

**Johannes “River John” Conrad
(1788-1850)**

This short biography of River John Conrad explains the significance of his house and of the Conrad lands to the history of Forsyth County. It was prepared for Preserve Historic Forsyth by Fam Brownlee, Jr., a local historian and writer. He is the author of the first pictorial history of Winston-Salem (published in 1977), and for about five years in the late seventies and early eighties was the curator of the Winston-Salem Museum.

Johannes (River John) Conrad, Jr. was born to Christian and Marie Boeckel Conrad on July 11, 1788 in Heidelberg Township, Pennsylvania. When he was seven years old, his parents moved the family to join relatives in Bethania, NC.

On December 27, 1803, Johannes Conrad, Jr. married Elizabeth Miller, the daughter of a prominent farmer and mill owner. The next year, he built for her a house on a bluff overlooking the Yadkin River and named it “River View.” He came to be known as “River John” Conrad because he operated a ferry across the Yadkin River downstream from the house, and because he quickly accumulated a significant amount of property along the river. A county tax list from 1812 shows that he owned 950 acres of land. By the time of his death in 1850, he had more than doubled that acreage, owning land on both the Forsyth and Yadkin County sides of the river.

He is often referred to as a ferryman, but the ferry was probably the least important of his enterprises. His was the biggest farm in western Forsyth County, with several mills of various types. He was also active in the establishment of local schools and churches and acted as an “attorney” for settling estates. In short, he was a very important member of the community.

When he died in 1850, his will provided for the distribution of \$40,000 worth of land and other property, plus numerous land bequests that had not yet been evaluated. He would certainly have been one of the wealthiest farmers in this part of the state.

Six years after his death, his grandson, Augustine Eugene Conrad, built a grand Greek Revival house on a nearby ridge and named it “Pilot View.” Both houses stand today as reminders of an industrious and talented family that led the way in the early development of what is now Forsyth County.

Until the 1870s, manufacturing had little impact in what is now Forsyth County; there was one cotton and woolen factory and a scattering of small wagon works. The heart of the economy was agriculture and milling. The chief crops were fruits, berries, wheat and tobacco.

During the first quarter of a century of the town of Winston’s existence, its two largest businesses were those of Hinshaw & Medearis and Pfohl & Stockton, both of whom produced large quantities of dried fruits and berries for interstate shipment. A 19th century US Congressional report stated that Forsyth County “has shipped for several years past \$100,000 worth of dried fruits and berries.” A considerable percentage of the fruit and berries shipped were grown on the huge Conrad farms. Conrad agricultural and milling operations continued to be an important part of the local economy until well into the 20th century.

What I’m trying to get at here is that the issue is not just Johannes Conrad’s house, but the totality of the Conrad impact on Forsyth county, which includes several houses and multiple farms and mills – a rural landscape that was once the heartbeat of the local economy. That landscape has disappeared elsewhere. The Conrad Road houses and farms are all that remains.

■ Fam Brownlee, Jr.