted in borrowed space, which was then reestablished at 3 Market Square in late August. It was not the last such disruption that Branda experienced, but for the next seven years, he appears in the public record as a successful tradesman with a young family. In October 1819, he married another French expatriate, Mary Françoise Pointier, a daughter of merchant-factor Honoré Pointer, a woman later described as "one of Norfolk's most beautiful daughters." Branda was apparently a fine choice for her, as that same account reports that he was "rich, handsome, and courted" widely.

The new couple "lived in happiness for seven years" before things turned sour, evidently in the wake of the birth of their second son, Adolphe, in 1826. That October, Branda found himself enmeshed in scandal when his long-time watchmaker, Oliviér Droz (from Neuchâtel in Switzerland), slashed his throat in his master's residence, where he had lived since at least 1820. Branda's residence was, in turn, destroyed in March 1827 by yet another of Norfolk's catastrophic fires. Then, his shop was heavily damaged in a hurricane the ensuing August, further adding to his difficulties. His advertising notices disappear from Norfolk's papers after that event, although he evidently remained in business for some time, as he is seen in Norfolk County's will books buying gold and silver furnishings and jewelry from intestate estates during 1828. But the only record of his presence in Norfolk thereafter is the sparse entry for his household in the 1830 decennial census. As a result, Branda's fate, as well as his subsequent employments, is uncertain.

Remarkably, the death of his son Adolphe presented an acquaintance of Branda's with the chance to publish an account of his later life. In desperation, the son committed suicide in January 1858 after he was discovered embezzling funds from the San Francisco merchant house that employed him. A correspondent of the *Sacramento Bee*, who had known both father and son in Norfolk, wrote to the editor comparing each man's death – essentially a "like father, like son" morality tale. That account reports that after the father's 1826-27

travails, he was a broken man; the losses quickly bankrupted him, which impelled his now-discomfited wife to desert the family and return to France. After her departure, Branda "drank hard, and entered into accompanying vices that brought him to a suicide's grave." Claiming that he had boarded with the family, and so knew them well, the writer said that "Branda cut his throat, and was dependent on former friends for his funeral expenses." This story is curiously similar to that of Branda's watch-maker, raising the possibility that the author conflated the two events in his memory some thirty years later. Yet it appears wholly accurate concerning the results of Branda's death. The engraver's bachelor brother Auguste adopted the orphaned boys and raised them himself. The *Bee's* correspondent blamed this development for the subsequent immoral acts of Adolphe Branda: the uncle had been the "example in their youth" for them, and "was not the best. He was a libertine and a seducer." The writer clearly saw an equivalence in the son's desperate suicide to that of his father's purported death so many years before. Yet the veracity of his published account remains unproven.

***Personal Data***

Born: ca. 1790 In France.  
Married: Oct. 20 1819 Mary Françoise Pointier @ Norfolk, Virginia.  
Died: After 1830 Norfolk, Virginia.  
Children: Charles Louis Jr.; Adolphe F. (1826-58).

Sources: MEDSA entry no. 3733, 42580; newspaper notices in *Norfolk Herald* and *American Beacon* (1811-27); article in San Francisco *Daily Globe*, January 25, 1858.