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ON THE COVER: This lithograph which originally appeared in Harper's Weekly December 7, 1878, shows the hazards, such as forest fires along the banks, which faced James C. Burbank's steamboats as they traveled the Red River.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The photograph on page 3 is from the private collection of Winfield R. Stephens, Sr., Anoka, founder of the Motor Corps of the Minnesota Home Guard during World War I. All other pictures in this issue are from the audio-visual department of the Minnesota Historical Society.



The Ramseys' first home, about 1852, on Third Street below Robert Street.

Introduction: Anna Ramsey's Letters

The following collection of information and quotations represents an attempt to describe something of the character and the interests of Anna E. Ramsey, the wife of Alexander Ramsey, as revealed through her correspondence which is contained in the collection of Ramsey Papers. More than 250 of her letters were read. They fall into three groups: those of 1864-1869 to her daughter, Marion, at school in Philadelphia; those of January to July, 1870, to her husband from Europe, and those to her daughter, Marion, after her marriage in 1875 to Charles Furness. This is not a biography but rather a survey of various aspects of Mrs. Ramsey's life. It was compiled by Ellen Mikulak as a special interim project when she was a student at Macalester College, St. Paul.

Mrs. Ramsey is described by T. M. Newson in Pen Pictures and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers as "a tall, well-informed, queenly-looking woman; commanding in her manners, yet gentle and loving in her nature . . . Throughout a quarter of a century, she not only greatly aided by her diplomacy her husband in his political career, but has maintained the regard and esteem of the public for her many private excellencies."

"The autumnal tint of years," Newson adds, "only add to her graces, while in the social circle she maintains her supremacy, as she always has."

Ramsey was appointed the first governor of the Territory of Minnesota, a government appointment made while he was living in Pennsylvania, and he moved with his wife to St. Paul. Later he was a mayor of St. Paul, the second governor of Minnesota, a United States senator, and secretary of war under President Rutherford B. Hayes. The Ramseys' first home stood near what is now Kellogg Boulevard and Robert Street. It was a board house with a projecting portico and it had belonged to the "Minnesota Outfit," the St. Paul headquarters of the American Fur Company. The building had been renovated by the company for the Ramseys, and they lived there until they built a home on the site of the present Ramsey House, the mansion built in the early 1870's, on the corner of Walnut and Exchange. The earlier house faced Walnut, while the mansion faces Exchange. When work began on the mansion, Ramsey had the older house moved across the street where it became part of another large, Late Victorian mansion built there by Horace H. Bigelow.



Alexander and Anna E. Ramsey as they looked during the early years of their marriage.

Excerpts Reveal Her Warmth, Humor -

At the time of Mrs. Ramsey's death in 1884, the newspapers described her in glowing terms:

"A presence that had been so long among us purifying, alleviating, elevating, has passed away, and the vacant place no soul can fill. Without being a woman of obtrusive individuality, Mrs. Ramsey was possessed of a disciplined and trained mind and great amiability. She had that rare social characteristic whose possession every stranger recognizes at once as a friend."¹

She was described as an asset to her husband's career . . .

" . . . and in all relations of private life she was one of those rare women who adorn the highest circles of society and respond with easy grace to all its exactions, but who find their greatest happiness in the quiet duties of wife and mother, and in the affectionate and hospitable amenities and unostentatious charities of private life."²

But such eulogies, customary during the Victorian era, reveal only a small part of Anna Ramsey's life. Much more can be learned about her from the letters she wrote.

Anna E. Ramsey was born July 17, 1826. Her father was the Honorable Michael Jenks, a judge in Buck County, Pennsylvania. She married Alexander Ramsey then a state representative and a colleague of her father, September 10, 1845.

Four years later, when Ramsey was appointed territorial governor of Minnesota, she moved to St. Paul. At first Mrs. Ramsey

did not enjoy the rigors of Minnesota life. In a letter during her first winter, she wrote ". . . it is so forlorn living alone in such a place as this I think it intolerable." She never wanted to winter in St. Paul again. However, life became more pleasant and St. Paul did become home to her. For the next thirty-five years, it was the place she lived or returned to when she was not traveling with her husband.

Mrs. Ramsey came from a Pennsylvania Quaker family and she used the customary "thees" and "thous" in her letters to her husband and to her sister, Hannah, but she dropped them when writing to her daughter. A newspaper article once said that she only used the quaint language when at home. ". . . in public she used the usual language avoiding slang and flippancy." [At first] "her husband was disposed to poke fun at her 'thees and thous,' but eventually he fell into the same style of speech simply and naturally, without banter or raillery."³

The letters show that Mrs. Ramsey used endearing terms in addressing her family. She referred to her husband as "my darling husband" or as "my dear ducky." Marion's nickname was "Sis." The most frequent closing found in her letters was formal and read: ". . . and believe me as ever thy devoted wife, Anna" or a variation appropriate to whomever she was writing.

Humor, though somewhat guarded and subtle, shows itself, and Mrs. Ramsey's

humor often was directed at herself. For example, in describing some entertaining she had to do, she wrote:

*"... and if the weather should become warm, I shall dissolve. I wish I could be excused on account of age and excessive flesh; but no one seems to think such infirmities are to be recognized."*⁴

She also spoke of herself in a humorous vein as "the old lady." Occasionally, she injected humor into otherwise uninteresting events. She reports on the capricious spring weather: "... and I had my bonnet twice blown off my head coming from church; but being all the one I had held on faithfully to it and came off the conqueror."⁵

Mrs. Ramsey was also capable of teasing people.

*"Major Nelson called on Monday — seemed delighted to meet me once again: congratulated me on my good looks which he supposed was owing to hair dye I used: of course I informed him in confidence such was the fact: promising to furnish him some that might rejuvenate him which I felt was necessary."*⁶

Her family played an important role in Mrs. Ramsey's life. She was known as a woman who was an asset to her husband's career but, like many wives, she did not quite trust him when she was not around to check on him. She writes from Europe:

*"These good dinners thee so often speaks of I trust may not demoralize thee: that thy former circumspect life and character: may adhere to thee. And on no account allow thyself to go astray."*⁷

She repeats her warning several months later.

*"I trust my darling husband has never been overcome attending so many dinners: but I fear the strongman has become weak: but I hope for the best: would be most truly mortified to hear any other than a good report."*⁸

While in Europe, Mrs. Ramsey missed her husband and wrote that, *"I will be glad to come home and never be separated if it can be helped."*⁹

Ramsey apparently was not as demonstrative as Mrs. Ramsey would have wished, especially, she felt, when he was busy in government. In a letter to him she bemoans this situation, declares that not one profession of love comes from him but that perhaps, being a senator, it would indicate a lack of dignity: however, she adds, she knows

that he means it even though he may not express it.¹⁰ On another occasion she comments, "So my old gentleman must think I am after all a right nice old lady: although he never tells me so. I take it for granted."¹¹ As she began to age, she perhaps was afraid that her husband's feelings towards her would change. Her hair was beginning to turn white, and she writes:

*"... but I shall still be thy dear old wife and shall love thee with all the strength and fervor of youth and what matters it if time has whitened my locks: thee knows they were once pretty and envied by not a few."*¹²

As the years passed, Ramsey did grow more attentive. Instead of writing to a "dear but negligent husband," as she did during her first winter in St. Paul, she could write Marion about an evening at the home of friends in 1870:

*"... he said I could spend an hour there as well as not: so I took him at his word: but staid over my time: and he very coolly sent for me thinking I had forgotten and had better return to the home that missed me: I thought it quite touching particularly when I found he was aching to present me with a lot of pears he had brought home to me such attentions startle me: as he is not much given to tender ways."*¹³

A few days later she makes a similar happy report.

*"Your Papa and myself enjoy being devoted to each other immensely he is a perfect sunbeam from morning until night: I don't know when I have seen him so uniformly cheerful."*¹⁴

Marion was the Ramsey's only child to survive and she was her mother's joy.

When she was to be married to Charles Furness and make her home in Pennsylvania, Mrs. Ramsey knew she would miss her daughter. After Marion's marriage, Mrs. Ramsey writes repeatedly about how lonely she is and how only Marion's happiness makes her loss endurable. Her letters to her daughter also include advice on housekeeping and other aspects of married life. She wisely advises Marion to, "... let every act of your life be known to him: in this way (and this alone) he will show to you his abiding faith in you."¹⁵ She was overjoyed when she learned that she was to become a grandmother.

"We are both: Papa and self, well satisfied and am glad the rest of you are pleased: as you have your share to perform in multiplying and replenishing the earth: I am happy

you begin in season."¹⁶

Mrs. Ramsey seems to have been the typical doting grandmother and spent much time preparing for the child that was to be born. She wrote Marion that,

*"I think by the time I get my baby rigged out I will certainly be bankrupt. The little fellow takes a great deal of money and much nice sewing."*¹⁷

She was much saddened by the death of Marion's son, Charles, but she sent reassuring and consoling words:

*"I have passed through this great affliction: and know so well your agony of mind: but darling one you must feel his little spirit has gone to heaven where there is no more sorrow or sickness for him."*¹⁸

Although Mrs. Ramsey was reared in a Quaker family, she apparently drifted away from the practices of her sect after her marriage. From that time on, her own will dictated the course her religious practices were to follow.

She joined the Presbyterian church in St. Paul and belonged to House of Hope Presbyterian Church until her death.

Mrs. Ramsey's faith appears to have been an important force in her life but it was strictly guided by her own interpretation of what it should be. She wrote to Marion that,

*"This is a bright Sunday morning but I don't think I shall go to church: as I learn Mr. Breed is not to preach: but the Rev. Mr. Lyon one of our old missionary laborers: and I do not feel I am Christian enough to be bored just in this way."*¹⁹

After hearing a stranger preach on foreign missions she reported that it was a "subject somewhat dry, and uninteresting."²⁰

Although Mrs. Ramsey often missed church if the weather was bad, if she did not feel well, or if the minister was not to her liking, she did value the habit of church-going. She told her husband that she was glad he went to church and that "such duties should never be neglected by anyone; particularly to us who have passed middle life."²¹

At a time when religious revival meetings were going on, she showed both disapproval and curiosity:

*"We are having a series of religious meetings which I hear are largely attended: as I don't believe in sensational preaching; have not been; and don't propose going more than once or twice at most."*²²

At the same time her reading circle was

poorly attended and she remarked:

*"The fact is I think these meetings are getting to be tiresome: and if some of our religious enthusiasts don't get their death it will be strange to me: running out in every night in all kinds of weather."*²³

Mrs. Ramsey was clearly involved in the activities of her church. She was a church school teacher at the Fort Street Mission. (Fort Street is present-day West Seventh Street). In one letter she writes that while she did not go to church she:

*"... went to a little chapel and Sunday school: under the auspices of House of Hope Church: some four squares above our home on Fort Street. Rained very hard: but as I had pledged myself to become a teacher to the heathen: could not allow a rainstorm to weaken my zeal: so put on my waterproof: and braved the elements."*²⁴

In a later letter she comments with pride that, "... our mission school numbers 204 persons: and the building is growing too small to be comfortable."²⁵

Her attitude toward her church work seemed to vary with her mood. On December 1, 1875, she wrote Marion that church affairs "tax your mother physically you well know: consequently I always dread them."²⁶ On December 26, 1875 she wrote, "Our festival at the mission school passed off as all such occasions do: very pleasantly —."²⁷

In a time of trouble, such as the death of Marion's child, she naturally turned to religion for comfort. She wrote to Marion and her husband that "I pray you may have strength given you from on high to bear the crushing blow which falls upon you and all of us."²⁸

Mrs. Ramsey has been remembered as a woman who was interested in charity. Her letters reveal that interest.

In a letter dated May 30, 1864, she wrote:

*"I think I shall go to the hospital this morning as there is much we can do for the poor soldiers: give them water; bath their wounds: and fan them: for they are so weak: many having lost a leg and arm, but they appear very cheerful through all their suffering."*²⁹

Mrs. Ramsey's major charity work was for the Home of the Friendless, which offered shelter to destitute women and children. In her first mention of the Home in her letters, she remarks that she is,

"... expected tomorrow to take part in a Festival at the Home of the Friendless have to prepare seventy-five sandwiches



beside a lot of strawberries, I shall be too glad when the thing is entirely over." ³⁰

Her satisfaction is evident when she writes that they,

"... had a donation visit at the Home of the Friendless: and were made glad by many persons sending bundles of clothing for the distribution which is almost upon us reminds us to prepare for it. I rather dread it but will get through safely without much discomfort." ³¹

She refers again to this event. The missionary boxes, she writes, "afford us much happiness: knowing we will make two needy families happy and comfortable for six months at least." ³²

As time passed she became a member of the Home's board of directors and later served as vice president. In a letter she comments on her duties:

"I am for all this month manager for the Home of the Friendless: and have to make two trips a week over to their quarters which is a great tax upon me: but I have to do it: feel it is well for me." ³³

Mrs. Ramsey served as vice president for almost ten years and she was generous with her time and money. She furnished a parlor at the Home and in her will she left the Home \$5,000.

A problem arose when she and Marion were in Europe and Ramsey did not send the money she had requested. She was sure he would want them to travel and buy clothes, and Mrs. Ramsey tried to get her point across in a letter to him:

"But recollect we never take this trip again and don't want to miss too much on account of poverty: — as we could raise a little on credit if we tried: Now if I was the Husband, I should say, My dear wife and child I wish you to take this trip, but in taking it you must be judicious in the use of money: recollecting I want to build a house: at some distant day: how much may you need I am unable to say but your good judge-



Later in life — the Ramseys both seem to have aged gracefully.

ment will of course direct you I send you a letter of credit." ³⁴

She pleaded and scolded, her letters becoming sharper and sharper in tone. Finally she wrote that if she did not hear from him she would "neither beg or borrow But I will draw on thee — " for money. ³⁵ She told him that it would be to his advantage because she would be more independent, and less trouble for him.

Finally, she did draw upon her husband for money. He did not approve, and sent a telegram telling her so. She responded: "I beg of thee not to denounce me too severely: but if I am wrong in what I have done forgive me 'this time' as I shall never do so again." ³⁶ She added that much of the money was her own, or she would not have dared use it. Throughout her life, Mrs. Ramsey kept account of the money she spent and economized when times were hard. When she died, she left a large estate.

From the beginning of her European trip, Mrs. Ramsey seems to have felt strongly about American life and its contrast with that in Europe.

Her pride in her own country extended from its beauty to its system of government:

"... but for beauty our own country cannot be surpassed and I shall ever be proud of having been born in a free republic: and under a flag that gives perfect freedom to every poor oppressed soul who flies to it for protection." ³⁷

Interesting comments about nobility seem to turn up in her letters,

"Mrs. Custin and myself could be presented [at court] by simply desiring it: but I have no wish to toady to an old worn out and intensely seedy count: Even if it is the oldest in Europe: it is fast become of no account. — When I am presented I want to look my best and create a sensation: I shall not do

it here but at the White House."³⁸

During her stay in Europe, the Franco-Prussian War broke out. Mrs. Ramsey's first comments on Prussia were part of a letter to her husband dated January 23, 1870.

*"The Prussians are different and sincere in their praise of us so we can well afford to let Saxony like a sinking ship go: In a few years Prussia will swallow her up — and I shall not be sorry: but I keep this to myself as the blow might be too great and overwhelm somebody."*³⁹

On February 20 she remarked that Paris was in an unsettled state, and on June 17 she described the start of the war by reporting that troops were marching to the Rhine,

*"... and in a few days a most uncalled for and bloody war will follow. I hope Prussia will give the French a good flogging altho we are quiet in this quarter: as many of the family are in favor of the French and feel very sanguine of success."*⁴⁰

In her letters from Europe she mentions her interest in art. She comments that she has learned a great deal about paintings and would like to own some,

*"... but have not yet asked King John: and I fear my excessive modesty — will control me: thee must therefore make up thy mind I shall not bring thee a picture from the Dresden gallery."*⁴¹

She describes a visit to the Louvre and coming home with a headache because of the attempt to look at so many pictures.⁴²

Reading was another interest. In a letter to Marion, she writes, "I have been very quiet for some days but *happy with my books: getting very literary without being learned.*"⁴³

Her letters also revealed concern about her health. She seems to have suffered from "sick headaches" throughout her adult life. During the last four years of her life, she had a kidney problem — perhaps earlier than that. She mentions it in letters from Europe.⁴⁴ In an 1880 letter to Marion Mrs. Ramsey describes her poor health: "I find I am very nervous, some days can scarcely hold my pen: today is one of my shaky days . . ."⁴⁵

Lastly, Mrs. Ramsey evidently enjoyed natural beauty. She often commented on it, and on her own garden and yard with its flowers.

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THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.