

BARBARA ANN CARON

# The ALEXANDER RAMSEY HOUSE

## *Furnishing a Victorian Home*

**H**ouse” and “home” have long been important cultural symbols in America. During the nineteenth century, as urbanization and industrialization separated the workplace from the residence, these terms intensified in meaning. In the Victorian era (1837–1901), the architectural entity “house” was associated with the male, whose job was to provide shelter for his family. Capturing a popular sentiment

*Dr. Caron is an assistant professor of interior design at the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls. This article is based on her dissertation, “American Victorian Furnishings Textiles as a Vehicle for Understanding Lifestyle and Meaning: A Case Study of the Library and Reception Room in the Alexander Ramsey House” (1991).*



*The stately Ramsey family home, about 1890, in St. Paul's Irvine Park neighborhood*





Alexander Ramsey, photographed in Mathew Brady's Washington, D.C., studio, 1863

of the period, architect Elisha Charles Hussey wrote in 1877, “A man’s house is the expression of himself. As he builds, so is he.”<sup>1</sup>

“Home,” on the other hand, was the realm of the female, according to the dictates of the Victorian cult of domesticity. As the home was transformed into a center for socializing rather than economic production, the ideal wife and mother became responsible for creating a stable and orderly environment where morals, manners, and

cultural values could flourish. As a result, her domain extended from furnishings to domestic activities and the ambience she fostered. As author Jan Cohn observed, “The house that had been described from 1850 onward as the expression of the character of . . . the man who built or purchased it gradually became an expression of the woman who decorated it.”<sup>2</sup>

In St. Paul’s Irvine Park neighborhood, the Alexander Ramsey House today stands as one of the Minnesota Historical Society’s premiere historic sites. Completed in 1872, the house is a monument both to the Ramsey family and to the era in which it was built. Social history helps us understand how Alexander and Anna Jenks Ramsey developed their aesthetic preferences. Analysis of their furnishings, particularly those in two important spaces—the library and reception room—tells us more about the Ramseys’ lifestyle and status, their degree of individuality, and their identification with a particular set of values.<sup>3</sup>

Alexander Ramsey’s life spanned the Victorian era. Born in Pennsylvania in 1815, he was admitted to the bar in 1839 and practiced law in Harrisburg. His lifelong involvement in politics began in 1840. Five years later he married Anna Earl Jenks (1827–84), a young woman whose Quaker education, social skills, and status as the daughter of a judge and congressman made her an asset to the young politician. At age 34, Alexander was appointed first territorial governor of Minnesota, and in May 1849 he and his 22-year-old wife moved to St. Paul, a frontier city of 400 residents. Their first dwelling, a small story-and-a-half frame house on present-day Third Street between Jackson and Robert Streets, was originally built as a tavern. It served as both home and office.<sup>4</sup>

A letter from Anna to her brother William Jenks expressed ambivalence about the move to

---

<sup>1</sup> Elisha Charles Hussey, *Victorian Home Building: A Transcontinental View* (1877; reprint, Watkins Glenn, N.Y.: American Life Foundation, 1976), 219.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Cohn, *The Palace or the Poorhouse: The American House as a Cultural Symbol* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1979), xi, 224, 228.

<sup>3</sup> Michael E. Sobel, *Lifestyle and Social Structure* (New York: Academic Press, 1981); Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 25–38; Jeanette C. Lauer and Robert H. Lauer, *Fashion Power: The Meaning of Fashion in American Society* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 24, 36.

<sup>4</sup> *St. Paul City Directory*, 1873, p. 26; Marion Ramsey Furness, “Governor Ramsey and Frontier Minnesota: Impressions from His Diary and Letters,” *Minnesota History* 28 (Dec. 1947): 309–12; Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, comps., *Minnesota Biographies 1655–1912*, Minnesota Historical Society Collections, vol. 15 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society [MHS], 1912), 624; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (rev. ed., St. Paul: MHS, 1956), 1:248.



*Anna Jenks Ramsey, her hand resting on a multiple-stereograph viewer that allowed users to turn a knob and see numerous images*

St. Paul. Discussing the Ramseys' first real house, soon to take shape at the corner of Walnut and Exchange Streets, she wrote, "We are going to build a house during the summer as we are so

inconveniently situated. Imagine we will have a very comfortable one if the carpenters fulfill the contract. I would like to furnish it neatly but am too close [stingy] to buy new as Mr. R desires me and afraid to send east for my own fearing I may never get back to live." Anna's fear that she would not return to Pennsylvania hints at the difficulty of her early years in St. Paul. Her four-year-old son Alexander Jenks died in July 1850, and 19-month-old William Henry died less than two years later. Marion, the Ramseys' only surviving child, was born in 1853.<sup>5</sup>

After serving as territorial governor from 1849 to 1853, Alexander's career in public office included a stint as mayor of St. Paul (1855–57), two terms as state governor (1860–63), and two terms as a U.S. senator (1863–75). During their years in Washington, D.C., Alexander and Anna Ramsey lived at the National Hotel and actively participated in the city's political and social events.<sup>6</sup>

No doubt their experiences in the nation's capital and travels abroad influenced the Ramseys when they commenced to build their second house in St. Paul. Anna's frequent letters to teenage Marion at school in Philadelphia recorded an active social life. On March 4, 1864, she confided, "On Tuesday last I was at the President's: had a very nice time but nothing to eat: and I did not like that by any means." In June she wrote, "I went to the Opera last week with Mrs. Lincoln." "Well I went to the dinner party at the White House: had a splendid dinner and enjoyed myself greatly," she told Marion on February 15, 1865, adding that 17 courses were served and "the ladies were beautifully dressed." Anna herself was apparently a well-recognized figure in Washington society. An 1865 newspaper account of President Ulysses S. Grant's inaugural ball noted, "The Northwest contributes on the whole the fairest women to the National Capital—Mrs. Senator Ramsey of Minnesota."<sup>7</sup>

To further Marion's education, the Ramsey women spent 1869–70 in Europe. Sixteen-year-old Marion studied German, voice, and piano, and Anna took up needlework. Through travel and her education in a Philadelphia boarding school, Marion acquired the proper social accomplishments of the day.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to major social events and extended travel, Anna received and made social calls in

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Ramsey Papers, microfilm edition, R[oll] 4, F[rame] 676, R6, F351, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; [Alice Hermina Poatgieter], *The Alexander Ramsey House* (St. Paul: MHS, 1965), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Upham and Dunlap, comps., *Minnesota Biographies*, 624.

<sup>7</sup> Ramsey Papers, R15, F17, F187, F500–501, F537.

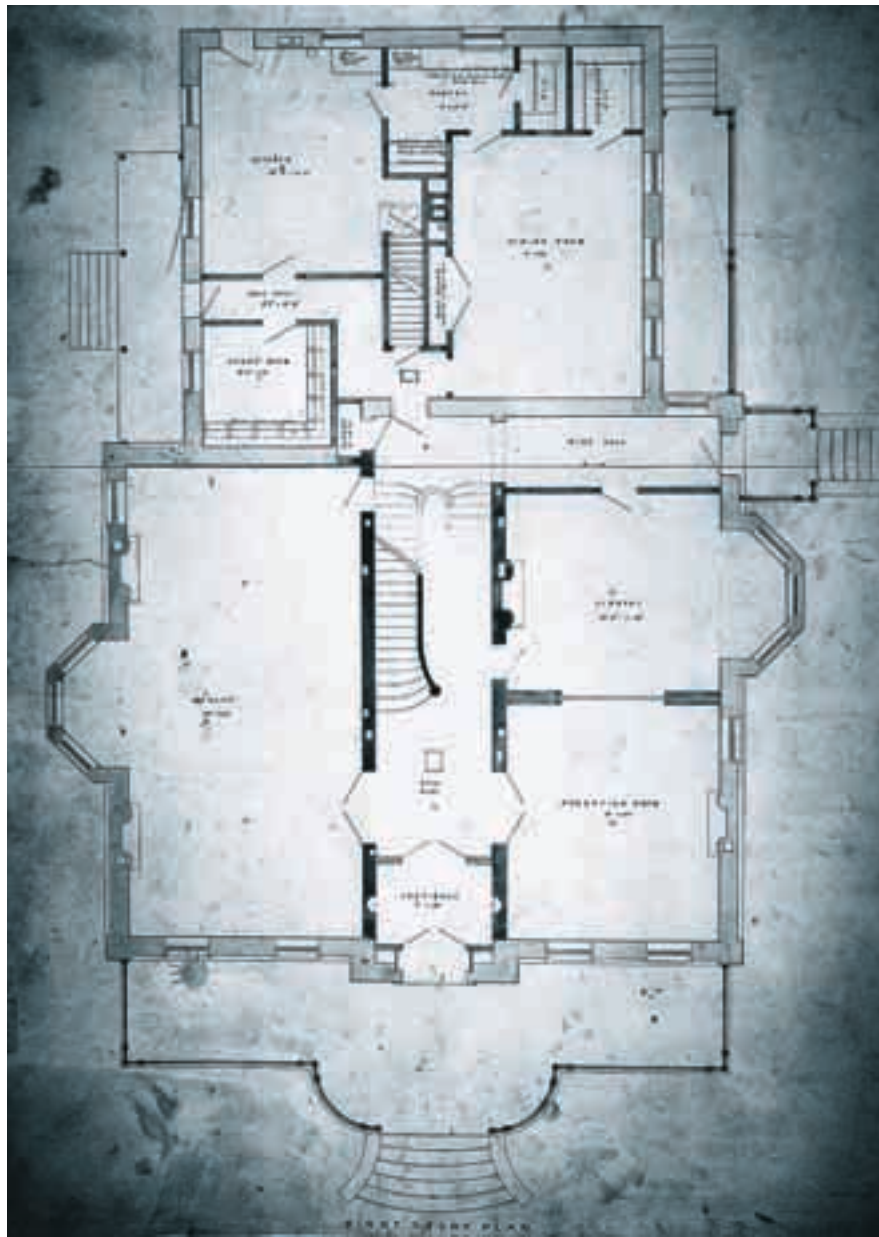
<sup>8</sup> Ramsey Papers, R19, F619.

Washington. On New Year's Day 1868, for example, she recorded in her diary, "Received 90 calls." On two days that April, she made 29 and 27 calls and noted, "Back home 4:50."<sup>9</sup>

When visiting, Anna apparently paid close attention to her surroundings, often relaying bits of information to Marion. On May 7, 1864, for example, she mentioned the "large and superbly furnished" home of Mr. Brown, a naval agent. On March 19, 1867, she noted that Senator Chandler had "purchased a fine house." Her April 30, 1866, letter first broaches Alexander's interest in having a new and more elaborate dwelling: "On Saturday after dinner Papa and myself rode over to Georgetown in the cars and after arriving there we walked over considerable of the city. I was astonished to see so many beautiful residences surrounded by fine grounds. Papa made the sensible remark: he wished he owned such a home: how he would enjoy it: I wonder if we all would not also." The following year, with Ramsey still a first-term senator, construction began on the "Mansion House." Alexander had the family home of nearly 20 years moved across the street in order to build on the same corner lot in the increasingly settled Irvine Park neighborhood.<sup>10</sup>

Architectural historian Alan Gowans notes that the social function of a mansion is to proclaim superior status and evoke a sense of luxury. While one might question whether the Ramsey house was truly a mansion, Alexander's use of the term suggests his aspirations. His new dwelling was not only fashionable but also relatively expensive, although certainly not as extravagant as the city and resort homes of the East Coast's wealthy. Designed by local architect Monroe Sheire, it was completed in 1872 and cost nearly \$41,000, including the fence and fireplace mantles. The modern mechanical systems—boiler and plumbing—added about \$5,000. (The 1990 value of \$41,000 is approximately \$460,000; with the plumbing, the total rises to about \$515,000.)<sup>11</sup>

The Ramseys' new house exhibited all the important characteristics of the ideal Victorian-



*Architect's plan for the first floor; the library and reception room are on the right (east) side.*

American home. The Second Empire or Mansard style that Alexander selected was considered fashionable, modern, elegant, and urban. Rooted in France's architectural renaissance under Napo-

<sup>9</sup> Ramsey Papers, R47, F388, F408.

<sup>10</sup> Ramsey Papers, R15, F89–90, R16, F366, F89.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Gowans, *Styles and Types of North American Architecture: Social Function and Cultural Expression* (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), xiii; Ramsey Papers, R41, F46, F70, F372, F374, F411, R16, F776, R18, F555, R19, F525, F783–84. This calculation is based on the January 1991 *Consumer Price Index* and *The Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Commerce Dept., 1975), 211. For a quick conversion of early 1870s dollars, multiply the amount by a factor of 11.2; for details, see Barbara Ann Caron, "American Victorian Furnishings Textiles As a Vehicle for Understanding Lifestyle and Meaning: A Case Study of the Library and Reception Room in the Alexander Ramsey House" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1991), 173.

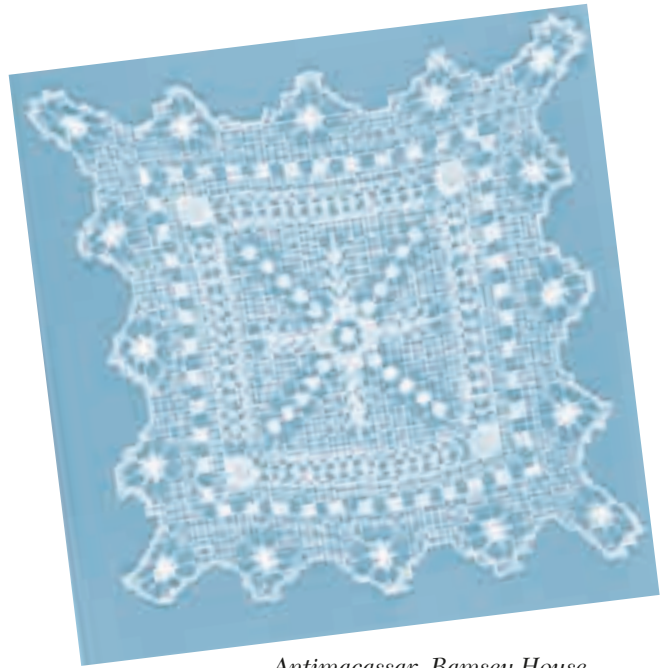
leon III and the Empress Eugenie, this style dominated public and private construction in the United States in the 1860s and early 1870s. The house is a substantial single-family dwelling with three stories, 15 major rooms, porches, bathrooms, a modern heating system, and a generous lawn. The first floor contains the public rooms, accessible from the central hallway. Private family quarters are located on the second floor; the laundry and utilities occupy the full basement. Servants' quarters, attic storage, and, in the 1880s, a playroom for Alexander's and Anna's grandchildren made full use of the third story. The scale of the Ramsey house is impressive: 15-foot ceilings on the first floor, a 300-square-foot (plus bay) library, 360-square-foot reception room, 800-square-foot grand parlor, and a central hallway 10 feet wide by nearly 40 feet long.<sup>12</sup>

Although Anna Ramsey signed the construction contract, that phase of the project was clearly within Alexander's province. With construction completed, her job of furnishing the new dwelling commenced. Just as Alexander's desire for a mansion and choice of style demonstrated his position as a Victorian gentleman, Anna's interior scheme demonstrated her personal tastes and allegiance to major Victorian preoccupations: tradition and heritage, consumerism and the desire to be fashionable, and the cult of domesticity.

Icons of heritage conferred a degree of comfort and stability as the United States transformed from a traditional to a modern society amid dramatic social, political, and economic change. Technological advances, industrialization, mass production, new methods of distribution, and improvements in transportation and communication resulted in a sense of optimism about the future. But the rapidity of change also created anxiety, compounded by political corruption and several serious economic depressions and recessions between 1873 and 1885.<sup>13</sup>

Like many of their contemporaries, the Ramseys retained ties to the past in this turbulent era. Although Anna spent thousands of dollars on new items, she chose, for example, to incorporate some of the family's mid-Victorian Rococo-revival furnishings in the library. Her loyalty to a style of furniture that had passed out of fashion was an

expressive act, whether motivated by parsimony, nostalgia, or, more likely, the desire to document a history of family prominence. Since fashionable consumer goods were available to the masses at affordable prices, status was established not exclusively through new goods but also by possessing objects with the patina of age. The Ramseys had inherited some of their earlier Victorian furnishings; others they apparently ordered from St. Louis in 1849. While these pieces were not very old by national standards, they did demonstrate that the family had acquired fine furnishings during the years when St. Paul was little more than a small town in the wilderness.<sup>14</sup>



*Antimacassar, Ramsey House*

On the other hand, Anna Ramsey also participated in the consumer trends of the day by acquiring fashionable, mass-produced furnishings through A. T. Stewart and Company of New York City, America's first department store. Utilizing this new approach to merchandising, Anna purchased two train-car loads of expensive furniture for the library, reception room, dining room, hall, and four bedrooms. The Renaissance-revival furniture, which was at the height of fashion in the 1870s and early 1880s, cost \$3,210,

<sup>12</sup> Lester Walker, *American Shelter: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the American Home* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1981), 148; Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873–1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

<sup>14</sup> Grant David McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 32; J. Fletcher Williams, "Outlines of the History of Minnesota," in *History of Ramsey County and the City of St. Paul*. . . , ed. Edward D. Neill (Minneapolis: North Star Publishing Co., 1881), 193.

including packing charges. Anna also bought a mirror, carpeting, window treatments, bedding, and bed and table linens for \$4,270 and a Steinway concert grand piano for \$1,400. (In 1990 dollars she spent nearly \$100,000.) In 1881, a St. Paul newspaper reported that the home was furnished with “the luxury of comfort and the elegance of refinement.”<sup>15</sup>

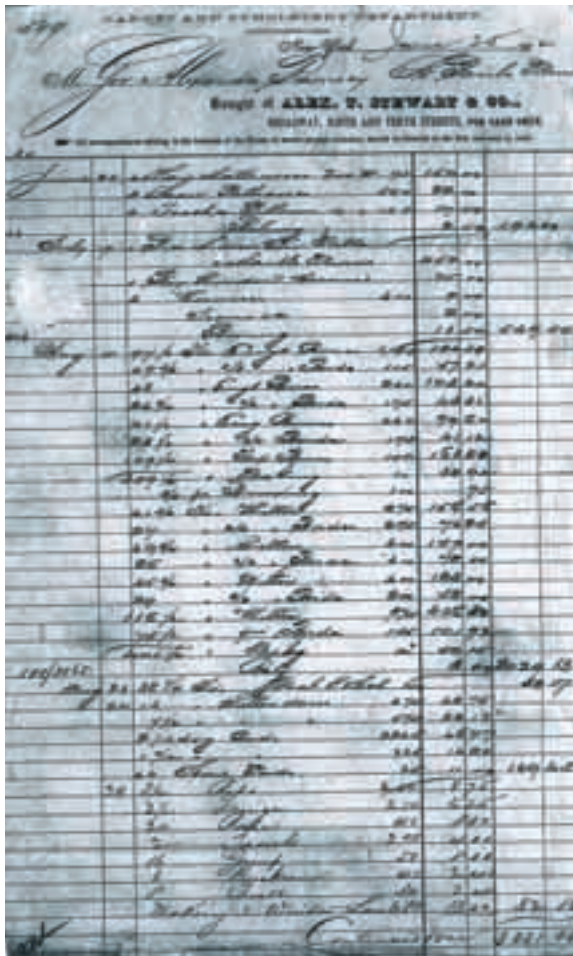
Anna bypassed St. Paul merchants and journeyed to New York City for her major purchases, either because she was living in Washington or, equally likely, because New York offered a wider selection. The St. Paul city directory for 1871 listed only 13 furniture manufacturers and wholesalers/retailers, six upholsterers, and three suppliers of carpets. There were no cabinetmakers, and the joint entry for wallpaper and window shades listed only four merchants. With the financial resources and the knowledge of fashion that accompanied her social status, she took advantage of the latest advances in manufacturing (mass pro-

duction), marketing (the department store), and delivery systems (the railroad).<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, Anna Ramsey showed her acceptance of the cult of domesticity by eagerly decorating her new home. Furthermore, she enhanced the furnishings with some of her own needlework, the most popular feminine activity of the day. While in Europe with Marion, Anna wrote to her sister Hannah Jenks Crouch on January 5, 1870, “Expect to be able to furnish my house quite well with my own handiwork. This [embroidery] is a new thing with me but strange to say I find great enjoyment in it and was it not for this the days would seem interminable.”<sup>17</sup>

Buying fashionable and relatively expensive furnishings from an East Coast department store placed the Ramseys on a par with well-to-do families nationwide. For example, Anna Ramsey made her purchases shortly after Sarah Davis, wife of Supreme Court Justice David Davis, bought seven rooms of furniture for her new home in Bloomington, Illinois. The women chose not only the same manufacturer but many of the same Renaissance-revival pieces as well.<sup>18</sup>

One page of the lengthy A. T. Stewart invoice, itemizing mattresses, pillows, mirrors, carpeting, and other purchases



Between 1875, when Alexander failed to earn the Republican nomination for a third Senate term, and 1879, when President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed him secretary of war, the Ramseys retired to their new house in St. Paul. The family entertained frequently, so the home was on display to members of local and, to a lesser extent, national society. In 1875 the large parlor was the site of one of the social events of the season when Marion Ramsey married Charles Eliot Furness (1844–1909).<sup>19</sup>

While Alexander continued to travel extensively, Anna focused her attention on her home

<sup>15</sup> Ramsey Papers, R20, F211, F214, F199; John H. Steinway to Donald C. Holmquist, Aug. 17, 1965, Ramsey Project, Jan. 1960–Mar. 1962, research files, Alexander Ramsey House, St. Paul; *St. Paul Pioneer*, Oct. 30, 1881, p. 3. Roll 20 contains all invoices and correspondence pertaining to the initial furnishings; unless otherwise stated, frames 198–99 and 210–14 are the sources of all purchases cited hereafter.

<sup>16</sup> *St. Paul City Directory*, 1871, p. 221, 226, 242, 243.

<sup>17</sup> Ramsey Papers, R19, F47.

<sup>18</sup> Fr. Krutina to David Davis, invoices, June 7, Sept. 16, 1872, Davis Family Papers, Illinois State Historical Society library, Springfield.

<sup>19</sup> Upham and Dunlap, comps., *Minnesota Biographies*, 624; *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*, Mar. 29, 1875.

and family. Her frequent letters to Marion in Philadelphia mentioned daily activities including gardening, hemming draperies, making baby clothes for the anticipated grandchild, attending church, calling on friends, and receiving visitors. On March 1, 1876, Anna told Marion of a “charming call” by “Mrs. General [Elizabeth Bacon] Custer,” who was on her way to Fort Lincoln. And on September 5, 1878, a visit from President and Lucy Ware Webb Hayes added spice to Anna’s life in St. Paul. The Ramseys entertained the Hayeses for breakfast before they attended the state fair. Upon the unexpected cancellation of a civic banquet, Anna and the servants prepared for the guests an impromptu but well-received dinner of sirloins and prairie-chicken legs.<sup>20</sup>

In May 1876, the Ramseys traveled to Philadelphia to see their new granddaughter, Anna E. R. (Anita), and to visit the Centennial Exposition. Almost 10 million Americans, more than 20 percent of the population from all classes and locales, attended. Highlighting American achievements in art and science, the exposition also included displays by 25 countries from Europe, South America, Africa, and the Middle and Far East. Enterprising Japanese, Turkish, and North African merchants set up bazaars outside the exhibit halls, encouraging an interest in exotic wares. “Nothing on so grand a scale, so exotic, or so euphoric with ‘culture’ had ever been seen in America before,” according to historian Russell Lynes. The Philadelphia exposition made a major impact on American tastes, and Anna Ramsey was not exempt.<sup>21</sup>

On April 12, 1876, Alexander wrote to Marion that Anna “is daily talking of her proposed visit to the centennial—I think she is an old dunce to care so much about that institution but she seems infatuated with it and I verily believe will hang about until the next centennial comes around.” While there are no extant records of purchases by the Ramseys, Anita Furness recalled that her parents bought Japanese items such as vases, bowls, and a screen after the event closed. These objects came to the Ramsey house when Marion’s family took up permanent residence in 1883.<sup>22</sup>

During Alexander’s 15 months in Hayes’s cabinet, the Ramseys rented a house in Washington from Postmaster General J. A. Cresswell. In 1881



Marion Ramsey Furness and her children (from left) Laura, Ramsey, and Anita, about 1888

they returned for good to their St. Paul mansion. After her marriage, Marion regularly traveled there for family visits. When her husband was hospitalized in 1882 and institutionalized in 1883, she and her surviving children, Anita, (Alexander) Ramsey, and Laura, returned to St. Paul. The addition of three children, aged one to eight, had a dramatic impact on the household, as did the death of Anna Ramsey in November 1884. After Marion became mistress of the house, she made some changes that reflected her interest in one of the latest decorating trends, the Aesthetic style, which advocated “useful forms” rather than the excessive ornamentation of the mid-Victorian

<sup>20</sup> Ramsey Papers, R22, F94; Poatgieter, *Ramsey House*, 5–7. Alexander’s diary notes some details of the Hayes’ visit but does not record the banquet story.

<sup>21</sup> Robert C. Post, ed., *A Treatise Upon Selected Aspects of the Great International Exhibition Held in Philadelphia on the Occasion of Our Nation’s One-Hundredth Birthday*. . . (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of History and Technology, 1976), 13–21, 176–87; Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York: Harper, 1954), 112.

<sup>22</sup> Ramsey Papers, R22, F146; “Material Given by Hal Quarfoth,” n. d., highlights of interview with Anna E. R. (Anita) Furness, Ramsey Project research files.



period. The Ramsey mansion remained the family home until the death of Anita, the last surviving grandchild, in 1964.<sup>23</sup>

**A** closer look at the furnishings of the Ramseys' library and reception room offers greater insight into the family's lifestyle and social alignments. The existence of separate public and private spaces was important to the Victorians. Since the library and reception room represent major public spaces within a private home, they are likely to contain items that served both functional and symbolic needs. For the most part, Anna Ramsey purchased the furnishings specifically for these rooms, which were used year around for both informal family activities and formal social interactions.

Textiles contributed significantly to the rooms' visual impact. During the Victorian era, wall, floor, window, and door treatments, upholstery, and miscellaneous items such as tablecloths and antimacassars were mass produced. Highly prized, these textiles are an effective vehicle for understanding the sociocultural history of the American Victorian home and family.

Since some of the 1872 furnishings have been discarded, moved to other rooms, or stored over the course of the house's long occupancy, receipts, photographs, daybooks, and journal entries from the Alexander Ramsey Papers helped identify and document the original furniture and textiles. Trade catalogs of the period, 20 household-art publications from the 1870s through 1887 (the heyday of the genre), and historic photographs of 50 libraries and 90 reception rooms or parlors in Victorian homes throughout the United States from about 1870 to 1900 established the Ramseys' social and cultural context.<sup>24</sup>

Victorian tastemakers—authors of household-art publications—felt that a library, even a small one, was as necessary as a parlor in any cultured, refined household. By the late nineteenth century,

they acknowledged that “nine times out of ten . . . the library—so called—is also the smoking room, morning room, school room, or ante room”; therefore, it should be decorated not with the austerity of a “genuine library” but as a “pleasant and useful family room.” Informality and comfort were the hallmark, produced by “quiet and unobtrusive” decoration. To achieve this effect in furnishings, the publications most frequently recommended somber tones including olive and other greens, buff or tan, gold, ochre, brown, and, to a lesser extent, red and blue. Sir William H. Perkin's discovery of synthetic dyes in 1856 made a wide array of new colors available to textile and furnishings manufacturers.<sup>25</sup>

Oral histories, correspondence, and material evidence suggest that the Ramsey library was the informal, family space that tastemakers advocated. On October 27, 1875, Anna wrote to Marion: “I am now alone with your Papa for the winter and altho it is very lonely we have a very cozy time of it. Our evenings are spent in reading to each other Dickens' works, have just finished David Copperfield.” Four days later, Anna added, “After we leave the dinner table, we retire to the Library and each seat ourselves beside the table, and until ten or half past he never thinks of leaving me; unless to freshen himself up he takes a little air upon the piazza.” The library continued as a cozy family setting after the arrival of Marion and her children. As a small child, granddaughter Laura Furness had her dinner at a little table in the library. Anita recalled that the library was one of her grandfather's favorite places in the house; his favorite activities were reading and having visitors. Upon his death in 1903 Alexander Ramsey's body “laid in state in the library.”<sup>26</sup>



*Antimacassar, Ramsey House*

<sup>23</sup> Ramsey Papers, R43, F52; Poatgieter, *Ramsey House*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Sources for the historic photographs include Arnold Lewis, James Turner, and Steven McQuillin, *The Opulent Interiors of the Gilded Age: All 203 Photographs from "Artistic Houses"* (New York: Dover, 1987); William Seale, *The Tasteful Interlude: American Interiors Through the Camera's Eye, 1860–1917* (rev. ed., Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1981); and the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>25</sup> Ella R. M. Church, *How to Furnish a Home* (New York: D. Appleton, 1881), 71; Harriet P. Spofford, *Art Decoration Applied to Furniture* (New York: Harper, 1878), 210, 322; Robert W. Edis, *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses* (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1881), 190; John M. Smith, *Ornamental Interiors: Ancient and Modern* (London: C. Lockwood, 1887), 124–27; Maria O. Dewing, *Beauty in the Household* (New York: Harper, 1882), 78.

<sup>26</sup> Anna E. R. (Anita) Furness, interview by John A. Dougherty and Russell W. Fridley, St. Paul, Feb. 7, 1961, and Anita Furness and Laura Furness, interview by John A. Dougherty, St. Paul, Jan. 27, 1959, transcripts in Ramsey Project research files; Ramsey Papers, R21, F678, F684–85.

The eight pieces of new furniture that Anna purchased for the library could not adequately fill so large a space, indicating that she intended to include pieces the Ramseys already owned. Indeed, visible in an 1884 photograph that shows some of the library's and reception room's furniture is a midcentury Rococo-revival sofa, probably part of the parlor suite ordered from St. Louis in 1849.<sup>27</sup> Photographs of Victorian interiors were frequently staged for a particular occasion, so they may not reflect actual room arrangements. A com-

parison with the 50 photographs of period libraries suggests that this sofa probably sat by the bay window to take advantage of daylight.

Another older piece pictured in the photograph is one of a pair of "Spanish" chairs with a band of Berlin wool-work embroidery. It is thought that Anna Ramsey executed the needlework while she was in Dresden, Germany, with Marion. Anna's accounts recorded the purchase of "zephyr work"; Berlin embroidery yarns were also known as "zephyr" yarns, and the patterns were

<sup>27</sup> Williams, "Outlines," 193. This furniture is similar to a \$60 seven-piece parlor suite advertised by wholesaler and retailer John F. Mason, in *Mason's Monthly Budget* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Mason's, [1860?]), 16.

*Part of the library (foreground) and the reception room, captured in 1884 by St. Paul photographer John S. Lovell. LIBRARY FURNISHINGS: (1) Rococo-revival sofa (2) Spanish-style chair (3) Renaissance-revival, Turkish-style easy chair (4) Antimacassar still at Ramsey House. RECEPTION ROOM FURNISHINGS: (5) Open-backed walnut side chair (6) Turkish-style easy chair (7) Jardiniere (8) Occasional chair (9) Armchair (10) Center table.*





“Spanish” chair embellished with Anna Ramsey’s wool-work embroidery, photographed in the reception room where it is currently displayed. Note the original carpet.

widely available from midcentury into the 1880s. Both Spanish chairs may have been placed in front of the fireplace; a period publication shows a man sitting in a similar chair while reading his newspaper by the library fire.<sup>28</sup>

The overstuffed Renaissance-revival chair, which takes center stage in the 1884 photograph, was purchased in 1872. Made by Fr. Krutina, a New York City manufacturer and dealer in “first-class cabinet furniture,” it was originally part of a

seven-piece suite including two divans, a patent rocker, a large easy chair, and two open-back side chairs. Obtained through A. T. Stewart’s for \$351, the suite was intended for the reception room. The well-worn, dark red pile upholstery on the easy chair (now in storage) is thought to be original. The suite’s overstuffed lines, plush pile upholstery, and abundant trims reflect the Turkish sub-style of Renaissance-revival, an emerging fashion in the early 1870s. The Victorian fascination with Turkey probably derived from the opening of the Suez Canal in 1867 and the popular exhibits at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. According to one author, this style of furniture satisfied a “restless yearning for exotic faraway places . . . and only the unsophisticated resisted the urge for tantalizing Turkish furnishings.” The Ramseys’ library chair most likely sat in the south-east corner under the gas jet that provided reading light.<sup>29</sup>

Although not visible in the 1884 photograph, a “lounge (no back)” costing \$75 also appears on the Krutina invoice for library furnishings. It was probably upholstered in a plush pile with tufting and fringe. Lounges were usually boudoir pieces, since it was inappropriate for a Victorian lady to recline in public. In the 1880s the boudoir of Mrs. C. A. Whittier of Boston and the New York bedroom of John D. Rockefeller had similar pieces. At the same time, Alexander’s political opponent Ignatius Donnelly had a lounge in the library of his home in Nininger, Minnesota. Likewise, the Ramseys’ friend Senator Charles Sumner had several in his Washington, D.C., library; perhaps this informality influenced the Ramseys. Certainly, purchasing a lounge for this public space suggests that Anna Ramsey intended the library to be an informal room, although it is not certain that the lounge was actually used there.<sup>30</sup>

A table for reading and writing was essential for any library, and the Ramseys’ featured a rectangular walnut model in the Renaissance-revival style. The original felt inset was probably olive green, consistent with the room’s tertiary color scheme, based on desaturated warm browns and olive tones. Similar tables, although sometimes more elaborate, could be found in many Victorian interiors.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Poatgieter, *Ramsey House*, 9; Ramsey Papers, R18, F730, F770; H. Hudson Holly, *Modern Dwellings in Town and Country* (New York: Harper, 1878), 199. For more on the embroidery, see Barbara Caron, “Berlin Wool Work Embroidery in America,” *Hope and Glory* 7 (Summer 1993): 1–14.

<sup>29</sup> Dan D’Imperio, *The ABCs of Victorian Antiques* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1974), 236.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, Turner, and McQuillin, *Opulent Interiors*, 156; John S. Bowman, *American Furniture* (New York: Exeter Books, 1985), 133; Donnelly photo in MHS.

<sup>31</sup> Seale, *Tasteful Interlude*, 47, 86, 166; Gail C. Winkler, *Victorian Interior Decoration* (N. Y.: Holt, 1986), 130.

Completing the purchases for the library were four Renaissance-revival side chairs and a pair of matching armchairs, upholstered in easy-to-clean leather and finished with brass nails. Louis Pasteur's work on germ theory in the 1870s and 1880s touched off a major concern for sanitation and good hygiene. Consequently, leather upholstery was frequently found in Victorian dining rooms, but it was not common in libraries.<sup>32</sup> The Ramsey's library table and several leather chairs were probably placed near the fireplace, directly under the center gaslight. H Anna and Alexander s: and read to each other.

Consistent with the room's fashionable color scheme, the windows in the library bay were probably topped with buff-colored lambrequins in 1872. These fabric window treatments, similar to flat valances, were usually attached to a wood frame that extended a the top and part way dc the sides of a window. Tl were elaborately emb lished with cording, fri and trims. Anna prob replaced these lambreq in 1884 with more fast able, dark grayish-olive v draperies embellishe free-style wool and silk c dery. The two-dimens stylized floral embroidery pa- tern was designed and executed by the School of Art Needle Work in Philadelphia at a cost of \$144.74. While Anna Ramsey's diary entry of May 2, 1884, recorded the expenditure "for curtain in large parlor bay window," the large parlor has three additional individual windows, for which nothing new was ordered. Furthermore, the draperies visible in an 1884 photograph of the

large parlor were still fashionable. This evidence, along with the colors and the patterns of sun damage visible on the draperies (now in storage), suggests that they supplanted the library's original lambrequins.<sup>33</sup>

By 1884 portieres had replaced the original 12-foot-tall walnut doors between the the library and reception room. Tastemakers emphatically promoted portieres as being more artistic and graceful than doors, "express[ing] hospitality and cheer" and turning "a barrier into a beauty." They also added a the- ality, offering partial adjacent rooms. While ppear in many of the otographs of libraries otion rooms, the Ram- ple, unembellished e not high fashion. Not nted by receipts, they ay have been pur- chased locally.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, the ori- ginal library wallpa- per, probably pur- chased in St. Paul, did not follow the style ad- vocated by many 1880s stemakers.<sup>35</sup> The 1884 otograph shows a w-contrast wallpaper th a small pattern, unlike the recom- mended tripartite design that set apart the lower wall, the in wall, and the frieze top. In 1990, low-con- t, grayish-brown floral wallpaper fragments were discovered behind the fireplace mantle, but no firm evidence dates this paper to the late Victorian period.

Anna Ramsey purchased the library's multi- color, cut-pile, wall-to-wall carpeting at A. T. Stewart and Company's carpet and upholstery department in 1872. The two-dimensional, abstract pattern, woven in 27-inch strips with a

*Popular Turkish-style easy chair, this version from the catalog of Coogan Brothers, New York, about 1876*



**This Handsome Chair, \$12.**

<sup>32</sup> This conclusion is based on the 1880s photographs in Lewis, Turner, and McQuillin, *Opulent Interiors*.

<sup>33</sup> Ramsey Papers, R20, F183, F199, R27, F605, R47, F796. In 1990 dollars, the drapes cost approximately \$2,200.

<sup>34</sup> Henry T. Williams and Mrs. C. S. Jones, *Beautiful Homes* (New York: Williams, 1878), 54; Arnold W. Brunner and Thomas Tryon, *Interior Decoration* (New York: W. T. Comstock, 1887), 40; Lucy Orrinsmith, *The Drawing Room* (1877; reprint, New York: Garland, 1978), 75.

<sup>35</sup> Clarence Cook, *What Shall We Do With Our Walls?* (New York: Warren, Fuller and Co., 1881).

# The Alexander Ramsey House 1995

More than a century after it was built, the Ramsey house retains its graceful Victorian charm. Situated in St. Paul's historic Irvine Park neighborhood, the house and its furnishings reflect the careful stewardship of three generations of Ramseys and ongoing research and restoration by the Minnesota Historical Society.

Over the years, Anna and her descendants made some changes to the house's decor. Some original furnishings are gone; others have been reupholstered or moved to different rooms. Many of the objects discussed in the accompanying article, however, are still in place. The original walnut doors between the library and reception room are back, replacing the portieres from the 1880s. The lounge, listed on the 1872 invoice for library furnishings but not visible in the benchmark 1884 photograph, stands in a bedroom upstairs. The original reception-room carpet and a reproduction in the library make a vivid backdrop for the stately Rococo- and Renaissance-revival furniture, antimacassars, lace curtains, and other visual reminders of Minnesota's Victorian era.

The Alexander Ramsey House is open to the public from mid-April through Thanksgiving and during the Christmas season. Interpreters in period clothing lead tours through the house, describing the lifestyles of well-to-do Victorian families and their ser-

vants. Visitors can view the marvels of industrial-age technology newly available to homeowners and sample goods baked from Ramsey family recipes. For more information, call (612) 296-8760.

54-by-54-inch repeated pattern, appears to have had a narrow border. It was done in the recommended tertiary hues. On January 2, 1873, Alexander paid \$238.55 to his neighbor, John "Matthias" (Matheis), for "laying carpet, etc." Matheis, who sold carpets, oilcloths, window shades, wallpaper, and draperies, may also have provided and hung the original wallpaper.<sup>36</sup>

Miscellaneous textiles visible in the 1884 photograph include two doilies or antimacassars and a fringed throw. Antimacassars were created to keep macassar hair oil from staining upholstery; commercially produced in many sizes, they sold for as little as nine cents each. One antimacassar in the photograph, a square of white guipure d'art lace, is still in the house. While it may have been machine made, the other pieces in the 1884 picture appear handmade. Guipure lace, also known as darned netting or spiderwork, was one of many popular Victorian needle arts. Both Anna Ramsey and Marion Furness were proficient needleworkers, and Anita Furness recalled that her mother made the crochet pieces in the house.<sup>37</sup>

All in all, the Ramsey library was well within the mainstream of contemporary interior design. The colors and textures created an appropriately subdued atmosphere.<sup>38</sup> Solid-color upholstery fabrics minimized the visual textures and complemented the highly patterned carpet. Plushes and other pile fabrics created a sense of modest luxury. Even the eclectic mix of new and old furnishings was typical of the period. Almost half of the 50 historic photographs of libraries showed two or more furniture styles; the Turkish substyle appeared in one-third of them, while a simpler version of the Renaissance-revival style was found in nearly one-half. The earlier Rococo-revival style, however, was not common.

While the Ramsey library's wall treatments were simpler than others of the day, the portieres, wall-to-wall carpeting, and window treatments followed the current trends. By the late 1870s, wall-to-wall carpeting was considered unsanitary, since it could not easily be removed for cleaning. Photographs document that many Victorians nevertheless retained it. In contrast, the Ramseys

<sup>36</sup> Ramsey Papers, R41, F411; *St. Paul City Directory*, 1873, p. 304.

<sup>37</sup> Sophia F. Caulfeild and Blanche C. Saward, *Encyclopedia of Victorian Needlework*, (1882; reprint, New York: Dover, 1972), 1:233; Montgomery Ward, *Catalog* (Chicago: Spring and Summer 1884), 31-32; "Material Given by Quarfoth."

<sup>38</sup> Dewing, *Beauty in the Household*, 78; Smith, *Ornamental Interiors*, 125.

were fonder of antimacassars than the majority of Victorians whose libraries were captured in the 50 period photographs.

While the Victorian library had evolved into an informal family living space by the 1870s and 1880s, the parlor or reception room was still essentially a woman's province. As the site of public social interaction, it was meant to exhibit the home's "most brilliant aspect." In the parlor, the homemaker carried out "her mission as promoter of the beautiful" by exhibiting her refined taste, good judgment, and wisdom in selecting furnishings.<sup>39</sup>

Though some household-art publications argued against the need for formal parlors reserved exclusively for ceremonial purposes, the Ramseys had sufficient space to retain this special room. In fact, their house had two parlors—the "grand parlor" on the west side of the main hall, reserved for large events during the social season, and the smaller reception room, used year around for receiving and entertaining guests. On January 2, 1876, Anna wrote to Marion, "Yesterday being New Year's day the old custom of calling was observed; altho not so generally as in former years. . . . had about one hundred visitors." On January 1, 1883, Alexander's diary noted, "Wife says she had near 70 calls." Other letters and family diaries refer to callers as well as dinner guests, who were probably received in this room. Anna most likely entertained her reading circle there as well.<sup>40</sup>

Because the reception room or parlor showed the family's public face, it should be lavishly furnished with an eye to beauty and elegance. Tastemaker Harriet Prescott Spofford felt that only a lack of finances could justify simplicity. She also stated, "Providing there is space to move around, without knocking over the furniture, there is hardly likely to be too much in the room." The Ramsey finances were sufficient to furnish the reception room fashionably in 1872.<sup>41</sup>

Publications promoted a variety of color schemes for the parlor: peach, rose, ethereal green, gold, greenish yellow, blue-green, low tones (dulled or grayed hues), twilight shades,



*Rococo-revival armchair, part of the suite ordered from St. Louis in 1849, now in the library. Note the carpet, a reproduction of the original, and the antimacassar.*

blue, and cloudy reds. While red and blue hues were acceptable, Anna's selections were less subtle and more intense than the colors generally recommended.<sup>42</sup>

Whether purchased separately or en suite, sofas, divans, lounge or easy chairs, and a variety of light chairs for the ladies were required parlor accoutrements. The Ramseys' seven-piece suite in the Renaissance-revival Turkish substyle satisfied the need for both comfort and fashion. The upholstery was probably a red plush with tufting and fringe, like the large easy chair that was placed in the library. The suite's two divans (not visible in the photograph) most likely stayed in the reception room except during the winter when, as Marion Furness told her daughter Anita, "The piano has flitted, as is its annual custom, to the

<sup>39</sup> Jakob Von Falke, *Art in the Home* (Boston: L. Prang, 1879), 315.

<sup>40</sup> Ramsey Papers, R22, F14, R43, F567.

<sup>41</sup> Spofford, *Art Decoration*, 222; John A. Dougherty, comp., "Alexander Ramsey's Expenditures, 1867–1901," Ramsey Project research files.

<sup>42</sup> Spofford, *Art Decoration*, 215–16; Orrinsmith, *Drawing Room*, 26, 61; Church, *How to Furnish a Home*, 52; Dewing, *Beauty in the Household*, 108–110.

warmer clime of the reception room where it will pass the winter months.”<sup>43</sup> In the 90 historic photographs of parlors, sofas were placed either against the wall or at an oblique angle near a fireplace.

Among the other Renaissance-revival furnishings acquired in 1872 and documented in the 1884 photograph are five chairs, a jardiniere (ornamental plant or flower stand), and an inlaid parlor table. The open-walnut side chair is the pair from the seven-piece parlor. So, too, is one of the overstuffed easy chairs located at either side of the pier mirror; the other was ordered separately for \$52. The Turkish influence is evident in the peaked corners of the chair backs, their tassels, and the fringe. The same style chair is pictured in many periodicals, from *Boston* to *Denver*, suggesting it was both widely available and popular.<sup>44</sup> The occasional chair (behind the jardiniere) and the armchair (near the portiere) are two of many upholstered chairs that Anna Ramsey bought in 1872; Sarah Davis purchased the same style chair for her home. Listed on the 1872 invoice as bedroom furnishings, some cost \$64 per pair and others were \$24 for three. The shipping list referred to bedroom and parlor chairs in yellow, blue, and red.

The Krutina receipt also indicates that Anna Ramsey purchased a patent or platform rocker for

the reception room. Unfortunately, it is no longer in the house. Patent rockers catered to the Victorian interest in mechanical innovations and epitomized the late nineteenth-century ideal in comfortable seating. Perhaps it was so well used that the mechanism wore out and the chair was discarded.

Trade catalogs of the period confirm that a variety of revival furniture styles were available simultaneously, though some were more fashionable than others. Based on these, it appears that Anna Ramsey's purchases were not fashionable and comfortable but also relatively expensive. For example, at approximately the same time that she paid \$351 for the Krutina parlor suite, Coogan Brothers of New York offered a similar one for \$18.<sup>45</sup>

The window treatments in the reception room were less elaborate than most tastemakers would recommend and simpler than those in many contemporary parlors. Intense blue lambrequins that were embellished with hand-applied cording, fringe, and flat ornamentation

trimmings at the windows. Purchased from A. T. Stewart's carpet and upholstery department in the summer of 1872, they topped lace curtains obtained from Lord & Taylor through A. T. Stewart's retail department for \$17 per pair. These may have been guipure lace, since the inserts appear similar

*Inexpensive suite of Turkish-style parlor furniture from Coogan Brothers catalog, about 1876*

**PARLOR FURNITURE.**

Good Turkey-Turn	12
Sofa Bed	24
Great Easy Chair	34
Sofa Rocker	44

**WE CAN SELL CHEAPER THAN ANY HOUSE IN THE CITY.**

**Trunks of Liberty.**  
1788.

January 2.—Georgia accepted the Constitution.  
January 9.—Connecticut accepted the Constitution.  
February 6.—Massachusetts accepted the Constitution.  
April 28.—Maryland accepted the Constitution.  
May 21.—South Carolina accepted the Constitution.

June 21.—New Hampshire accepted the Constitution.  
June 26.—Virginia accepted the Constitution.  
July 26.—New York accepted the Constitution.  
April 30.—Meeting of the first United States Congress under the Constitution, at New York.  
April 30.—George Washington, of Virginia, inaugurated the first President of the United States.

<sup>43</sup> Ramsey Papers, R31, F415.

<sup>44</sup> Lewis, Turner, and McQuillin, *Opulent Interiors*, 155; Seale, *Tasteful Interlude*, 174; Lawrence A. Ray, "Victorian Material Culture in Memphis, Tennessee: The Mallory-Neely House Interiors as Artifacts" (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1988), 664.

<sup>45</sup> Coogan Brothers, *Illustrated Catalog of Furniture* (New York, [1876?]), 21, 23.

to the library's extant antimacassar. Anna's curtains were probably luxurious and expensive; an 1881 Lord & Taylor catalog offered guipure lace curtains at prices ranging from \$8 to \$20 per window.<sup>46</sup>

Tastemakers who devoted detailed attention to the parlor generally advocated soft, rich draperies that harmonized with the decor of the room. Some publications illustrated lambrequins; others opposed them. Spofford felt that lambrequins with lace curtains had an airy effect and were satisfactory when finances did not allow a more elaborate treatment. Because Anna's other choices showed that she could have afforded more, it may be that the simple window treatments merely reflected her tastes. While the use of lace curtains without heavy draperies was somewhat atypical for the period, it no doubt created the desired "light and airy" effect. These curtains remained in place well into the twentieth century. They are clearly visible in a photo of Anita Furness from about 1915.<sup>47</sup>

The reception room wallpaper is not visible in the 1884 photograph, except for a narrow strip of border reflected in the pier mirror. Wallpaper in light colors with stylized floral or similar motifs in low-contrast, overall patterns was widely recommended by household-art books and would have been visually consistent with the library paper.

The reception room's wall-to-wall carpet was more formal and elegant than the library's and served as an interesting background for the unpatterned pile upholstery. Purchased from A. T. Stewart's in 1872, it is still in use (see photograph on page 204). The pattern has red, stylized motifs on a grayish-cream ground. The carpet was manufactured in 27-inch strips with a 17-inch multicolored mitered border in red, blue, green, and black.

Other typical Victorian flourishes visible in the 1884 photograph were the machine-made anti-

macassars and a round "center" table with its embroidered or appliqued tablecloth, placed in the middle of the reception room. One tastemaker advised her readers that a parlor table "looks cozy and delightful, and as though the room was really lived in and enjoyed."<sup>48</sup>

Like the library, the Ramseys' reception room generally followed mainstream fashions. Although the Turkish furnishings did not supply light and airy elegance, they were, nevertheless, very fashionable and connoted luxury and comfort, which were also important values. This was, in fact, the most popular style, shown in almost half of the 90 period photographs, followed by a simpler version of Renaissance revival. On the other hand, the Ramsey reception room housed only Turkish pieces, while more than half of the contemporary parlors contained at least two furniture styles.

The appearance, ambience, and use of the Ramsey house's library and reception rooms provides insights into the family's lifestyle not recorded in their copious journals and letters. As the cult of domesticity dictated, Anna Ramsey and Marion Furness took seriously their role as homemakers, keeping current with new trends. Changes in the rooms over the years attest to the women's knowledge of evolving styles: while Anna's tastes dominated in the selection of the original Renaissance-revival furnishings, Marion's "artistic" influence became evident in the early 1880s. If we know how to read them, the rooms' mute furnishings express the family's strong ties to tradition and heritage balanced by their consumerism and the desire to be fashionable, modern Victorians.

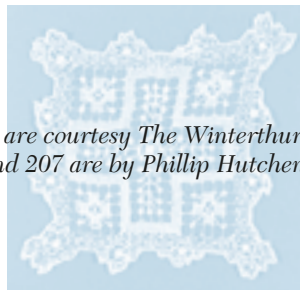
---

<sup>46</sup> Lord and Taylor, *Catalog* (1881; reprint, Princeton, N.J.: Pyne Press, 1971), 161. An extant lambrequin, purchased for the second-floor snuggery, has the same fabric and color as specified on the receipt for those in the reception room.

<sup>47</sup> Spofford, *Art Decoration*, 179; Williams and Jones, *Beautiful Homes*, 110; Rhoda and Agnes Garrett, *Suggestions for House Decoration in Painting, Woodwork, and Furniture* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1877), 28; photo in MHS collections.

<sup>48</sup> Church, *How to Furnish a Home*, 68.

*The illustrations on p. 205 and p. 208 are courtesy The Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection; those on p. 199, 202, 204, and 207 are by Phillip Hutchens. All others are in the MHS collections.*







Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).