

## Let Us Hasten to Redeem the Time that is Lost:" J. G. M. Ramsey's Role in the Preservation and Promotion of Tennessee History

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### **Abstract:**

The son of an early East Tennessee settler, James Gettys McGready Ramsey saw it as his patriotic and filial duty to collect, preserve, and disseminate his knowledge and grand vision of the pioneer generation to scholars, whom he believed had overlooked the region's important contributions to American history. Although an 1863 fire destroyed his collections, Ramsey's work with state and local historical societies, his correspondence with historian and fellow collector Lyman C. Draper, and the 1853 publication of his *Annals of Tennessee* continue to influence the compilation and interpretation of the region's historical record.

**Keywords:** archives | Tennessee history | James Gettys McGready Ramsey | preservation | librarianship | cultural history

### **Article:**

On February 10, 1842, many of the most influential men and women in Knoxville, Tennessee, gathered for a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the city's settlement. Playing a major role in the ceremony was the East Tennessee Historical and Antiquarian Society. After toasting the society ("formed for the purpose of collecting and preserving facts connected with the settlement and early history of Tennessee, may its success be commensurate with the object"), the organization's president, William Reese, rose to address the crowd. (1) In a few words Reese confessed that he was not "a working president" and that the labor and heart of the society was embodied in Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey, the organization's perpetual secretary (figure 1). Reese called Ramsey "able, industrious, and indefatigable" and added that "if the European Napoleon could claim to be France, our secretary could with more justice and trust claim to be the Society." (2)

Ramsey saw his work with the society as an extension of one of the most important missions in his life--the collection, preservation, and promotion of the history of Tennessee, particularly that of the pioneer era. From the earliest years of his life, the seed of historical consciousness for his home region flourished in Ramsey. Through his involvement in the East Tennessee Historical

and Antiquarian Society and later in the Tennessee Historical Society as well as in his numerous publications and correspondence with other scholars, Ramsey perpetuated his notion of the importance of Tennessee and its citizens in the past, present, and future development of the United States.

**[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]**

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Ramsey described himself as "one of the first born of the sons of the State of Tennessee" and "the connecting link between the pioneers and their successors in the Volunteer State," and his interest in the history of Tennessee was deeply rooted in the pride he took in his ancestors and their roles during the region's earliest years. (3) Ramsey's father, Francis Alexander Ramsey, held military, diplomatic, and civil positions with the government of the former state of Franklin as well as with the newly created state of Tennessee. (4) His mother, Peggy Alexander, was the eldest daughter of John McKnitt Alexander, the secretary of the Mecklenburg (North Carolina) Convention. (5)

Born March 25, 1797, at the family's home six miles east of Knoxville, young J.G.M. received an education unavailable to most boys in East Tennessee. (6) In addition to early tutoring from the young men who worked as clerks in his father's law office, Ramsey and his brother William attended the Ebenezer Academy and Washington College, both prominent Presbyterian institutions in East Tennessee. (7) After earning his bachelor of arts degree in March 1816, Ramsey continued his education in Knoxville, studying medicine under the supervision of physician Joseph Strong. After strong encouragement from both Strong and his father, Ramsey abandoned his initial plan to relocate to West Tennessee and on August 1, 1820, opened his own practice on Knoxville's Main Street.

Ramsey followed his father by becoming active in regional civic affairs, entering public service with his election as county registrar in July 1817. Ramsey saw community involvement as an extension of his pride in East Tennessee. He admired men whom he saw as "full of enterprise and public spirit, & much in the spirit of internal improvements." (8) In letters to his wife Margaret during a trip to Charleston, South Carolina, Ramsey lamented their separation but recognized that "duty to myself, to my family & to my country requires the sacrifice." (9) He considered fighting for Tennessee to be a patriotic duty, noting that "next to my family is my country-- & my services are at her bidding." (10) Ramsey's advocacy for the East Tennessee

region included promotional trips to other major cities as well as articles in local and national newspapers promoting the area.

Ramsey's interest in the internal improvement of the region focused on three key areas: transportation, banking, and education. He lobbied prominent citizens of East Tennessee and other southern states in his attempts to bring railroad access to the region, arguing that "East Tennessee was gradually becoming less prosperous, [and] that this lack of prosperity was attributable to the absence of transportation facilities that would enable East Tennesseans to get their produce to markets at a reasonable expense." (11) In the financial sector Ramsey was appointed to the board of numerous local banks, including the Knoxville branch of the Second Bank of the State of Tennessee and the Bank of East Tennessee. Additionally, his civic involvement extended to education. In 1822, at age twenty-five, Ramsey was elected to replace his father on the board of trustees of East Tennessee College. Five years later Ramsey became chief organizer and secretary of the board of trustees for Mecklenburg Academy after donating land and "more than half the money necessary for a frame building." (12)

#### Mining "the gems of the past"

Ramsey's interest in the intellectual improvement of the region extended to the establishment of an institution to perpetuate the telling of its "unique, peculiar & anomalous" history. (13) He saw his home state as ordained "to assume an elevated rank among her sister republics." Because of its burgeoning population, expansive territory, and geographic centrality, Tennessee, in Ramsey's eyes, seemed destined to "exert a weighty influence upon co-terminus States and upon the country at large." As such, he believed that "her history is becoming ... every day more interesting and important." (14)

In an effort to promote the history of the region Ramsey wrote numerous articles and gave a number of lectures in Knoxville and other locales. He explored topics ranging from local geographic name origins to the historical accuracy of the name "Franklin" (as opposed to "Frankland") for the "lost state" to biographies of prominent East Tennesseans. By 1850 Ramsey was acknowledged as one of the region's leading historians, earning recognition from historical societies in Georgia, Maryland, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.

To promote his research interests the doctor ultimately aspired to compile the documentation for a comprehensive account of the early years of Tennessee. Obsessed with the notion that his home state's early history had not been granted proper attention by other historians or by its citizens, Ramsey began collecting the papers of prominent Tennesseans. He was particularly concerned with the documentation of the history of East Tennessee. While praising Judge John Haywood's 1823 books on the state, Ramsey noted that "much of the field [of Tennessee history] lies unoccupied--unexplored and unknown. This is especially true as to the Eastern extremity of the State." (15) He hoped to gather records of these people and events in a publication that "might add to his own pleasure, to the historical literature of the day, and thus do a service, at least to the people of his own State." (16)

The first step for Ramsey in the development of a proper history of the region was the establishment of an organization whose sole function would be the acquisition and preservation of these records. Within Tennessee no organization of this kind existed at the time. While Haywood had established the Tennessee Antiquarian Society in Nashville in 1820, the organization held its final meeting less than two years later. In 1834, with the help of like-minded citizens of Knoxville, Ramsey formed the East Tennessee Historical and Antiquarian Society. Although William Reese, chancellor of the eastern division of Tennessee and state Supreme Court justice, was elected president, Ramsey was given the title of perpetual corresponding secretary and served as the primary administrator and correspondent for the organization. His work in this position ranged from answering reference questions from historians from across the United States to gathering records that would support the society's collecting mission to serving as the primary caretaker for the materials themselves. As president Reese accepted the role largely of a figurehead.

The purpose of the society was to collect materials and publish works related to the settlement and early history of Tennessee. In his May 5, 1834, address at the society's first meeting Ramsey urged the membership to "hasten to redeem the time that is lost," adding that "from every citizen we expect a whisper of encouragement. From the intelligent and enlightened we allow ourselves to hope essential and efficient assistance. Upon our members in the different counties we depend for prompt and active co-operation. We appeal to every lover of learning and science. We appeal to the gratitude of every son of Tennessee--We appeal to his state preferences and to his ancestral pride." (17) He saw the mission of the society to be a service for the public--a service that the public could not afford to ignore.

With this mindset Ramsey and other members of the society set out to collect the records of Tennessee, particularly those of its outstanding pioneers. The papers of these men came to the

society in different manners. Ramsey held the journals and papers of his father, Francis Ramsey, who, as an active participant in the Franklin and early state governments, played an integral role in the region's development. By the early 1850s he had also received from Col. G. W. Sevier the papers of his father, John Sevier, a Revolutionary War hero, leader of the state of Franklin, and Tennessee's first governor. Papers of other early Tennessee pioneers, including Governors William and Willie Blount, Col. Alexander Outlaw, and Capt. Isaac Shelby, came into the society's holdings. As in the case of the Sevier papers, most of these documents were acquired from the pioneers' descendants, many of whom found material stored in antique trunks in attics or outbuildings.

To supplement these papers Ramsey added transcriptions of documents found on visits to repositories throughout the southeast, including archives in Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia. This material provided further information on Daniel Boone, Ben Cleveland, James Robertson, William Campbell, Governor Richard Caswell, and others. Additionally, William Ramsey's position as secretary of state for Tennessee provided his brother with access to the state archives in Nashville. There he copied the "the messages of the governors, the Senate and House journals, and other necessary materials." (18)

To create an encompassing history of Tennessee Ramsey enhanced the written records with interviews and reminiscences of participants or those who had known them. He corresponded with Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, David Campbell, and numerous other "elite and distinguished" men involved in the early development of the region. (19) He asked for their papers, and when these could not be produced he asked for their recollections, questioning each man for information on his personal and civic life that could prove useful in building a base of historical knowledge.

In addition to corresponding with the more prominent participants Ramsey sought the reminiscences of the soldier-citizens living in East Tennessee. Ramsey noted in a letter to fellow historian and collector Lyman C. Draper that "on the fourth of March and seventh of September of every year I dropped all other business to linger around the pension office for several days, take the old and feeble Revolutionary soldiers home with me, take down their services and their recollections of the past in my note book." (20) Ramsey believed wholeheartedly in oral history as a method of recording undocumented segments of history, arguing that "some of the most brilliant incidents in [Tennessee's] early history are unrecorded and if not soon rescued from oblivion will be lost to the present generation--to posterity and the world." (21) Through oral history and the publication of works drawing from these interviews and documents, Ramsey hoped to salvage these memories and provide an encompassing history of early Tennessee.

Ramsey's personal notes and copies of documents joined with the personal papers he collected to form the foundation of the East Tennessee Historical and Antiquarian Society's holdings. The doctor proudly described the collection as "the largest Historical Library in the West, probably, and certainly in Tennessee." (22) As the organization's perpetual secretary Ramsey served as the primary reference contact for researchers wishing to view or use these materials. In response to an 1842 question from Draper, Knoxville Congressman Joseph L. Williams wrote that he knew "of no man living who possesses in an equal degree with [Ramsey], the very information you seek." (23) On a collecting trip through East Tennessee two years later Draper visited Ramsey's home. The two began a correspondence that, although interrupted by the Civil War and Reconstruction, lasted through 1883. In these letters Ramsey answered numerous questions regarding East Tennessee history. He recounted narratives of the Watauga Convention, the Battle of King's Mountain, the state of Franklin, and other important events and people in Tennessee's early development. Additionally, he provided Draper (as well as other historians) with copies of numerous documents in his possession.

In addition to fielding questions Ramsey solicited visits by historians whom he believed could make use of the materials. In 1858 he attempted to persuade George Bancroft to visit Mecklenburg, his home located just outside of Knoxville at the fork of the Holston and French Broad rivers. With Mecklenburg serving as the storage location for the society's vast holdings, Ramsey promised to show the historian "a vast number of written & private dispatches--papers & letters which I know you will examine with great interest." (24)

The majority of Ramsey's use of the society's collections, however, came in conjunction with the development of his book *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century*. In the early 1840s Ramsey set out to mine "the gems of the past in our state which should sparkle & illuminate the pages of biography & illustrate the virtues of our ancestors." (25) He hoped "to get what was early, obscure, and unknown, into a less perishable--much of it old and almost illegible letters and documents--form before I should die." (26)

In an October 26, 1846 letter to Draper, Ramsey noted that he possessed "nearly all the materials necessary for the [first volume of] *History of Tennessee*." He regretted, however, that "the mass is so large, and the labor of arranging it for publication so Herculean that I advance so slow in its performance as to lead me sometimes to despair of accomplishing it till the shade of the evening of life shall darken around me." (27) So overwhelmed with the task before him, Ramsey turned

down a presidential appointment to serve in Mexico; he feared that time away from the country would cause him to "drop my pen for a few years at least, and perhaps forever." (28)

Although it took nearly a decade to produce the epic tome, Ramsey completed *The Annals* in the early 1850s. After contracting with printers J. Russell of Charleston and J. P. Lippincott of Philadelphia, five thousand copies were printed in 1853 at the cost of \$5,000. Ramsey personally underwrote the publication. (29) Dedicated "to the surviving pioneers of Tennessee, whose enterprise subdued her domain and whose valour defended it," *The Annals* received positive reviews from the majority of newspapers. (30) In Knoxville, as well as in Charleston, Nashville, Asheville, Memphis, Charlotte, Washington, and New York, Ramsey garnered praise. One editor commented that Ramsey's work "was at once pronounced by the leading reviewers in Great Britain and America as a masterpiece of local history." (31) The majority of negative reviews came from Middle Tennessee, where many of the region's historians saw it as a work focused too much on the contributions of the men from the eastern portion of the state. Both William B. Campbell, former congressman and Tennessee governor from 1851 to 1853, and A. W. Putnam, author of *History of Middle Tennessee* (1859) and leader of the Historical Society of Tennessee in Nashville, "assured Draper that the field of Tennessee history had not been closed by Dr. Ramsey's work." (32)

Despite the chilly reception in Middle Tennessee, Ramsey's *Annals* found success in the marketplace. In an April 14, 1853 letter to Draper, Ramsey noted that "the first three boxes are nearly sold. Two more arrived today, and others are on their way to Nashville and other points." This was despite the fact that "book agents and booksellers have very high commissions for setting--such is the invariable custom of the trade--from twenty-five to fifty per cent." (33) In 1860 Lippincott published a second edition.

"The torch of the incendiary"

Ramsey continued collecting for the society after the publication of his *Annals* in 1853. In September of that year he provided Draper with a lengthy list of historical figures whose descendants he had contacted or was attempting to contact. In a May 20, 1857, letter to historian Bancroft he noted that he continued writing and collecting every day. (34) Ramsey's writing at this point turned from the pioneer years to a second volume of his *Annals*, one that would cover the state's history from 1800 through the close of fellow Tennessean James K. Polk's presidency in 1849.

Ramsey's writing and collecting ended abruptly, a casualty of the Civil War. An adamant secessionist in predominantly Unionist East Tennessee, Ramsey temporarily fled Knoxville to Abingdon, Virginia, in June 1863, when a Union force made a foray into the Knoxville region. Hardly had he returned two months later when word arrived of another and larger invasion. Ramsey hastily determined to join the Confederate retreat to Atlanta.

Prior to leaving Knoxville Ramsey made every effort to assure the safety of his papers and the society's collections. He packed everything in leather trunks, stored them in the counting room of Mecklenburg, and paid a hasty visit to J. L. Moses, "an honorary member of the ETH & A Society, fond of letters, and I believed a trustworthy friend." (35) He asked Moses to "take charge" and "to take care of and preserve" the precious trunks. On his way out of Knoxville, through a "Mr. Corley" who was traveling back into town, Ramsey sent "a renewal of my request to J. L. Moses, Esquire about preserving my manuscripts." (36) With that final expression of concern Ramsey left behind his collections, his family, and his beloved East Tennessee.

On September 1, 1863, Union troops arrived in the city of Knoxville. and a Michigan private asked for directions to the doctor's home. If Moses tried to intervene, he failed, and soon afterward "the torch of the incendiary was applied to the beautiful old family mansion." After "indignation was publicly expressed upon the streets and in more private circles," the soldier was identified, drummed out of service, and sent back to Michigan. (37) Ramsey considered this punishment too lenient. He noted that "everyone who witnessed the infliction of this idle military ceremonial laughed at the inadequacy of the punishment to the enormity of the crime.... The burning of a Southern patriot's house and making a gentleman's family homeless and houseless was rewarded by allowing the convict quietly to retire in private life with all his laurels fresh upon his brow." (38)

All of the historical materials stored at Mecklenburg--both Ramsey's and those of the society--were destroyed. Ramsey learned of the conflagration from a fellow East Tennessean relocated with the Confederate army in Marietta, Georgia. "I thought little of the loss of property," declared Ramsey. "But the apprehension that my library, my manuscripts, my unpublished second volume of the History of Tennessee, my correspondence, my museum etc. were also taken or burned did give me a bitter pang--none could be more bitter. Property I could replace or live without. But this loss was irreparable." (39)



Ramsey never fully recovered from the destruction of the historical materials, as his later correspondence with Draper demonstrates. On October 3, 1872, he wrote, "Of (my) East Tennessee Historical and Antiquarian Society of which I was perpetual corresponding secretary only three members survive and all our collections, transactions, cabinet, etc., burned or stolen and destroyed. What a wreck!--the Sevier and Blount papers, executive journal, private correspondence--all lost." (40) When Draper requested information on a historical topic Ramsey continually harked back to the destruction of his collection, reminding his friend that all of his holdings had been ruined in the fire of September 1863.

"I have done what I could"

At the close of the Civil War Ramsey and his family were left homeless and penniless, with a "joint fortune of forty-two dollars of available money on which to start in the world again." (41) He and his wife, both in their sixties, and three of their children relocated to western North Carolina. Ramsey returned to medical practice and began writing short newspaper articles, revisiting many of his prewar subjects of the state of Franklin and the Battle of King's Mountain. The family never viewed North Carolina as a permanent home, however, as evidenced by their frequent contemplations of moving. After being persuaded against migrating to Texas and encountering problems securing a home in Alabama, the Ramseys remained in North Carolina, moving between Charlotte, Hopewell, and Salisbury.

Despite taking the amnesty oath and receiving a presidential pardon from Andrew Johnson on November 10, 1865, Ramsey and his family remained in exile, fearing retribution and uncertain of what property they would be able to reclaim. "Scathing editorials" by William Gannaway "Parson" Brownlow, editor of the Knoxville Whig and an ardent opponent of Ramsey in prewar debates, encouraged local Unionists to "[seek] revenge through the courts against leading Confederates." (42) Moreover, Brownlow was appointed the U.S. Treasury agent in charge of abandoned property for the region; the Ramsey family faced the confiscation of their two farms east of Knoxville as well as the doctor's three-story office building in town. Forced to travel to Knoxville to settle lawsuits regarding the recovery of his property, Ramsey dared return to East Tennessee in 1869. He "dreaded the visit to the scenes of my boyhood and of my manhood, and of my half-century of active public life and extended usefulness to my country." (43) With the suits settled, in the summer of 1871 the Ramsey family again made their home in East Tennessee, relocating to a Colonial-style house on Knoxville's Main Street.

With his return to Knoxville Ramsey also renewed his prewar mission of collecting and recording the history of his beloved state. Although his East Tennessee Historical and Antiquarian Society had been devastated by the loss of its collections and the deaths of a number of its members, including President Reese, Ramsey was prodded to return to active collecting with his 1874 election as president of the Tennessee Historical Society, a position he maintained until his death ten years later. At age seventy-seven he was initially wary of taking the role but relented and accepted, believing that he "could not consistently decline the honor and the labor implied by the complement [sic] intended me." (44)

The Tennessee Historical Society had been founded in 1849, reestablished in 1857, and, like the East Tennessee Historical and Antiquarian Society, destroyed by the Civil War. With its revitalization in 1874 Ramsey saw a keen opportunity for collecting and promoting history on a statewide level. In his welcome address at the newly re-created society's annual meeting on June 16, 1874, Ramsey declared:

Instead of ceremonies--we need activity--well directed labour & perseverance. We must stimulate the energies of all our officers & of each individual member. We must combine other activities & increase our machinery so as if possible to interest our remotest counties in our enterprise. The Transactions of our Society should fill a volume every year. We should call to our aid all the literature & science of the State--our teachers & our students every where. With zeal & industry our success is sure. (45)

Although in the antebellum years Ramsey had been disappointed by the work of the society, (46) postwar he appeared quite confident in the organization's ability to become a powerful source for Tennessee history.

One year after assuming the presidency Ramsey reported success in acquiring new collections. He was able to secure some papers of John Sevier and the state of Franklin as well as the proceedings and acts of the Territorial Government South of the River Ohio. In addition to papers, he presented the society with a number of museum pieces including the cane carried by his grandfather at the Battle of Trenton during the Revolutionary War, the desk used by his

father as the secretary of the Franklin Convention, the last flag flown at the Battle of Cerro Gordo in the Mexican War, and a military coat that had been tailored by Andrew Johnson. (47)

Despite Ramsey's intense devotion, the society did not progress as he had anticipated. Lack of financial support stunted the organization's ability to publish. Early in his presidency he noted that "we are yet without funds, and Tennessee is so much in debt we cannot certainly count on a legislative appropriation." (48) He also became frustrated with the lack of assistance from other society members, telling Draper that he stood "nearly unaided and alone." Describing a large ("5x3x2 feet deep") collection of papers that he received for the society, Ramsey wrote of arranging them himself, believing that "no one else would have the patience to do it right." (49) As its most active member, a well-known historian of the region, and a man who had "never touched any public enterprise which did not succeed," (50) Ramsey feared that the society's failure would reflect poorly on him personally.

He became increasingly frustrated when comparing the work of his society to that of Draper's Wisconsin Historical Society, which he held as a model for imitation. The doctor continually expressed disappointment that "the sixteenth state of our union lags so far behind her younger sister." (51) "Our society has the same date (1849) with yours and yet it has done nothing, literally nothing," Ramsey wrote his friend on December 21, 1878. "I am discouraged, wholly so. I see no fruits, no harvest, no growth. Will it ever be otherwise?" (52) Four months later and himself then a feeble octogenarian, Ramsey agonized that "our Tennessee Historical Society is hardly alive. I have done what I could." (53)

"Oh! for just one year more on the History of Tennessee"

In 1882, hopeful that "a younger & more active member of the society could render you a more efficient service & a more extended usefulness than I have been able to render to our great enterprise," (54) Ramsey asked that he be allowed to resign his position within the society. Although Ramsey was bedridden from an equestrian accident and a subsequent fall while on crutches, the membership would not accept his resignation. They did consent to making his presidency an honorary position but failed ever to elect a new president. While he doubted his ability to accomplish all that he hoped in regard to the society, Ramsey continued writing. On August 7, 1878, Ramsey explained to Draper that "I cannot sit upright against my table and do much of my writing with a pencil and a board across my lap. You would be surprised at my power of endurance. I wrote eight pages foolscap in one day." (56) The following year he

wistfully wrote, "'Oh!' said Calhoun 30 minutes before he died 'for one more hour in the Senate of the U.S.!' I often think of this myself & exclaim 'Oh! for just one year more on the History of Tennessee.'" (56)

Beginning with his 1869 return to Knoxville and continuing through 1882, Ramsey composed a number of articles and other short pieces on early Tennessee history. Included were addresses on the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, written for the centennial anniversary of the event, and on the accomplishments of Tennesseans in the Revolutionary War, created for the war's centennial celebration in Nashville. Ramsey also focused on the religious history of early Tennessee, particularly that of local Presbyterian churches, ministers, and members. In 1875 he composed a History of Lebanon Presbyterian Church, which contained biographical sketches of the early leaders of the church, including Ramsey's father, Governor John Sevier, and Gen. James White, founder of Knoxville. Later, at the request of its members, he wrote a congregational history of the Hopewell Presbyterian Church in North Carolina.

The project on which Ramsey most fervently worked, however, was an abridgment of his Annals to be used as a textbook in the local common schools. He hoped to append a "synopsis" of the state's history through 1860, thereby re-creating, albeit in abbreviated form, his destroyed manuscript of the second volume of his Annals. The work proved difficult. In addition to his physical problem with writing, increasingly he became frustrated with Dr. J. Berrien Lindsley, superintendent of Nashville Public Schools, and the Nashville publishing house with which he had contracted for editing and publication. Lindsley and the publisher wanted a smaller work than Ramsey envisioned, causing the author to exclaim: "I only write for grown men & the general public." (57)

The "venerable old historian" continued to serve as a fount of knowledge regarding early Tennessee history until his death on April 11, 1884, at the age of eighty-seven. The flag at the capitol in Nashville was lowered to half-mast. The Knoxville Daily Chronicle reported that Ramsey's funeral procession was the largest ever witnessed in the town, with many prominent Tennesseans, including Governor James D. Porter, serving as pallbearers. So many of Ramsey's friends and associates in the state capital wished to attend the ceremony that "a special train was run from Nashville to bring friends to his funeral." (59)

"Others Can Do What Remains Undone"

Ramsey viewed the rescue of fragile documents from decay and potential destruction to be his responsibility as a historian and a civic-minded individual. His goal was to compile and publish these documents in such a form that the "true" history of the state of Tennessee could be told. He did not seek to analyze the documents or to provide a context for them outside of their importance to the history of the region. Instead, he declared that "others can do what remains undone." (60) Unfortunately, the original documents of Ramsey's collecting fever no longer exist. In the September 1863 fire at Mecklenburg one of the largest--perhaps the largest--caches of records related to early Tennessee history was destroyed. While Ramsey could not save the documents themselves, in his *Annals* and other writings he replicated the text of the items as well as the stories they contained.

Ramsey's *Annals* has been described as "a veritable encyclopedia of information and original sources for the student of Tennessee history up to 1800." (61) Much of what has been written about the state of Franklin was compiled from information presented in Ramsey's work. In *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina* series, a standard source for the modern historian of early Tennessee, the text of the petition of the Wataugans to the North Carolina legislature during the Cherokee War of 1776 is excerpted directly from *The Annals*, its only source. Also copied from Ramsey for the series were a May 19, 1776 letter from Deputy Indian Agent Henry Stuart to the settlers of Watauga; a July 1776 deposition of Jarrett Williams regarding hostile intentions of the Cherokees against the Watauga settlers; and an insert entitled "An Account of the Subjugation of the Cherokees." (62) Despite criticism of Ramsey's methodology, including his unquestioning acceptance of the veracity of historical sources and oral histories, and questions about some of the details of the events documented in the book, (63) Ramsey's work continues to serve as a fundamental source for scholars.

Ramsey's influence is apparent in a second important resource for research on early Tennessee history--the collection of Lyman Draper, housed at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Through their correspondence Ramsey provided Draper with numerous vignettes about the Watauga settlers, the Mecklenburg Convention, the Battle of King's Mountain, the state of Franklin, and many other important events and people during the years of the pioneers. Thanks to Ramsey's diligence in copying the original documents in his collection, these letters also preserve the text of many of the items destroyed at Mecklenburg.

Ramsey's influence on Draper extended beyond the simple delivery of historical information. Historian and Draper biographer William B. Hesseltine credits Ramsey with inspiring Draper to finally publish from his vast collections. (64) Ramsey continually offered his encouragement, asking, "May I hope to live long enough to see and read your magnum opus? Do publish soon."

(65) "Print," he implored his friend. "The public is eager for it and you can't live always (only through your works)." (66) *King's Mountain and Its Heroes* (1881) was Draper's only major publication. In the three years left to him Ramsey continued to provide support, suggesting field agents and writing to his friends throughout the Southeast in support of Draper.

In addition to his influence on contemporary historical scholars Ramsey had a lasting influence on historical records collecting in the state of Tennessee. Despite the destruction of its collections and the dissolution of its organization during the Civil War, the East Tennessee Historical and Antiquarian Society received new life in January 1883, when a number of prominent men of the region reconstituted the organization as the East Tennessee Historical Society. While Ramsey's injuries prevented his participation in the society's revival, his brother-in-law John Crozier, the former responding secretary for the prewar organization, provided his assistance. (67)

Ramsey also left a lasting legacy with the Tennessee Historical Society. Although his injuries affected his ability to physically participate in the meetings of the organization, his presidency proved to be a promising period of growth. The society was reincorporated by the state in 1875, and throughout the remainder of the 1870s and the 1880s it appointed local historians to gather and create reports from biographical, historical, and statistical information about their counties. These reports included information on antiquities and relics, biographies of prominent local citizens, and accounts of political and military events. Some were published by the society; others appeared in Goodspeed's *History of Tennessee* in 1887; yet others remain in manuscript form in the society's papers. To bolster documentation of the history of the entire state the society in 1879 began electing a president and two vice presidents, each of whom represented one of the three major geographic divisions of Tennessee. In 1880, due in part to Ramsey's admiration of Draper's work in Wisconsin, the society published an annual report listing all of the books, manuscript collections, and artifacts in its holdings. After Ramsey's death the society continued to grow, playing a prominent role in the Tennessee Centennial celebration of 1897 and forming an official partnership with the state in 1927. (68)

## Conclusion

In her examination of the origins of the Jewish Historical Society, archivist Elizabeth Kaplan argued that the founding of a historical society begins a "tautological process," with each step in the development legitimizing the next. Collections are gathered that support publication of

documents and histories. These publications in turn "grant legitimacy and authenticity," thereby galvanizing a group identity that the organization's founders wished to perpetrate. Continuing the process, "once this identity was forged, further collection of archives and writing of history would confirm and sustain it, continually 'proving' its existence." (69)

Ramsey made it his mission to "prove" his vision of early Tennessee pioneers--their "adventures and perils[,] ... their hearty sacrifices for the general good, their character for conduct and courage in war, their uniform devotion to the honour and greatness of the country, their rapid advancements in the arts of peace, in population and political influence, and the impress of their wisdom, valour and patriotism which they have stamped upon their descendents." (70) Regional promotion served as a primary impetus for Ramsey's collecting. He believed that the contributions of Tennesseans, particularly those from the eastern portion of the state, were being ignored by many historians.

Interest and pride in his ancestors also motivated Ramsey's collecting as well as his interpretation of Tennessee history. Ramsey celebrated his father's involvement in the state of Franklin and in the early years of the state of Tennessee. Additionally, his grandfather's participation in the Mecklenburg Convention led to years of collecting and research by Ramsey on the topic. As "one of the first born of the sons of the State of Tennessee" Ramsey saw it as his patriotic and filial duty to collect, preserve, and disseminate to future generations of Tennessee scholars his knowledge and vision of the pioneer generation.

From his earliest days of academia to his death in 1884, through his intense collecting efforts, the publication of *The Annals of Tennessee*, and his extensive correspondence with fellow historian and collector Lyman Draper, Ramsey provided modern scholars of Tennessee with his vision of the history of the state. He set the groundwork for the interpretation of Tennessee history by collecting and preserving those materials that he saw as fundamental for the understanding of Tennesseans and their place in regional and American history. Despite the loss of many of the original documents, Ramsey's vision remains.

## Notes

1. *The Half-Century of Knoxville: Being the Address and Proceedings at the Semi-Centennial Anniversary of the Settlement of the Town, February 10, 1842* (Knoxville: Printed at the Register Office, 1852), 71.

2. Ibid., 73.

3. J. G. M. Ramsey, *Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey: Autobiography and Letters*, ed. William B. Hesseltine, 2nd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 305.

4. With the U.S. government encouraging the creation of independent states from the western territories, the state of Franklin was formed in 1784 by settlers in what was then the western portion of North Carolina. Led by John Sevier, the state faced challenges from North Carolina legislators who deemed the Franklin movement an act of rebellion. In November 1785 a convention met to adopt a permanent constitution. The following March Sevier was elected governor. Soon, however, the fledgling government faced opposition from a number of settlers as well as the government of North Carolina. With the end of Sevier's term in 1788 the Franklin movement effectively came to an end. The next year North Carolina permanently ceded its western land to the federal government, and the region became part of the Southwest Territory. In 1796 Tennessee was admitted to the Union as the sixteenth state.

5. The Mecklenburg Convention of May 19, 1775, consisted of a number of citizens of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, who met to determine a response to what they believed to be tyrannical oppression being placed on the American colonies by Britain's King George III and Parliament. These men drafted a "Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence," which stated that "we do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people, are, and of right ought to be, a sovereign and self governing association, under the control of no power other than that of our God and the general government of the Congress." The authenticity of the document, known as the Mecklenburg Resolves, has been called into question. No copies of the resolves are extant. The oldest printing of the document can be found in the April 30, 1819, issue of the Raleigh (North Carolina) Register. Ramsey also reprinted the text in his *Annals of Tennessee*. In a May 17, 1875 letter to Lyman Draper, Ramsey notes that "about 1824 or 1825 Colonel William Polk of Raleigh, North Carolina sent me by mail the Raleigh Register and a small pamphlet containing the Mecklenburg Resolves with names of delegates and others by whose influence and popularity the meeting had been gotten up May 19 and 20, 1775" (Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 282). Based on this pamphlet, which Ramsey asserted was printed in Philadelphia in 1785, and on correspondence between himself and Andrew Jackson, Judge John Haywood, and other individuals who were in some way connected to Mecklenburg, Ramsey adamantly advocated acceptance of the veracity of the document.

6. The fourth son of Francis and Peggy, J. G. M. Ramsey was named for his second cousin, Gen. James Gettys of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and for the Reverend James McGready, a Presbyterian revivalist who traveled to East Tennessee in 1796 and later settled in the Cumberland region of Kentucky.

7. Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 14.



8. Ramsey to Margaret Ramsey, November 26, 1828, Ramsey Family Papers, MS-253, University of Tennessee Special Collections Library, Knoxville. Hereafter cited as Ramsey Papers (UT).
9. Ramsey to Margaret Ramsey, November 11, 1828, Ramsey Papers (UT).
10. Ramsey to Margaret Ramsey, January 21, 1829, Ramsey Papers (UT).
11. Ramsey in the *Railroad Advocate* (1831), quoted in David Lawson Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee: A Career of Public Service," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1965, 94. After battling lack of interest by other prominent East Tennesseans, economic and banking crises, and competing railroad lines and developers, Ramsey saw his advocacy come to fruition with the establishment of the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad in 1855. This line provided the region with a vital transportation link to the major markets of the East Coast.
12. Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 50. The school continued for more than twenty-five years, until the Civil War.
13. "Inaugural Address to the Historical Society of Tennessee," June 16, 1874, Ramsey Papers (UT).
14. J. G. M. Ramsey, *Ramsey's Address Delivered Before the East Tennessee Historical and Antiquarian Society at Its First Meeting in Knoxville, May 5, 1834* (Knoxville: Printed by F. S. Heiskill, 1834), 5-6.
15. *Ibid.*, 6. The state of Tennessee is divided into three "grand divisions": East, Middle, and West. The region has been divided into these areas since Tennessee's territorial period because of geographical barriers.
16. Ramsey, *Autobiography*, xxxiii.
17. Ramsey, *Ramsey's Address*, 10.
18. Ramsey to George Bancroft, July 7, 1858, Bancroft Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, quoted in Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 207-8.
19. Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 55.
20. Quoted in Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 229.
21. Ramsey, *Ramsey's Address*, 6.
22. *Knoxville Daily Tribune*, April 12, 1884, quoted in Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 206.

23. Joseph Williams to Draper, July 18, 1842, quoted in *ibid.*, 213.
24. Ramsey to Bancroft, July 7, 1858, quoted in *ibid.*, 208.
25. Ramsey to David Campbell, January 10, 1853, David Campbell Papers, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Durham, North Carolina, quoted in *ibid.*, 228.
26. Ramsey to Draper, January 14, 1853, in Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 74.
27. Ramsey to Draper, October 26, 1846, in *ibid.*, 58. Ramsey was so concerned about his inability to find time to finish this history that he suggested a partnership with Draper, saying, "The proposition then I have to make to you in confidence is that we put our capital together, form a partnership in the work, and finish it at once."
28. *Ibid.*, 62.
29. Catalog of Ramsey's writings, March 25, 1879, Ramsey Papers (UT).
30. J. G. M. Ramsey, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1853), v.
31. Knoxville Register, December 28, 1853, quoted in Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 217.
32. Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 75.
33. *Ibid.*, 78. Ramsey believed that the private's actions were carried out on the order of William Gannaway "Parson" Brownlow, an ardent Unionist and editor of the Knoxville Whig. Brownlow and Ramsey carried on heated debates in the local press in the years leading up to secession. With the arrival of Confederate troops in Knoxville in 1861 Brownlow was jailed for his vituperative newspaper articles. Ramsey encouraged Brownlow's arrest and fought against his subsequent release. In the winter of 1861 Brownlow was expelled from the region by Confederate forces. His family and his press relocated to Ohio. The Michigan private who carried out the burning of Mecklenburg had only recently arrived in Knoxville from Cincinnati. Ramsey asserted that Brownlow hired the soldier to destroy Mecklenburg, attributing the private's actions to "the latent revenge of the devil incarnate" (Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 253).
34. Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 233.
35. Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 115.
36. *Ibid.*, 116.
37. *Ibid.*

38. Ibid., 171-72.
39. Ibid., 144-45.
40. Ibid., 268.
41. Ibid., 298.
42. Robert Tracy McKenzie, "Introduction," in *ibid.*, xxiv.
43. Ibid., 250.
44. Ibid., 278.
45. "Welcome Address to the Historical Society of Tennessee," June 16, 1874, Ramsey Papers (UT).
46. In a September 18, 1851 letter to Draper, Ramsey notes that "the Historical Society at Nashville had a hasty accouchement, breathed once after it got into its nurse's lap, gave a convulsive gasp to let its aunts and its cousins know it had vitality enough to squeal, gave a wild stare upon its seniors, and suddenly swooned away.... I hear nothing of it since" (Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 63).
47. Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 349-50.
48. Ramsey to Draper, July 8, 1874, in Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 281.
49. Ramsey to Draper, January 31, 1876, in *ibid.*, 301.
50. Ramsey to Draper, May 25, 1874, in *ibid.*, 281.
51. Ramsey to Draper, January 31, 1876, in *ibid.*, 301.
52. Ramsey to Draper, December 21, 1878, in *ibid.*, 315.
53. Ramsey to Draper, April 30, 1879, in *ibid.*, 319.
54. Portion of an undated and unaddressed Ramsey letter, Tennessee Historical Society's Miscellaneous Manuscripts, Tennessee State Archives, quoted in Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 348.
55. Ramsey to Draper, August 7, 1878, in Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 311.
56. Ramsey to Marcus J. Wright, October 18, 1879, Wright Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, quoted in Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 333.

57. Ramsey to Anson Nelson, October 7, 1879, Tennessee Historical Society's Miscellaneous Manuscripts, quoted in *ibid.*, 337.
58. Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 344.
59. Ramsey Alexander Recollections, J. G. M. Ramsey Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, quoted in Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 358.
60. Ramsey to Draper, January 14, 1853, in Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 74.
61. Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 225.
62. *Ibid.*, 224.
63. In an April 1898 article in *American Historical Magazine* historian A. V. Goodpasture pointed out errors in *The Annals* regarding the Watauga settlement. He noted that "these statements, coming from an author usually so accurate and trustworthy, have misled as able and discriminating writers as [James] Phelan, [Theodore] Roosevelt, and [Joshua W.] Caldwell" ("The Watauga Association," *American Historical Magazine* 3 [April 1898]: 114-15, quoted in Eubanks, "Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey of East Tennessee," 232).
64. Ramsey, *Autobiography*, xxv.
65. Ramsey to Draper, October 3, 1872, in *ibid.*, 268.
66. Ramsey to Draper, January 17, 1860, in *ibid.*, 50.
67. W. Todd Groce, "A Brief History of the East Tennessee Historical Society," *Journal of East Tennessee History* 66 (1994): 4. This revival was short-lived, however, as the society quickly lapsed again. It was not until 1925 that it was reconstituted as the East Tennessee Historical Society of today.
68. Ann Toplovich, "The Tennessee Historical Society at 150: Tennessee History 'Just and True,'" *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 58 (1999): 203-4, 207-8.
69. Elizabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," *American Archivist* 63 (Spring-Summer 2000): 149.
70. Ramsey, *The Annals*, 13.