

ANNA RAMSEY

"Shining Exemplar" of the True Woman

Diana Barsness

LITTLE has been written about Anna Jenks Ramsey. She is linked in most references — grammatically, legally — to her husband; her identity is described in terms of his. In a sense, she was most notably singled out for public attention at her death in 1884, when newspapers published glowing eulogies and sketches of her life. These articles, too, described her primarily, sometimes exclusively, as Alexander's "true helpmeet." She was characterized as a devoted mother, a pious, cultured, and refined woman of generous instincts, and an ornament to society. She certainly, according to these ac-

counts, exemplified the idealized and stereotyped concept of the "true woman." According to that view, what mattered for a woman were four qualities: "piety, purity, submission and domesticity."¹

Anna and Alexander Ramsey were married in 1845 in Pennsylvania when she was nineteen and he was thirty. He had already launched his political career and was then serving as a congressman from the Keystone State. For the next thirty-nine years, until her death at the age of fifty-eight, Anna adapted her life to the demands of her husband's career. Her life followed the configurations of his, but the division of work by roles and sex is clear. Alexander helped shape official state and national history as first territorial governor and later second state governor of Minnesota, mayor of St. Paul, United States senator, secretary of war, and, finally, chairman of the Utah Registration and Election Board. Anna took care of house and children, discharged religious and charitable duties, and entertained Alexander's colleagues. The image of "woman as part of the 'natural setting' against which the human drama was enacted" applies to Anna Ramsey. In this respect, she more or less typified the wives of prominent men of the era.²

It is significant that Alexander's career spanned the nineteenth century. It was a time of unlimited opportu-

¹ Alice S. Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers. From Adams to Beauvoir*, 252 (quote) (New York and London, 1973); Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," in *American Quarterly*, 28:152 (Summer, 1966).

² Helen McCann White, *Guide to the Microfilm Edition of the Alexander Ramsey Papers and Records*, 1, 5-9 (St. Paul, 1974); Aileen S. Kraditor, *Up From the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of Feminism*, 7 (quote) (Chicago, 1968).

THE RAMSEY FAMILY in photographs (opposite page): Alexander, Sr., and Alexander, Jr. (upper left), in a daguerreotype made about 1850. The boy, who appears to be about three or four here, died at the age of four and a half. The above picture of Anna, seated, was probably taken about the same time. The one of her standing was probably taken a little later. The ambrotype of Marion at far left was taken in 1860 when she was about seven.

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nity for intelligent and talented men who could "take charge." Women's spheres, on the other hand, were becoming more confining. Colonial women had shared with men much of the knowledge and practice of productive skills and responsibilities which enabled them to make a direct and observable contribution to the security of the family. As America changed from rural to urban, women were cut off from these channels of contribution.³

To the nineteenth-century woman were allocated the spheres of home, church, and social life. "In the period following the American Revolution, political and economic activities were critically important and therefore more 'masculine,' that is, more competitive, more aggressive, more responsive to shows of force and strength," writes one scholar. "Religion, along with the family and popular taste, was not very important, and so became the property of the ladies."⁴

Concurrent with the division of work by sex, many women witnessed the transfer of responsibility for food and clothing from home to servants and factory. As woman's real and practical contributions lessened — or were made to seem less — her characteristics as "woman" among the affluent, upper middle classes became more emphasized and valued. Thus grew the "cult of true womanhood."⁵

This view of woman perched securely on a pedestal is clearly mirrored in the description of Anna Ramsey — which characteristically begins with the men — published in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 30, 1884:

"Four gentlemen. . . , above all others, have been identified with the growth and prosperity of the territory and state, and to whom Minnesota owes more than the everlasting gratitude of its citizens can repay. They were Alexander Ramsey, Henry H. Sibley, Henry M. Rice, and Franklin Steele. With these gentlemen dwelt their wives and, unique in frontier history, the consorts of the representative men in a wild hamlet in the midst of a vast unsettled wilderness, were all ladies of refinement and culture and endowed with that natural grace and courtesy which is an ornament to every social circle, and is the peculiar characteristic of high birth and breeding alone. These ladies formed the nucleus of a cultured society, the existence of which, in such a region and among such conditions, seems hardly to be credited. To them is due that purity and culture that has so markedly distinguished the social circles of St. Paul from those of other towns from the earliest days. To them is due the city's religious and charitable as well as social development. How much of the success and public benefaction of their husbands' careers is due to their pure home influence, and how much their lives have acted as a shining exemplar for their daily companions, only omniscience can comprehend. . . . Without being a woman of obtrusive individuality, Mrs. Ramsey was possessed of a

disciplined and trained mind, and of great amiability. . . . She was the keystone of the social arch, and her memory must remain, strengthening and purifying."⁶

In this article, her religious and social roles are emphasized. Lightly passing over her education at one of the "thorough and systematic schools of the Society of Friends" (Anna had been raised a Quaker), it continued: "During the twenty years that Gov. Ramsey was summoned to the nation's capital she was a marvelous, bright ornament to Washington society, there as everywhere attaching to herself men of every class and condition. . . . she spent her summers in Minnesota and devoted herself soulfully to religious and charitable as well as social duties.

For years she taught in the Fort Street mission and in the Sabbath school of her home church. She was always ready and zealous in every charitable work, and many a poor hovel has been lightened by the presence and aid of one of the first ladies of the land. Among other specific charities she took a strong interest in the Home for the Friendless, devoting thereto much time and money."⁷

Another article located her more firmly in the center of her home: "Mrs. Ramsey was in every sense the helpmeet of her husband throughout all his honorable career — 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."⁸

The divine pronouncement on Anna's character was delivered by the Reverend David R. Breed, minister of the House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, of which the Ramseys were members. The Reverend Breed in his eulogy compared Anna to Sarah of the Old Testament, who was "wife of a chieftain. . . the head of a little company who had followed him from afar to sojourn in a strange land — just as this Sarah followed her husband. . . . But after all, a 'woman's kingdom' is her own house; and it was here that our departed friend displayed her grandest royalty. She was a true helpmeet to her husband, a true mother to her children and chil-

³ Rossi, *Feminist Papers*, 251–252.

⁴ Barbara Welter "The Feminization of American Religion: 1800–1860," in Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner, eds., *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, 135 (New York, 1976).

⁵ Rossi, *Feminist Papers*, 250–252.

⁶ *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, November 30, 1884, p. 8.

⁷ *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, November 30, 1884, p. 8.

⁸ *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, November 30, 1884, p. 8.

dren's children. Her house was the rallying point and center of the circle of relatives among whom she moved."⁹

THUS did others describe Anna Ramsey. What did Anna and Alexander themselves have to say about woman's role and Anna's attributes? Fortunately for later historians and researchers, the Ramseys were separated geographically from each other at times, and their letters, part of the Alexander Ramsey Papers and Records in the Minnesota Historical Society, provide valuable insight into their views and into their relationship with each other.

Although their attitudes were formed while the true womanhood concept prevailed, the Ramseys were also living, breathing people who faced, at times, hardship, discomfort (especially in the early years in frontier St. Paul), scarcity of goods, separation, loneliness, and tragedy, not to mention lesser anxieties. It is clear that they had a warm — sometimes heated — relationship, and that they sorely missed each other when they were parted. It is also clear that while they may have subscribed in theory to the notion of the true woman, the ideal suffered somewhat under the onslaught of reality and Anna Ramsey's intelligence, strong will, and wit.

Most of the Ramsey letters are from three different periods of family separations. The first group dates from 1863 to 1869 when the Ramseys' daughter Marion was at a private Philadelphia boarding school. The second set is mostly between Anna and Alexander when they were in Europe in 1869–70. Part of this time he was on a government mission in Paris and Anna and Marion were in Dresden, where Marion was studying German and music. The third group is primarily between Anna and Marion after the latter's marriage to Charles Eliot Furness in 1875 and subsequent move to Philadelphia.

Anna Ramsey's punctuation is odd, particularly in the use of the colon; the emphases indicated are entirely

hers. Peculiarities and incorrect punctuation have been retained. Occasionally a word is illegible and that is noted. Mrs. Ramsey continued to use the Quaker *thee* and *thou* in addressing her husband — a habit which he sporadically adopted.

PIETY is one of the four cornerstones of the nineteenth-century ideal of woman, and Anna's letters shed some light on her religious beliefs. A former member of the Society of Friends, Anna was disowned by that sect by the following resolution of the monthly meeting of Friends at Middletown, Pennsylvania, September 3, 1851:

"Anna E. Ramsey late Jenks, had a right of membership with us, the Religious Society of Friends; but has so far transgressed the discipline and good order thereof, as to neglect the attendance of our meetings for worship and discipline, and has also accomplished her marriage contrary thereto; for which she has been treated with without the desired effect; we therefore disown her from being any longer a member of our Religious Society, until she becomes sensible of her deviation, and condemns the same to the satisfaction of, this meeting, which is desired for her."¹⁰

Mrs. Ramsey apparently had no permanent feelings of guilt because of this ostracism, judging by later comments. Before his marriage, Alexander had attended the German Reformed Salem Church in Harrisburg,¹¹ so the decision to join a Presbyterian church in St. Paul could well have been a joint one. Anna refers to her former religious affiliation almost twenty years after her ostracism, in this lighthearted remark from Dresden:

"As it is now church time I will stop writing for a little while and go to hear my Scotch friend Dr. Cunningham who had the good taste to call upon me one day last week. I found him an agreeable liberal minded man and was so much pleased with him asked him to call again. I think he will: as I hear he is greatly taken with me: knowing I was once a Quaker and having written a book on that Sect wants to know more of me: a great treat in store for him no doubt *thee* will think."¹²

Alexander sheds some light on his wife's religious beliefs in this letter to his daughter.

"Your mother is as attentive to her Sunday School as ever and once or twice attended the revival meetings here, but she is not very zealous about it: and in order to make this want of zeal satisfying has taught a theory that as a Quaker and now a Presbyterian, she has not a high opinion of religious revivals gotten up in this way."¹³

Anna's letters contain many remarks that hardly suggest an uncritical or slavish attitude toward church or "good works": "I have just returned from church but did not hear so good a sermon as usual: our minister has left and another much his inferior has taken his place."¹⁴

In another letter she writes: "This is a bright Sunday

⁹St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press, December 3, 1884, p. 7.

¹⁰Resolution of the Monthly Meeting of Friends, Middletown, Pa., signed by Samuel Hulme and Elizabeth Jenks, clerks, September 3, 1851, in the Alexander Ramsey Papers, Minnesota Historical Society microfilm edition, M203, roll 6, frame 261. All letters hereafter cited are in the Ramsey Papers.

¹¹Pew rent receipts, in Alexander Ramsey Papers, roll 3, frame 46. According to information from the Historical Society of Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, the German Reformed congregation and the German Lutheran congregation both held services in the church at that time. The differences between the two denominations were slight, and it is not certain to which church Alexander belonged.

¹²Anna to Alexander, January 23, 1870, roll 19, frame 95.

¹³Alexander to Marion Ramsey Furness, September 26, 1875, roll 21, frame 635.

¹⁴Anna to Alexander, January 9, 1870, roll 19, frame 35.

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."¹⁵

Anna Ramsey's good deeds were frequently noted by others, but she herself often felt they were slightly unpleasant obligations that she must discharge. She was active in the church-sponsored Home for the Friendless which then took in the penniless but later evolved into the Protestant Home for the Aged. In a letter to Marion she wrote:

"I am for all this month manager for the Home for the Friendless: and have to make two trips a week over to their quarters: which is a great toil upon me: but I have to do it: and feel it is well for me."¹⁶

In other letters she refers to her duties as "Vice-President" of the Home for the Friendless and to her Sunday school teaching.¹⁷

Anna has already suggested she feels pressure to be involved in charitable organizations. Writing to the adult, married Marion, Anna's tone is much more candid than when she was writing to the schoolgirl, and she makes explicit her lack of enthusiasm regarding, for example, a church-sponsored fair to raise money for orphans: "All churches are urged to go into the work with zeal: but I feel as if I could run away from all these things: I am too boxed in in every quarter."¹⁸

Later she writes:

"The House of Hope Ladies wanted me to let them use my house again for an entertainment, but your Papa said No: and that of course ended it: And I was very glad: for it is a perfect annoyance to be continually asked for the use of my parlor."¹⁹

Perhaps some women in St. Paul found in these volunteer activities not only an opportunity to discharge a moral obligation and to socialize with other women, but a means of learning and practicing organizational skills — although that would seem more a happy result than a motive. Mrs. Ramsey apparently never thought of her charitable works in these terms, in any case.

As curator of the family faith, Anna is not reluctant to give her husband advice, and her tone assumes female superiority in this area:

"I am glad to find thee attends church so regularly: and hope thee will never be too busy to spend an hour in this most profitable way. The habit of going to church is a good one therefore cultivate it. such duties should never be neglected by any one: particularly to us who have passed middle life."²⁰

Mrs. Ramsey does seem to have had a strong personal religious faith. The death of Marion's and Charles's infant son reveals her belief in a supporting God:

"May the Lord bless you and give you strength to bear this your first great sorrow. . . I know my precious one your agony of mind: I have twice 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: May the Lord comfort and strengthen you both."²¹

The next day she says: "I pray you may have the strength given you from on high to bear this crushing blow which falls upon you and all of us."²²

It is noteworthy that Anna does not emphasize the death as the will of God, but rather encourages a turning to God for strength. The difference is significant.

PURITY was another pillar upholding the concept of true womanhood. In a letter to his brother-in-law, written not long after his marriage (he refers to his "honeymoon season"), Alexander writes:

"The duel that occurred here [in Washington, D.C.] yesterday morning between two individuals from N. Carolina excites but little conversation. Johnson and Jones were the names of the parties. Johnson fell on the first fire — dead. The cause is said to be Jones had a wife, Johnson had none, Jones used Johnson's so justice carried the bullet aright." (Although he may have been joking, Ramsey transposed the two names).²³

The chastity of a woman, when violated, resulted in the just execution of the (presumably) guilty male. But Ramsey does seem to take an almost humorous view of the matter — probably not the attitude Anna would take. She did occasionally concern herself with the morals of others. In a letter from Dresden discussing a dinner party, she tells Alexander:

"I had the honor of sitting beside the *Mistress of the Crowned Prince*: a rather good looking but *bold woman*. The Prince spent most of his time looking at her notwithstanding his wife and her Father sat beside her."²⁴

She is even more clear in her attitudes in another excerpt from the same letter:

"We attended a little tea party given by Mrs. Bagaley . . . [who is] parted from her husband. She seems very fast and I think a very undesirable acquaintance: like all fast women she is most kind and goodhearted: really oppresses you with her attentions: I had a pleasant evening for which I heartily thank her: but there the

¹⁵ Anna to Marion, May 9, 1875, roll 21, frame 460.

¹⁶ Anna to Marion, January 5, 1876, roll 22, frame 19.

¹⁷ Anna to Marion, April 5, 30, 1876, roll 22, frames 140, 166.

¹⁸ Anna to Marion, January 19, 1876, roll 22, frame 29.

¹⁹ Anna to Marion, March 15, 1876, roll 22, frame 112.

²⁰ Anna to Alexander, February 6, 1870, roll 19, frame 137.

²¹ Anna to Marion, September 21, 1880, roll 25, frame 591.

²² Anna to Marion and Charles, September 22, 1880, roll 25, frame 604.

²³ Alexander to William J. Jenks, February 4, 1846, roll 3, frame 171.

²⁴ Anna to Alexander, January 23, 1870, roll 19, frame 94.

intercourse ends as this old lady has too much pride to allow her name associated with exceptionable women."²⁵

A few months later, Anna writes to her husband, passing on a bit of gossip about an acquaintance, who "had been quietly informed she could not stay at the [illegible] House: as it was not customary for ladies to receive gentlemen in their bed rooms."²⁶

And in this excerpt about the death of a woman acquaintance she seems to be saying death is preferable to disgrace:

"Poor child: . . . her life was short: but perhaps well for her: as she had permitted a taint to rest upon her character which it would have taken years to wipe out: and perhaps never as her ideas of propriety were somewhat loose and unrefined."²⁷

Anna writes to Marion in an instructive tone about a lady's modesty: "The wind blows a furious gale rendering it highly improper for a lady to appear upon the streets unless willing to show her ankles which many do not seem to object to at the present day."²⁸

Nor should a woman give the appearance of impropriety, perhaps even of enjoying herself too much:

"[I] regretted so much I did not go to her party: but this going to evening entertainments night after night without my husband I don't approve of: and I don't wish sis [Marion] to be brought up to think it a highly proper course to pursue: We are satisfied at home: she reading and I a listener."²⁹

She occasionally lectures Alexander regarding morality, and he does not seem to take offense, perhaps acknowledging her female role as guardian of morals. In one fairly typical letter in 1870 she informs him that she is maintaining the highest standards of conduct while in Dresden, and Alexander (at that time in Washington, D.C.) should do the same:

"These good dinners thee so often speak 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."³⁰

In another letter she inquires:

"How are thy morals: I hope good: all excess may tend to much evil. Therefore be a very good boy and do just as I tell thee: and when I come home let me see thee looking beautifully fresh and vigorous."³¹

²⁵ Anna to Alexander, January 23, 1870, roll 19, frame 93.

²⁶ Anna to Alexander, April 3, 1870, roll 19, frame 250.

²⁷ Anna to Alexander, March 27, 1870, roll 19, frame 232.

²⁸ Anna to Marion, February 19, 1869, roll 19, frame 494.

²⁹ Anna to Alexander, January 16, 1870, roll 19, frames 80-81.

³⁰ Anna to Alexander, January 23, 1870, roll 19, frame 96.

³¹ Anna to Alexander, March 13, 1870, roll 19, frame 214.

³² Alexander to Anna, February 6, 1870, roll 19, frame 131.

³³ Anna to Alexander, December 25, 1849, roll 4, frames 332-333.

Alexander occasionally responds to this advice. In a letter telling of his many social duties he writes:

"On Thursday I had the best of all of the dinners at the Charles Sumners, . . . on all these occasions — my dear — I am happy to say that I had in mind your injunctions and drank sparingly."³²

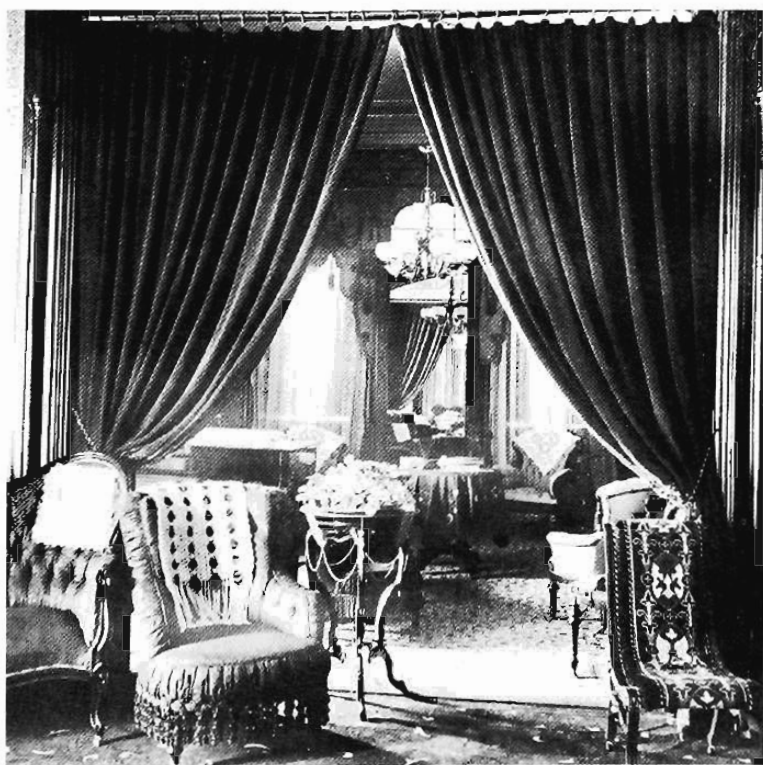
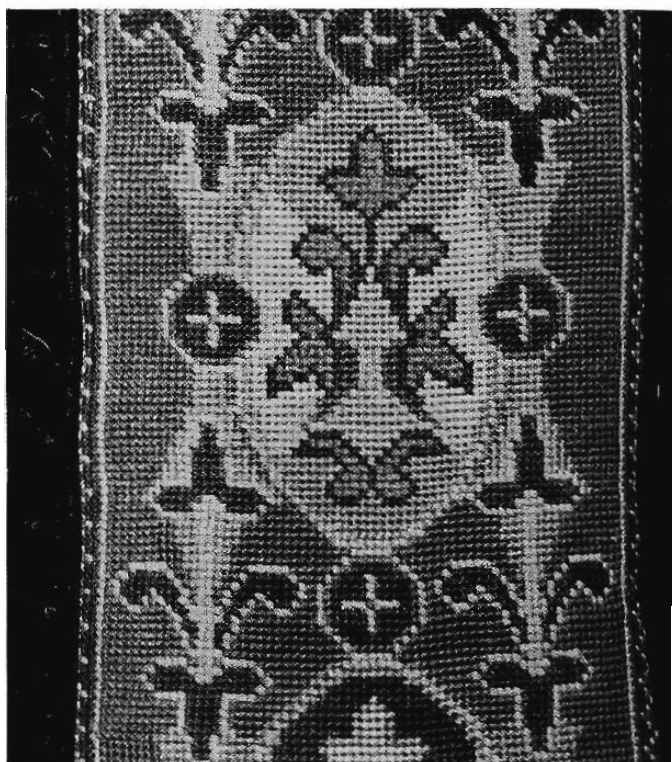
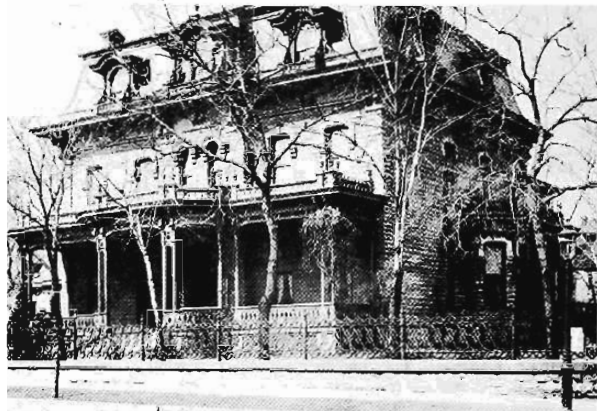
THE RAMSEYS' relationship was evidently not just one of dominant husband and docile wife. It was a warm, loving marriage, apparently, although Alexander — to Anna's annoyance — rarely expressed his affection in words. But one would hesitate to apply the word "equal" to their partnership, even in that era. Anna was submissive, but she had her limits, and when they were reached, she did not hesitate to speak her mind to her husband. During their first winter in Minnesota Territory, a region of great hardship in comparison with the comfortable, established life they had left behind in Pennsylvania, Alexander left Anna and three-year-old Alexander, Jr., alone to make a trip. At the time, Anna was expecting the birth of their second child. This letter, written on Christmas day, 1849, is one of her bitterest and most outspoken. Nevertheless her apparently indomitable wit flashes occasionally:

"My dear but very negligent Husband:

"Oh, Alex, could thee be here and know how we suffer with cold thee would never want to winter again in St. Paul]. I know I will not I nearly froze to death in bed as well as out. Today is Christmas and such a one making a shirt for thee and nothing in the house to eat but strong butter and coffee without cream every potato and vegetable is frozen up. My health is not very good I suffer so much with headaches. I do hope thee will hasten home it is such forlorn living alone in such a horrid place as this. I think it intolerable. I made some mince pies last week but [not] having the proper ingredients they are not as good as they might be still they can be eaten. The sleighing on the river is splendid but so cold that one loses all enjoying or at least I do. Sonny [Alexander, Jr.] enjoys it amazingly if mama will hold him and not let him get cold but unfortunately for him mama is losing her lap. The thermometer stands at 22 degrees below zero and if it gets much colder I shall have to close the house as the four windows and five doors besides innumerable cracks give more air than we really require. . . . Sonny says tell Papa what a good boy I am: But he is not as good as he would have thee think full of mischief he knows nearly all the alphabet and much that he should not. All manner of badness appears to come natural. . . . I tell thee now thee shall never leave me again so long. I will not stay."³³

Nor does Anna apparently limit her complaints to her husband, for her brother-in-law, Henry K. Ramsey, writes to Alexander:

"I am glad to hear you are all well, and hope that a



THE SNUGGERY (upper left) is the name Anna Ramsey gave to this little room she designated as her own in the upstairs hallway overlooking Exchange Street. It gave her a good vantage point from which to see people coming and going on the street and to and from Alexander's office on the second floor. It was here she spent her quiet, private hours, sewing, reading, and writing letters. At upper right is a photograph of the Ramsey House taken in about 1880. At left is the reception room as it looked in 1884. At far right in this picture can be seen one of two chairs Anna bought in Germany and which she embellished with needlepoint while she and Marion were in Dresden. Above is a detailed view of the needlepoint.

few weeks longer will reconcile Anna to her new home, which will make it much pleasanter to all. I had already intended sending her something to read, as I was fully aware that in that wild region she would feel the want of it. I know of nothing that would answer better than Willes's 'Home Journal,' for newspaper reading, which is a most excellent one, and its perusal from beginning to end would well repay the time spent on so doing. I have already sent one and will continue every week."³⁴

Anna apparently did become reconciled to Minnesota, for stay she did. Her letters are filled with frequent expressions of love for Alexander. The unhappy marriage of the Niningers, the Ramseys' in-laws, occasions this outburst:

"I am only too thankful to my Heavenly Father he has given me such a dear darling husband who has always been so kind and good to me and has rendered my life one of happiness: And I trust the rest of life allotted to us may be equally happy: *Now take off thy hat or drink to me with thy favorite drink: Beer.*"³⁵

In another letter from Dresden she tells him a friend had obtained some pigs' feet — apparently a great treat in that city — which she was looking forward to having for breakfast: "how I wish my precious was here I would give thee my share most willingly: but as thee is not I shall do the next best thing: think of thee whilst eating them."³⁶

Her humor again surfaces in the following:

"I so long to have a good look at thee again: And tell thee as I have a thousand times before what a dear darling husband thee is: But with all my professions not one ever passes thy lips: probably being a Senator it would indicate a lack of dignity: never mind thee means well even if thee don't express it."³⁷

Only obliquely, in his own roundabout way, does Alexander admit his own affections and dependencies upon Anna. In a letter to Marion, Anna tells of this incident:

³⁴ Henry K. Ramsey to Alexander, September 11, 1849, roll 4, frame 49.

³⁵ Anna to Alexander, February 6, 1870, roll 19, frame 138.

³⁶ Anna to Alexander, January 23, 1870, roll 19, frame 92.

³⁷ Anna to Alexander, February 13, 1870, roll 19, frame 152.

³⁸ Anna to Marion, October 27, 1875, roll 21, frame 680.

³⁹ Alexander to Marion, May 6, 1876, roll 22, frames 173-174.

⁴⁰ Anna to Alexander, January 30, 1870, roll 19, frame 123.

⁴¹ Alexander to Anna and Marion, May 1, 1870, roll 19, frame 328.

⁴² Alexander to Marion, April 4, 1875, roll 21, frame 407.

⁴³ Anna to Marion, March 15, 1876, roll 22, frame 111.

⁴⁴ Anna to Marion, April 14, 1867, roll 16, frame 395.

⁴⁵ Anna to Marion, March 12, 1876, roll 22, frame 109.

⁴⁶ Alexander to Henry K. Ramsey, June 11, 1847, roll 3, frames 306-307.

"I called to see Mrs. Brud [?] at your Papa's insistence yesterday: he said I could spend an hour there as well as not: so I took him at his word: but stayed 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 attention startled me* as he is not much given to tender ways."³⁸

And Alexander writes to Marion while Anna is in Philadelphia: "Tell your mother that I slept one night in our bed chamber, but by myself it seemed so cold and lonely that I ordered Sophy [*the maid*] to prepare the room over the dining room and I propose to sleep there in the future."³⁹

Writing from Dresden Anna tells Alexander: "the time is not very long before we will be together once more: And what rejoicing there will be *on our part*."⁴⁰

INSIGHT into other nineteenth-century concepts of a woman's role and desirable traits is provided by many of the letters. A woman is submissive, childlike: the male is the protective adult. In one letter Alexander addresses both Anna and Marion as "My dear children."⁴¹ Shortly after Marion and Charles are engaged he writes to his daughter: "I now expect him [*Charles*] to take the best care of you as you are out of my charge and in his."⁴²

And just before Marion's first child is born, Anna writes to her daughter:

"Papa said last night it was all wrong your not coming home to be sick: Here you would have plenty of room and good care: and he also said tell Sis *if she will come* I will come after her: and take the best care of her and land her safely in St. Paul."⁴³

Anna reinforces the idea of higher value placed upon a male child in preference to a female in these letters to Marion. The first was written while her daughter was in school: "I must tell you a great piece of news: Jennie Sherwill's mother has a *baby: and a boy* at that. I don't think the young lady is much pleased: feels it may supplant her in her father's and mother's affections."⁴⁴

The second was typical of the comments she made all during Marion's first pregnancy: "don't expect me before the 10th of May as I will want to stay with you a little while after the arrival of my boy."⁴⁵

The male is strong, assertive, in control; the female is weak, passive, ornamental. She lives for and through others. Alexander illustrates some of these principles in letters to his brother Henry:

"I am sorry to hear you speak of having the 'blues' I believe that was the term. Cast off all such womanly conceits feel yourself a man, resolve to be one — resolve to accomplish something in life and work up to this resolve and like faith it will move mountains out of your way."⁴⁶

Moods which may be allowed a woman have no place in the personality of a man. Male strength and feminine response are made more explicit in another letter written in 1847 during the Mexican War by Alexander to his brother Henry:

"At present we have here on a visit my wife's sister Rebecca and her cousin Yardley, the latter a beautiful little fairy Anna has mentioned you to them frequently and they often wish you were here — but I tell them you must kill a score of Mexicans and be a Colonel at least before you shall think of the girls, then you may make a hit.

"Anna like all women I perceive is much pleased with the flattery you have bestowed upon her in your last letter."⁴⁷

Another subtle aspect of the cult of true womanhood was the emphasis on physical beauty, which assured that its possessor would be cherished and admired while remaining passive and submissive. Anna seems to have put a fairly high value on feminine attractiveness; she herself was described in this newspaper article from the *New York World*, July 30 (no year is given but it probably was 1870): "Mrs. Senator Ramsey, who is a very beautiful woman, drew the critical gaze of no less than Doré himself, in Paris recently."⁴⁸ (Paul Gustave Doré was a celebrated French artist.)

Both Ramseys make allusions to the physical appearance of women from time to time. Alexander, for example, graciously passes along this comment to his wife:

"On Wednesday night I dined at the President's (I've inclosed slip) & had Mrs. [Ulysses S.] Grant by my side, she inquired after thee very kindly and said thee was

respected very much — said how fair looking thee was etc.etc."⁴⁹

A lady was delicate, and Marion's size seems to concern Anna — although photographs of the girl and her actual wedding dress, which is at the Ramsey House, certainly do not give the impression that she was unduly large. In one letter Anna admonishes Marion: "You talk still about growing. I wish you would stop altogether as I think you are large enough for a young lady."⁵⁰

She is even more direct in a letter to Alexander:

"Everybody has taken to skating; but as I don't advocate this amusement do not let Marion take much part in it: I am so afraid she might injure herself in some way: being large and heavy: to fall might cripple her all winter."⁵¹

The sometimes-blunt Anna writes to her husband:

"My best love to Gov. and Mrs. Lane [*Senator and Mrs. Henry M. Lane, from Indiana*]: how I should love to see them: does she look as formerly: for ugly people never change much I therefore imagine her face to look thoroughly good as in days past."⁵²

If she is sometimes vain, she is also wise and recognizes the endurance of their affections despite physical alterations: "The only change rapidly coming over me is

⁴⁷ Alexander to Henry K. Ramsey, June 20, 1847, roll 3, frames 308–309.

⁴⁸ Clipping in files at Alexander Ramsey House.

⁴⁹ Alexander to Anna, February 20, 1870, roll 19, frame 166.

⁵⁰ Anna to Marion, March, 15, 1867, roll 16, frame 360.

⁵¹ Anna to Alexander, February 6, 1870, roll 19, frame 138.

⁵² Anna to Alexander, January 30, 1870, roll 19, frame 121.

MARION RAMSEY (below) and Charles E. Furness (at right) were married in 1875. Marion is shown in the center in her wedding dress.



my hair is growing gray so fast I shall be almost white-haired when thee sees me: but I shall still be thy dear good old wife and shall love thee with all my strength and fervor of my youth: so what matters it if time has whitened my locks: Thee knows they were ever pretty: *and admired by not a few.*"⁵³

IT IS all very well to be pampered and protected, in the proper mold of the true woman, but one must then play the role of the irresponsible (but charming) child. Anna Ramsey was totally dependent upon her husband financially, and she resented it. In no other area was she so obviously helpless, frustrated, angry, and outspoken. In letter after letter written while she and Marion were in Europe, she complains of Alexander's failure to send the monthly agreed-upon sum on time and of not being able to make or keep plans because of uncertainty over money. She tells him — at least indirectly — what a penny pincher he is. She was obviously humiliated by being forced to wait helplessly for him to dole out money to her. She protests being treated like a child. And like a youngster attempting to gain adult responsibilities, she makes repeated attempts to gain some control over her purse by proving her frugality. The matter of money is brought up in a letter to Marion, who is attending boarding school in Philadelphia. Anna is waiting to receive funds from Alexander so she can visit her daughter:

"I hope to hear from Papa the early part of the week: in regard to money which he was to send me: If I don't I shall not be able to come to the city the last of the week. I shall be as much disappointed as yourself should he fail to write but you ought to know him by this time: he is very forgetful about fulfilling his promises and puts me to very great inconvenience but he says it is unavoidable so we must bear with the annoyance."⁵⁴

Nearly two weeks later she writes Marion again: "Papa has not sent me any money. . . . I [have] never known him so negligent about such matters."⁵⁵

In that era, it was rare that woman controlled a penny

⁵³ Anna to Alexander, January 2, 1870, roll 19, frame 45.

⁵⁴ Anna to Marion, October 13, 1867, roll 16, frame 474.

⁵⁵ Anna to Marion, October 25, 1867, roll 16, frame 493.

⁵⁶ Ruth E. Finley, *The Lady of Goden's: Sarah Josepha Hale*, 68 (Philadelphia and London, 1931).

⁵⁷ Anna to Alexander, January 2, 1870, roll 19, frames 44, 45.

⁵⁸ There are frequent references to Mr. and Mrs. O. H. Irish, who were apparently close associates of the Ramseys. Irish was in 1870 named to a consulate post in Dresden apparently with Alexander's aid. See Alexander to Anna, January 23, 1870, roll 19, frame 103, and Anna to Alexander, roll 19, frame 117.

⁵⁹ Anna to Alexander, January 23, 1870, roll 19, frame 96.

⁶⁰ Marion to Alexander, January 23, 1870, roll 19, frame 98.

⁶¹ Anna to Alexander, January 30, 1870, roll 19, frame 119. The Ramsey House at 265 South Exchange St., St. Paul, was begun in 1868 but not completed until 1872.

of money; she had to be content with doles from her "immediate protector."⁵⁶ Anna suggests that Alexander fails to send the money out of negligence rather than outright denial, but the end result is the same — a situation which Anna is not going to accept quietly. She uses every weapon in her arsenal to persuade, wheedle, flatter, anger, jolt, and shame Alexander into action. This letter, written from Dresden, is a good example:

"The gaieties of this city are about commencing and we are invited out a good deal: but shall not go out much more: I find the young people dress a good deal and more than I am willing to dress Marion this winter: she is very good about it and wants to be as economical as possible for the present. But with all the care we spend money but I feel I have not been so reckless with the use of it: And I hope thee thinks so too.

"Sis says Mama you look so poverty-stricken when you go out on a cold day: No muff or heavy clothing to put on: do stay home and wait for milder weather."⁵⁷

In another letter Anna uses the expert witness of another person to present testimony in her favor:

"It is all moonshine about the economy of this city [*Dresden*]: it costs as much as any other place unless you cultivate the strictest economy: And in my position it is hard work as I pass in this community *as a lady of the highest respectability*: I must pay for the honor in a very small way. Mr. Irish⁵⁸ says and he knows all about the financial affairs of our ladies that I am by far the most economical of the whole party: That they spend more in a fortnight than I do in six weeks. 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."⁵⁹

At the end of this letter, Marion appends her own plea:

"You may remember that you promised me \$25. for a muff last fall, but as you did not send it I did without ~~the~~ **muff** it although it has been very cold. I am now anxious for a very beautiful painting on porcelain, which costs \$25. but Mamma is so very stingy that she won't get it. I would be very much obliged if you would send me a draft (in my own name) for the said amount, immediately. I know you won't refuse."⁶⁰

Anna first tries sarcasm and then sweet reasonableness in another letter:

"I don't wish thee to go beyond *thy very limited means* and will be content with whatever thee thinks best. [I] don't want to miss too much [*while in Europe*]: 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 you may need I am unable to say but your good judgment will of course *direct you*. I send you a letter of credit."⁶¹

In letters written in March, 1870, her good humor wears away as she waits helplessly for the tightfisted Alexander to send money. She is trying to make plans to leave Dresden and she bursts out in exasperation:

"I am glad thee is enjoying thyself so much: but remember there are those very far from home entitled to some consideration: Let me ask thee once more read my letters and answer every question put: yes or no. I am sorry times are tight in the vest but that don't make any difference *thus far* to us: as I am sure we are not the cause or likely to be: thee allude to our going . . . to Switzerland or England: unless thee has means to send us it is a great waste of talk and stationery and I am tired of it. From the tone of my letter thee may think I am unamiable: Perhaps it is so: but thee must excuse it as thee can't but admit I am justified in being provoked at thy indecision I know the reason is thee feels thee can't afford to let us travel: and how much better to say so like a man: and not treat me as a child."⁶²

She occasionally refers to the themes of maturity and independence, as these excerpts indicate: "to wait six weeks for an answer [*to questions about travel plans*] and then discover thee pays no attention is to a woman over forty years rather humiliating."⁶³

In another letter she considers drawing funds on his name rather than waiting for him to send a bank draft: "The advantages of drawing on thee would render me a little more independent: and perhaps thee may fear too great a license but I don't think thee can complain of the past and I hope the future may be quite as satisfactory."⁶⁴

And the following poignant excerpt reveals her ambivalence and confusion over the whole concept of a woman, independent and making decisions without the guidance of a male:

"But I have at last realized I am a woman of 43 years and not a child, that I am capable of judging for my self: and feel I have discretion to do what thee will approve of: And if thee would sometimes tell me I do right I should feel better: but thee never says one word for or against."⁶⁵

She apparently abandons such gropings toward independence, and she even denies the anger that so clearly bursts through her words, as in this excerpt regarding continuation of their travel:

"If I have money sent me so much the better: if I don't get any shall go any way and I shall neither beg or borrow: *but I will draw on thee.* . . ."

"I don't propose to be treated so shabby any longer. It is just as easy to be punctual to your promises as not: And I feel it my privilege to speak on this most *trying occasion*: I am not cross *most noble husband* but speak the words of *truth* and *soberness*: as becometh a strong minded woman."⁶⁶

The suggestion of sometimes grateful dependency

can be seen in comments such as this one to Alexander:

"I have grown so gray all owing to my great *responsibilities no doubt* which will very soon devolve upon my dear darling husband: I hope thee may enjoy the additional care and never want us to leave thee again."⁶⁷

Anna is not above using the plight of their daughter to extract some sympathy from her husband. She tells him that a friend of Marion's has been receiving presents from her father "which Sis rather envies: but says never mind her Papa will do the same thing when she comes home: she is very sure."⁶⁸

She continues in the same vein later in this letter: "Another winter will soon be here when thee will have a great duty to perform: That of bringing out a young daughter: And I hope on this thee will take much pleasure in: as she is mighty *clever* as the *English* say and has made good use of her time [*in Dresden*]: she therefore deserves a brilliant *debut*: and thee will do it so cheerfully."⁶⁹

And in another exasperated letter she upbraids him for the fact that Marion looks "quite seedy," for ignoring their daughter's request for \$25: "thee never paid any attention to it: which nearly broke her heart" — and ends with this comment: "And I think myself a man with an *only* child might show her a little generosity — once in a while. But wait until she is near thee perhaps thy heart will relent."⁷⁰ In his defense, Alexander wrote back on March 27, the date on which he said he had received their letters of both March 2 and 6: "both came to hand this evening: They are both very good specimens of certain⁷¹ lectures and that I fully submit I do not desire.

"I have regularly sent all that it was among us understood I was to send viz \$250 in gold monthly: For February and March both sums have been sent. I further said that if from any accident more was wanted thee should draw on me.

"I am a little cramped mainly from a desire to keep the old estate which I have been nursing [?] for more than twenty years together. It will be a beautiful thing

⁶² Anna to Alexander, March 2, 1870, roll 19, frame 189.

⁶³ Anna to Alexander, January 20, 1870, roll 19, frame 122.

⁶⁴ Anna to Alexander, March 13, 1870, roll 19, frame 211.

⁶⁵ Anna to Alexander, March 20, 1870, roll 19, frame 218.

⁶⁶ Anna to Alexander, March 6, 1870, roll 19, frames 194, 195.

⁶⁷ Anna to Alexander, May 1, 1870, roll 19, frame 332.

⁶⁸ Anna to Alexander, March 6, 1870, roll 19, frame 193.

⁶⁹ Anna to Alexander, March 6, 1870, roll 19, frame 195.

⁷⁰ Anna to Alexander, March 27, 1870, roll 19, frames 233, 231. This is a good example of her "crosshatched" letters. Rather than begin a fresh page as she neared the end of her letter, she often turned the paper sideways and wrote vertically across earlier writing — perhaps an economy for her but a great annoyance for the reader.

⁷¹ The word may be Curtin. There are frequent references to a Mr. and Mrs. Curtin, and this could be a private joke.

and I am willing to make some sacrifices to keep it. Before thee and I are five years older it will be worth \$500,000 and I wish to hold it: the girl [Marion] may never appreciate it, but still it will be there. In 10 years it will double. Thee may live that time and will have the superintendence of it, I will scarcely be around[.]”⁷²

To which Anna retorts:

“If thee proposes to retire in ten years, I propose to do the same: we may therefore take a small slice now and enjoy it: and *as we* made it together who can blame us for wanting to use a little of it.”⁷³

Anna and Marion did continue to travel around Europe. While she had told her husband she would “be content with whatever he thought best,” she apparently made the statement out of convention, for she intended to be heard. The concept of submissive wife was overridden by her needs, her good sense, and her strong personal qualities.

THE SUBMISSIVENESS and patience valued in the cult of true womanhood placed impossible demands upon the woman with real responsibilities as wife and mother, as at least one feminist author points out.⁷⁴ This was partly true for Anna Ramsey, although her family was not large (unhappily, only Marion survived of the three children Anna bore), and she had a staff to help run the house, nevertheless Anna was often left to cope by herself while Alexander was off on government business. Both the Ramseys believed a woman's place was in the home. In an 1846 letter to his brother-in-law, William J. Jenks, from Washington, D.C., Alexander writes:

“Our interesting little family are getting along as smoothly as could be desired — we have pretty comfortable quarters, true we pay well for them — our own dear selves could be nothing less than happy in this our honey-moon season. In my wife I am really happy. She has many very good qualities that young ladies situated like herself often lack, chief among these, she is domestic and charming.”⁷⁵

The “young ladies like herself” apparently refers to the fact that Anna was the daughter of another Pennsylvania congressman and grew up in an economically comfortable situation, which, he seems to imply, might have rendered her helpless in the domestic area.

Alexander, interestingly, is not as adamant about

“woman's place” as Anna is. The two took issue over the career of their niece, Pauline Nininger, daughter of Alexander's sister Catherine and her husband John Nininger. Pauline did in fact become an opera singer, taking the name Pauline Lucca. Alexander comments on the business in a letter to Anna:

“[Pauline] can at once enter upon engagements that will yield her \$20,000 per annum. Randy Nininger⁷⁶ has much of the commercial cast of character, of his father and he thinks her singing for money is a very proper thing and indeed I see nothing improper in it — but won't Kate flourish on \$20,000 a year!”⁷⁷

If he sees nothing wrong with it, Anna certainly does:

“I am disgusted with the entire Nininger family: to think with their means they are bent upon forcing Pauline on the stage. John N[ininger] has one daughter to support and a wife: and has a valuable plantation [in Alabama] to do it with I should think he would have too much pride to send her into the world to make money: The fact is Kate is looking forward to having money to spend: and for *her* gratification she forces their child to sing in public: if they do insist upon doing it I am done with them: as I said before not that it disparages Pauline: but I blush for their parents.”⁷⁸

She expresses a similar thought in telling her husband about a young woman from New York who presented parlor recitations from Shakespeare at an evening's entertainment in Dresden: “although pleased [with the performance] I felt there was much to regret in this talent so rapidly developing itself: as nothing but the stage will ever satisfy her ambition.”⁷⁹

In many ways, Anna seems to have more traditional, conservative views than does her husband. For example, she writes to her daughter — in what may be an attempt to offer advice obliquely — that an acquaintance “is sending little Nellie to Kindergarten school down town somewhere [.] I think it the most silly thing I ever heard of: but she is very weak about some things, and wonderfully good in others.”⁸⁰

IF THERE was any thought on the part of either of the Ramseys that the education of Marion would be put to use beyond the parlor or other traditional female spheres, this author found no hint of it. On the contrary, Anna thinks a career for a woman a highly improper course. A well-trained mind was an end in itself. An educated and cultivated woman (provided she did not become too uppity) was a social asset to a husband.

It is interesting to note that Alexander took on the primary function of instructing Marion in academic matters, just as it was Anna's duty to instruct in matters of morals, modesty, and deportment. Busy as he was, Ramsey took time from his senatorial duties to write many letters to his daughter when she began at Miss Eliza Casey's school in Philadelphia. In 1864 he wrote to her:

⁷² Alexander to Anna, March 27, 1870, roll 19, frames 234–235.

⁷³ Anna to Alexander, April 24, 1870, roll 19, frame 294.

⁷⁴ Rossi, *Feminist Papers*, 252.

⁷⁵ Alexander to William J. Jenks, February 4, 1845, roll 3, frame 171.

⁷⁶ Alexander Ramsey Nininger, Pauline's brother?

⁷⁷ Alexander to Anna, January 9, 1870, roll 19, frame 63.

⁷⁸ Anna to Alexander, January 30, 1870, roll 19, frame 120.

⁷⁹ Anna to Alexander, January 23, 1870, roll 19, frame 93.

⁸⁰ Anna to Marion, September 15, 1880, roll 25, frame 570.

"You can not believe how glad I was that you had really entered upon your German studies again; you had made so much progress in that language, that most persons consider so difficult that I was anxious you should not lose what you had gained; but I am satisfied that you are at a good school and have excellent teachers and that my sweet little girl will not long be behind any of the girls of the school."⁸¹

In other letters Alexander continues to encourage his daughter: "I am glad you have written and trust that from time to time you will continue to do so as there is no greater accomplishment a young lady can possess than that of being able to write a good letter and that like every other proficiency is only to be attained by frequent practice."⁸²

He often included descriptions of his daily experiences and comments he apparently thought would be of an educational nature. He tells her of an 1865 visit to Richmond, describing the destruction of the city and the prisons, which formerly had held Northern soldiers and were then filled with Confederate prisoners.⁸³

In another he sends a little analysis of English history with the recommendation that she paste it in some book for convenient reference. He continues in this letter: "I was much pleased with your German letter - - it marks great improvement. I hope you cultivate the practice upon every convenient occasion of speaking the language."

"Your English letter shows a very marked improvement."

"Do you ever observe the difference in style in all kinds of writing? The charm of letter writing is that the style should be natural and easy - not stilted and pretentious."⁸⁴

He gives a brief academic lecture in a later letter: "I was much pleased with your letter just received especially as you informed me that you were having a higher appreciation of Arithmetic in itself, but its great importance is in training and regulating the mind. Logic, which you know is studied by the more advanced branches in the schools, is but the body of rules for the training of the various faculties of the mind: Arithmetic and all the branches of Mathematics is one means prescribed. A great mass of information without knowing how to use it, is undesirable; but if the mind is nicely cultivated the more you have the better off you are."⁸⁵

Anna, too, writes words of advice and encouragement to Marion:

"I think my little girl is having a fine time; which I am very glad of provided she does not fail to study well in the mean time."⁸⁶

Anna's letters contain more of clothes, parties, and the social aspects of life at boarding school than her husband's, but she does not fail to lecture Marion about her intellectual development:

"It is the day of the party. I would love to see how you all look; but you must write me all about it; and tell me what you wore and who helped to dress you."

"We talk about you every day: we want you to grow up [to be] a very nice intelligent woman."⁸⁷

And Marion, in response, gives reports of her progress and of her various activities:

"Yesterday I joined the Bible class at Holy Trinity. I think I shall like it very much we have a lovely teacher. I have just taken a new piece [of music] it is very pretty and is called Sans Souci."

"Miss Gardiner has very kindly offered to teach me to sew and of course I accepted. You don't know how much I practice [the piano], sometimes two hours together, isn't that wonderful?"⁸⁸

Most of the passages in these letters support woman's traditional roles and spheres. More than once Alexander remarks upon Anna's devotion as mother and as grandmother. He writes Marion that Anna - just before the birth of the first grandchild - has been happily sewing baby clothes, and then adds: "She is a wonderful woman and I really believe you are never out of her mind day or night."⁸⁹

On the death of Marion's second child, Alexander attempts to comfort Marion with these words about the death of his son. He tells of his own emotions, but the focus is really on Anna: "Your mother when younger than you are, had to suffer the loss of her first born child then grown to be four and a half years old: how vividly the terrible memory of that occasion, even after thirty years of time now comes back to me."⁹⁰

But for an affluent woman such as Mrs. Ramsey, domestic chores, childbearing, and child rearing no longer took up all her time and energy. The spheres in which she could extend her activities were circumscribed to religious and charitable works, morally uplifting or educational activities, social affairs, and handiwork. In addition to the larger, more eventful social occasions, there were the day-to-day social calls

⁸¹ Alexander to Marion, March 2, 1864, roll 15, frame 13.

⁸² Alexander to Marion, October 31, 1864, roll 15, frame 273.

⁸³ Alexander to Marion, April 21, 1865, roll 15, frames 589-590.

⁸⁴ Alexander to Marion, May 18, 1866, roll 16, frames 109-110.

⁸⁵ Alexander to Marion, June 10, 1867, roll 16, frames 442-443.

⁸⁶ Anna to Marion, March 4, 1864, roll 15, frame 17.

⁸⁷ Anna to Marion, March 9, 1864, roll 15, frames 27, 28.

⁸⁸ Marion to Anna and Alexander, March 4, 1867, roll 16, frame 349.

⁸⁹ Alexander to Marion, March 26, 1876, roll 22, frame 126.

⁹⁰ Alexander to Marion, September 30, 1880, roll 25, frame 582.

women of Mrs. Ramsey's class were expected to pay. Her daughter must attend to the same obligations, as this letter to twelve-year-old Marion indicates: "I hope you have called upon Mrs. Longstreth[?] since your visit there: as your little social duties must not be overlooked: even if you are a school girl."⁹¹

Several references are made to spending entire days paying or receiving calls: "Yesterday I was out making calls all day."⁹²

In another she writes: "My arrival [*home*] has been announced and all yesterday was engaged in receiving friends."⁹³

The suggestion of duty is clear: "Mrs. Lane and myself have been out calling together this winter. Yesterday we made a number of visits: simply because we felt we must."⁹⁴

Since the Ramseys were in Washington during the Civil War, Anna had opportunities to engage in patriotic and morally uplifting activities. In her letters to the schoolgirl Marion, Anna's tone of moral instruction is quite evident. In 1864 she tells Marion: "I think I shall go to the Hospital this morning as there is much we can do for the poor soldiers: give them water, bathe their wounds: and fan them."⁹⁵

In another letter she says: "The ladies here are busy forming a society called the *Ladies Union Covenant*. The ladies pledge themselves not to wear any goods of foreign make until the war is over so we can none of us wear silk dresses unless they are made in this country: — that is the material is manufactured here."⁹⁶

And there were "educational outings," usually made in the company of friends or Alexander: "We passed the old Capitol Prison: and gazing through the windows were *rebels* without number waving their handkerchiefs and laughing at a merry rate at the passers by. Judging from what I saw: I think they have kinder treatment than our poor prisoners get at Richmond."⁹⁷

In 1864 the Ramseys went to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where Alexander was involved in the selection of a monument to the soldiers who fell during the July, 1863, battle. Anna describes the scene to her daughter: "I wandered over the battle fields and found some minnie balls and buck shot which I am going to treasure. The day may come when they will be more valued than now."⁹⁸



ANNA in later years

Touring Washington with one of her daughter's teachers, Mrs. Ramsey writes Marion that she will take her to visit "Freedmen's Village," which she describes as inhabited by "about six thousand colored people: These persons are being taught to read and write -- also learn trades of different kinds a very interesting place I hear."⁹⁹

On another tour she writes: "I went to the Capitol, met your Papa: And he kindly took us through many of the committee rooms which I had never seen before."¹⁰⁰

And in another longer excerpt she describes a ceremony in which Alexander Ramsey took part and she is a passive and interested observer. This was as much participation as she or any other woman (with some rare and remarkable exceptions, perhaps) would have experienced. Nor did this author find any suggestion that this level of participation was ever questioned by the Ramseys: "I have just returned from the Capitol where I witnessed the going out of the thirty-ninth and the in coming of the fortieth Congress. It was a most impressive scene Senator [Lafayette S.] Foster delivered his farewell address to the Senate: and upon his leaving the chair Senator [Benjamin F.] Wade took his seat: and with but few words (which is characteristic of the man) proceeded to business. In a short time the Senate went into

⁹¹ Anna to Marion, April 14, 1867, roll 16, frame 396.

⁹² Anna to Marion, February 12, 1865, roll 15, frame 175.

⁹³ Anna to Marion, April 2, 1867, roll 16, frame 387.

⁹⁴ Anna to Marion, January 18, 1867, roll 16, frame 257.

⁹⁵ Anna to Marion, May 30, 1864, roll 15, frame 173.

⁹⁶ Anna to Marion, May 3, 1864, roll 15, frame 88.

⁹⁷ Anna to Marion, June 8, 1864, roll 15, frame 186.

⁹⁸ Anna to Marion, June 12, 1864, roll 15, frame 188.

⁹⁹ Anna to Marion, March 13, 1864, roll 15, frame 35.

¹⁰⁰ Anna to Marion, March 16, 1864, roll 15, frame 42.



ONE OF Alexander's granddaughters, Laura Furness, reads to the aging politician on the porch of the Ramsey House in this photograph taken in 1901 by Edward A. Bromley.

executive session: which turned us all out. We then fled to the house where we witnessed the going out and coming in of the fortieth Congress of the house. This scene was to me more interesting than the first: as the body is larger of course there is more excitement: more talking and fun interspersed. Mr. [Schuyler] Colfax was elected speaker and after being escorted to the chair made a very fine address. I waited to see all: and at 2 P.M. came home to write you a letter."¹⁰¹

Anna Ramsey, along with other women of her class, took part in various cultural events and helped maintain a level of "civilization," even, as the eulogies noted earlier, against great odds in frontier Minnesota. Anna was dutiful, but apparently privately as independent-minded about culture as she was about her religious beliefs. In 1864 she writes Marion: "Did I tell you I went to the Opera last week with Mrs. Lincoln I enjoyed it very much and had you been here might have taken you with me."¹⁰²

From Dresden she writes her husband: "On Monday we attended a concert given by [Carl] Tousig a celebrated pianist and to be fashionable must say I was enchanted: but to be truthful would much prefer to hear Sis: who I assure thee plays beautifully: and is going to sing very well."¹⁰³

Later, back in St. Paul, she writes her daughter in Philadelphia: "Tomorrow night Mr. Breed lectures upon Florence: a place he has never seen: but said to have delivered a lecture upon this subject before the University: and that it was a masterly effort: So I shall go to hear him: expecting him to interest me thoroughly: as a general thing I hate lectures: They are so stupid and dull."¹⁰⁴

If the lady of leisure still had some time on her hands, she could always fill them — and any unadorned surfaces

in her home — with handiwork. There are several articles and furnishings in the Ramsey House that are the work of Anna; perhaps it was an interest she developed more enthusiastically after she wrote this to her sister Hannah Jenks Crouch in 1870: "Marion is studying her german and music and I deep in embroidery: expect to be able to furnish my home quite well with my own handiwork: This is a new thing with me but strange to say I find great enjoying in it."¹⁰⁵

JUST BEFORE she left for Philadelphia for a visit in 1875 Anna wrote to Marion: "[Alexander] has never known what it is to manage the house without some responsible person in it: and imagines it will not run without me."¹⁰⁶

Perhaps the house could run for a short time without a "responsible person," but it is doubtful. After Anna's death, Marion Ramsey Furness (Charles was taken ill in 1882 and never again lived with his family) came to live in the house and take care of her father. Anna is undoubtedly far too modest in her assessment of her role. While shrewd, able, and aggressive husbands, fathers, and sons were establishing oil companies, founding universities, putting up skyscrapers, laying down railroad tracks, running the government, and amassing fortunes, these women quietly smoothed their way by providing comfortable, well-run homes, bearing and raising their children, and arranging a soothing background of social, cultural, and religious amenities.

Anna Ramsey did all those things. She was a woman of her class and time, and she did not seriously upset the concept of the "true woman" either in public or in private. In principle, and by and large in actuality, she upheld the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. But principle occasionally collided with hard reality. Anna Ramsey (probably like most women of that era who kept their sensibility and sanity — and many did not) occasionally tried to fight free of the smothering protection, attempted to gain a little independence, sought to make her voice and will heard. Through the imposed stereotype of behavior of the "true woman," Anna Ramsey's intelligence, compassion, strong will, and humor often managed to surface.

¹⁰¹ Anna to Marion, March 4, 1867, roll 16, frame 342.

¹⁰² Anna to Marion, June 8, 1864, roll 15, frame 187.

¹⁰³ Anna to Alexander, January 23, 1870, roll 19, frame 93.

¹⁰⁴ Anna to Marion, January 12, 1876, roll 22, frame 22.

¹⁰⁵ Anna to Hannah Jenks Crouch, January 5, 1870, roll 19, frame 47.

¹⁰⁶ Anna to Marion, March 20, 1876, roll 22, frame 117.

PHOTOGRAPHS of the snuggery and of the chair detail on p. 264 are by Bruce M. White. All other pictures are in the Minnesota Historical Society collections.



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