

**Thomas Nelson Conrad:  
Educator, Editor, Preacher, Spy**

*Clara B. Cox*

Thomas Nelson Conrad, the second president of Preston and Olin Institute and the third, fourth, or fifth president of Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College (VAMC, today's Virginia Tech), depending on how one counts Tech's top executives,<sup>1</sup> led a colorful—sometimes even life-threatening—existence. This note provides an abbreviated biography of the man.

Conrad was born on 1 August 1837 in Fairfax Court House, Virginia, to Nelson and Lavinia Thomas Conrad.<sup>2</sup> While growing up, young Conrad particularly enjoyed horseback riding, which he had accomplished by the age of 5. By the time he was 15, he had become “an expert horseman and a good pistol shot.”<sup>3</sup> Both would serve him well during the Civil War.

Conrad attended Fairfax Academy before enrolling in Dickinson College in 1853, about the time he turned 16 years old. He pursued religious studies, earning a bachelor's degree in 1857.<sup>4</sup> During his college days, he was a member of the Phi Kappa Sigma fraternity and the Belles Lettres Literary Society, which he served as secretary and then president. He also forged a friendship with fellow student Daniel Mountjoy Cloud, who would play a role in Conrad's exploits during the Civil War.<sup>5</sup>



This lithograph of Thomas N. Conrad appeared in a Dickinson College yearbook in 1857, his senior year (courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania).

*Thos. N. Conrad*

Although Conrad received a master's degree from the institution in 1860, it is unlikely that he remained at or returned to the school—or took any additional courses—for any period during the years between the two degrees. A master of arts could be secured by “graduates of three years' standing, or more, who have in the meantime sustained a good moral character” and made application to the president, “accompanied by the usual fee (\$5) at least three days before the Commencement.”<sup>6</sup> Besides, he was employed in the District of Columbia during that time.

Following his undergraduate education, Conrad served as principal of Georgetown Institute, a Washington, D.C. school for boys, from 1857 to 1861.<sup>7</sup> A Southern sympathizer, Conrad advised his students how to join the Confederate army after the Civil War started in April 1861.<sup>8</sup> But that was not the limit of his pro-South activities. According to Civil War historian Craig Sodara, “By raising and lowering his window shades, Conrad would send messages to Confederate soldiers on the other side of the [Potomac].”<sup>9</sup> It has been said that “no one in Georgetown was more defiantly pro-Confederate than Thomas Nelson Conrad,”<sup>10</sup> who “did not hide his Confederate sympathies.”<sup>11</sup> Conrad described himself as being “[h]ot-headed” and “impulsive to rashness” during that period of his life.<sup>12</sup>

Events organized by Conrad during his final commencement at Georgetown Institute led to his imprisonment. As he later wrote,

Some of the graduates' speeches undoubtedly smacked of the strongest Southern sentiment and when, at the close of the exercises, the band struck up “Dixie,” the audience went wild. . . . Already I had been suspected of being too pronounced in my expression of disloyalty and that night I was arrested and conducted to prison, ironed and chained to prevent attempts at escape from the squad of guards, who marched me through crowded streets. . . . In a few days I was paroled under a promise not to leave the capital until regularly exchanged and for six weeks . . . the freedom of the city was mine . . . I proceeded to get into more mischief without delay.<sup>13</sup>

That experience, he added, “hastened the abandonment of educational pursuits for the sterner ones of war.”<sup>14</sup> One of those war pursuits was a plan to kill Union Gen. Winfield Scott, who was considered a traitor by pro-Confederate Virginians. Conrad even obtained a musket for that purpose, but “peremptory orders from Richmond” stopped him from executing his plan.<sup>15</sup>

His temporary freedom from the prison became permanent—at least for a while—when he was taken to Union-held Fortress Monroe in

Hampton Roads, Virginia, and was exchanged along with hundreds of other prisoners.<sup>16</sup> Conrad then proceeded to the Culpeper, Virginia, headquarters of Confederate Gen. J. E. B. Stuart, where the general appointed him for scouting duty and approved Maj. Dabney Ball's suggestion that Conrad "become a chaplain, with the rank of captain," for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Virginia Cavalry. Conrad later noted that perhaps "no officer but 'Jeb' Stuart would ever have hit upon the plan of directing me to carry out such orders as were assigned in the guise of a churchman militant."<sup>17</sup> He spent most of his time as a scout,<sup>18</sup> at least until late 1861.

On 17 December 1861, two days after the Confederate victory at Fredericksburg, Virginia, Conrad traveled to Richmond and personally offered his services to President Jefferson Davis as a spy, an offer accepted by the Confederate leader.<sup>19</sup> The value of Conrad's subsequent intelligence-gathering activities was recognized in a note from Davis, dated 27 May 1864:

Please accept my thanks for the zealous and patriotic manner in which you have lately served the Confederacy by going within the enemy's lines. If the expression of my satisfaction at the efforts made by you for the advantage of our cause will afford you gratification, it is a pleasing duty to me to thank you for them.<sup>20</sup>

During his espionage activities, Conrad proposed a plot to kidnap President Abraham Lincoln in September 1864. As he wrote in his memoirs:

One shrewd move, a skillful capture of somebody high in Federal authority, and the advantage then gained might equal the struggle. Why was it not possible to capture Lincoln himself, take him into the Confederate lines and hold the Northern president as a hostage for peace? If such a plan were successful, there could be no doubt that the war would be at an end in a few weeks and who could tell, but that the South might gain in the treaty much, if not all, that had been left to the arbitrament of arms during the past three-and-a-half years.<sup>21</sup>

With approval from Confederate officials, Conrad secured the assistance of two other men, including his former Dickinson College classmate, Mountjoy Cloud; reconnoitered the White House to observe Lincoln's movements; and developed the final, detailed plans. But when the targeted day arrived and the would-be abductors were in place, the president's carriage was surrounded by a squad of Union cavalry troops, thwarting the kidnapping plans and causing Conrad to abandon any further

such attempts. “Had [Lincoln] fallen into the meshes of the silken net we had spread for him,” Conrad later wrote, “he would never have been the victim of the assassin’s heartless, bloody and atrocious assault.”<sup>22</sup>

Soon after the war ended, Conrad was arrested, this time by a military boat captain, and returned once again to the Old Capitol Prison. As he later wrote,

President Lincoln had fallen a few nights before and the captain of the gunboat and his officers were so outraged in feeling, that I was thrown into double irons in a trice, stripped to the skin, searched and threatened with the hangman’s noose before morning, for the captain informed me he was positively certain I had had a hand in the conspiracy and for ought he knew was in hiding after helping [Lincoln assassin John Wilkes] Booth escape.<sup>23</sup>

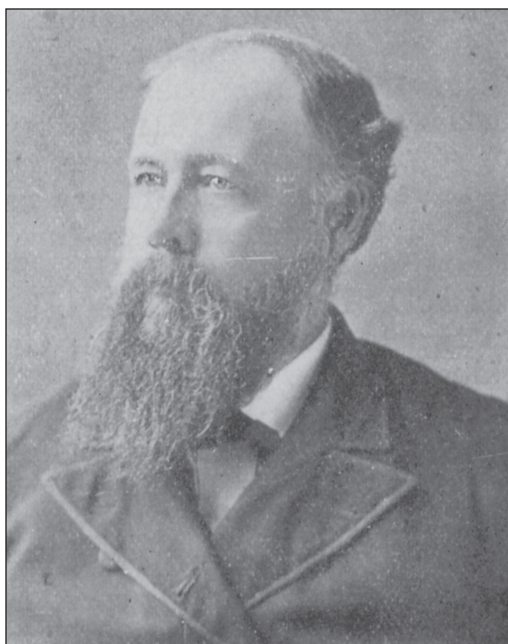
After the boat landed, troops moved Conrad to the prison. During the trek, “more than one person in the crowd” along the streets mistook him for Booth and wanted to hang him. The gathering mob “made a rush for me,” Conrad remembered, but the troops protected him, and he was delivered safely to the prison.<sup>24</sup>

After a couple of weeks, during which time he was imprisoned in a cell near the suspected Lincoln assassination conspirators, Conrad was temporarily released and spent some time with his parents, who were then living in Leonardtown, Maryland, before he went back to the prison for his official release and return to Virginia.

That July, however, as he was visiting a young woman in King George County, Virginia, he was arrested, taken to Fredericksburg, and imprisoned yet again. During a transfer by train to another prison, he escaped and hid in the Blue Ridge Mountains for months afterwards.<sup>25</sup>

In 1866, Conrad’s father, Nelson, purchased a home in Upperville, Virginia. That same year, Thomas bought the Upperville Academy and began teaching there in September, a job he continued until 1868. On 4 October 1866, the 28-year-old educator wed Emma S. Ball, the woman he had been visiting on the occasion of his last arrest. The couple had seven children over the course of their marriage.<sup>26</sup>

From Upperville, Conrad moved to Rockville and served as principal of Rockville Academy from 1869 to 1871.<sup>27</sup> His next job—again as a principal—was in Blacksburg, where he headed the Preston and Olin Institute for approximately one year, beginning in 1871. According to Virginia Tech historian Duncan Lyle Kinnear, he



Thomas Nelson Conrad was the only person to serve as president of both Preston and Olin Institute and Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College (courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania).

seemed to have entered upon his task with great enthusiasm. Possessed as he was with a flair for writing and a “tongue for speaking,” this ex-Confederate secret agent brought a new dimension of excitement to the school and to the town of Blacksburg.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to heading the school, he served as a local preacher, at least in 1871.<sup>29</sup>

When Preston and Olin Institute became Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College, the commonwealth’s white land-grant school, in 1872, Conrad eagerly pursued the presidency. According to Kinnear, he had the “strong support of the Methodists, especially those having been connected with Preston and Olin Institute,” and such influential men as Robert T. Preston, who had served on the institute’s board of trustees, spoke on his behalf. However, the position went to another former Confederate officer, Charles L. C. Minor.<sup>30</sup>

In 1873, Conrad purchased an interest in the *Montgomery Messenger* from John Sower and, according to the *Bristol News*, was expected to continue the paper with the other owner, a Mr. Carper. “Mr. Conrad is a gentleman of ability and culture and we shall expect that his impress upon the *Messenger* will be felt,” the *Bristol News* predicted.<sup>31</sup> Almost immediately after becoming editor of the *Messenger*, Conrad launched the

first of numerous editorial attacks on the VAMC Board of Visitors but not on the college itself.<sup>32</sup> Regardless, he accepted a position at VAMC in 1877 as an adjunct professor heading a new Preparatory Department<sup>33</sup> and was named chair of English in 1880.<sup>34</sup>

Conrad developed ties to Virginia's Readjuster Party,<sup>35</sup> a black and white coalition created in the late 1870s to "readjust" (reduce) Virginia's public debt and thereby free up money to invest in schools.<sup>36</sup> When that party swept into power in Virginia in the early 1880s, Conrad realized his dream of becoming president of VAMC. Called by Kinnear "the most colorful and controversial person ever to hold the office of president during the first century of the existence of the College,"<sup>37</sup> he made a number of improvements to the fledgling school, and it flourished for a while. But his political enemies created problems for him and VAMC, and when the Readjusters lost the governor's race in 1885, Conrad lost his job as well; he was removed from the presidency in 1886, four years after his appointment.<sup>38</sup> While in Blacksburg, he had briefly served as mayor of the town for three months in 1882, and the year after he left VAMC, he was mayor for one month.<sup>39</sup>

In August 1887, Conrad returned to Maryland to be professor of agriculture and chair of the faculty at Maryland Agricultural College.<sup>40</sup> In 1889, he received another degree from Dickinson College: a master of science.<sup>41</sup> He returned to Washington in 1890 as a special agent of the census office charged with collecting statistics on tobacco.<sup>42</sup> At some point, he became a general statistician for the office, remaining in the position until his death at age 67 on 5 January 1905. His wife, Emma, had died five years earlier. Conrad was interred with military honors in Blacksburg,<sup>43</sup> alongside Emma in Westview Cemetery.<sup>44</sup>

Conrad is the only person to have served as president of both Preston and Olin Institute and Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College.

### Endnotes

1. Virginia Tech counts John L. Buchanan, its second and fourth president, as its second president only, even though Buchanan served two entirely different terms, the first one from 1 March 1880 to 12 June 1880 and the second one from 14 August 1881 to 17 January 1882. The university does not count Scott Shipp, its third president, at all, reportedly because Shipp spent so little time in office—fewer than two weeks. Consequently, the university lists Conrad as its third president.
2. Frederick Hatch, *Protecting President Lincoln: The Security Effort, the Thwarted Plots and the Disaster at Ford's Theatre* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2011), 64; Ernest B. Furgurson, "Thomas Nelson Conrad (1837–1905)," *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, reprinted in *Encyclopedia Virginia*, at [www.encyclopediavirginia.org/conrad\\_thomas\\_nelson\\_1837-1905](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/conrad_thomas_nelson_1837-1905); and "Thomas Nelson Conrad" (*Dickinson Chronicles*), at [hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/5454](http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/5454), accessed 20 October 2015.

3. Capt. Thomas Nelson Conrad, *The Rebel Scout: A Thrilling History of Scouting Life in the Southern Army* (Washington, D.C.: National Publishing Company, 1904), 11.
4. Captain Thomas N. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy: A Story of the Civil War* (New York: J. S. Ogilvie, 1892, 6; "Thomas Nelson Conrad (1837–1903)," Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections, at [archives.dickinson.edu/people/thomas-nelson-conrad-1837-1905](http://archives.dickinson.edu/people/thomas-nelson-conrad-1837-1905); and Furgurson, "Thomas Nelson Conrad."
5. "Thomas Nelson Conrad," Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections.
6. *College Catalog*, Dickinson College, n.p., 1860, 27.
7. "Thomas Nelson Conrad," Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections. The Dickinson archives listed the ending date for Conrad's principalship at the school as 1861, as did Conrad himself in Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 7. Furgurson, however, in "Thomas Nelson Conrad," incorrectly stated that he was still principal for the closing exercises in 1862.
8. Ernest B. Furgurson, "Teacher, Preacher, Soldier, Spy," *HistoryNet*, at [www.historynet.com/teacher-preacher-soldier-spy.htm](http://www.historynet.com/teacher-preacher-soldier-spy.htm), posted 7 August 2012, and Edward Steers Jr., *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 55.
9. Craig Sodaro, *Civil War Spies* (North Mankato, Minn.: Capstone Press, 2014), 8. Furgurson, "Teacher, Preacher, Soldier, Spy," makes the same claim.
10. Furgurson, "Teacher, Preacher, Soldier, Spy."
11. William A. Tidwell with James O. Hall and David Winfred Gaddy, *Come Retribution: The Confederate Secret Service and the Assassination of Lincoln* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1988), 281.
12. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 8.
13. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 7.
14. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 6.
15. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 7–8.
16. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 9. Information on Fort Monroe can be accessed at Brian Matthew Jordan, "Fort Monroe during the Civil War," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the Library of Virginia, at [www.encyclopediavirginia.org/fort\\_monroe\\_during\\_the\\_civil\\_war](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/fort_monroe_during_the_civil_war).
17. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 10.
18. Steers, *Blood on the Moon*, 54.
19. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 34.
20. The handwritten note from Jefferson Davis was reprinted in Conrad's book, *A Confederate Spy*, npn.
21. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 68.
22. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 70–76.
23. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 79.
24. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 81.
25. Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 79–86, 105, 120–21.
26. "Thomas Nelson Conrad," Dickinson College Archives; Conrad, *A Confederate Spy*, 122; Conrad, *The Rebel Scout*, 218–219; Furgurson, "Thomas Nelson Conrad"; and Phi Kappa Sigma, "Thomas Nelson Conrad," *Semi-centennial Register of the Members of the Phi Kappa Sigma Fraternity* (Philadelphia: Avil Printing Company, 1900), 113.
27. Furgurson, "Thomas Nelson Conrad," correctly gives 1871 as the closing date; Phi Sigma Kappa, "Thomas Nelson Conrad," and Tiphen Walsingham Allen, "Student Life at Dickinson College from 1853 to 1854: Class of 1857," at [chronicles.dickinson.edu/studentwork/tiphenallen/studentbody/classof1857.htm](http://chronicles.dickinson.edu/studentwork/tiphenallen/studentbody/classof1857.htm), incorrectly list the date as 1872.
28. Kinnear, *The First 100 Years*, 14.
29. "Baltimore Conference Record, March, April, or May, 1871," *Hand-Book of the Baltimore Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, Rev. E. R. Smith, compiler, (Baltimore: King Brothers, 1871), 84, Emory University Archives, [archive.org/stream/30711779.1871.emory.edu/30711779\\_1871#page/n0/mode/2up](http://archive.org/stream/30711779.1871.emory.edu/30711779_1871#page/n0/mode/2up). According to the conference records, Conrad had

- also been a “local preacher” in 1868, apparently in the Baltimore area (“Baltimore Conference, Central Church, Baltimore, March 4–13, 1868,” *Hand-Book*, 48).
30. Kinnear, *The First 100 Years*, 60, and Furgurson, “Thomas Nelson Conrad.” Preston is identified as a member of the Preston and Olin Board of Trustees in *Catalogue, Preston and Olin Institute, Session 1869 and 70* (Baltimore: J. Wesley Smith & Brothers, n.d), VPI Miscellaneous Pamphlets LD 5655 A4 1870, Special Collections, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Va., 3–4. For information on Minor’s role in the Civil War, see Aaron D. Purcell, “Charles Minor’s Cashbook and the Diary of E. P. Harmon, A Maine Soldier in the Overland Campaign, Spring 1864,” *Maine History* 48 (January 2014), 136–58.
  31. *Bristol News* (Bristol, Va. and Tenn.) 8, no. 23 (4 February 1873), 1, Library of Congress, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, [chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov). Unless noted otherwise, newspapers cited in the “Endnotes” can be found in this online collection.
  32. Kinnear, *The First 100 Years*, 72–74.
  33. Harry Downing Temple, *The Bugle’s Echo* 1 (Blacksburg, Va.: Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets Alumni Inc., 1966), 129.
  34. “Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College,” *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond, Va.) (7 January 1880), 2.
  35. “Conference of Mahoneites,” *Shenandoah Herald* (Woodstock, Va.) (7 December 1881), 2.
  36. C. C. Pearson, “The Readjuster Movement in Virginia,” *American Historical Review* 21, no. 4 (July 1916), [www.jstor.org/stable/1835892?seq=6#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1835892?seq=6#page_scan_tab_contents), 739, and Brent Tarter, *The Grandees of Government: The Origins and Persistence of Undemocratic Politics in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 238–52.
  37. Kinnear, *The First 100 Years*, 111.
  38. Clara B. Cox, *Images & Reflections: Virginia Tech, 1872–1997*, eds. Lawrence G. Hincker and Clara B. Cox (Louisville, Ky.: Harmony House, 1997), 30–31.
  39. Donna Boone-Caldwell, “Blacksburg’s Mayors and the Evolution of Town Government,” *A Special Place for 200 Years: A History of Blacksburg, Virginia*, ed. Clara B. Cox (Roanoke, Va.: Town of Blacksburg, Va., 1998), 155.
  40. Furgurson, “Thomas Nelson Conrad,” and Kinnear, *The First 100 Years*, 120.
  41. *107<sup>th</sup> Annual Catalogue of Dickinson College for the Academical Year, 1889–90* (Carlisle, Pa.: Dickinson College, 1890), 10.
  42. “Virginia News,” *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, Va.) (24 July 1890), 3.
  43. “Thomas Nelson Conrad Dies in Washington,” *Times-Dispatch* (Richmond, Va.) (6 January 1905), 5; Furgurson, “Thomas Nelson Conrad”; and Kinnear, *The First 100 Years*, 120.
  44. “Westview Cemetery Plot Locator – WebGIS.net,” at [arccgis.webgis.net/va/Blacksburg/WestviewCemetery/](http://arccgis.webgis.net/va/Blacksburg/WestviewCemetery/).