Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey

Autobiography and Letters
Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey

From an oil portrait by Lloyd Branson. Picture furnished through courtesy of Dr. Ramsey's great granddaughter, Ellen Le Noir, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. (Frontispiece.)
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Foreword

In the wake of Todd Groce’s *Mountain Rebels: East Tennessee Confederates and the Civil War, 1860–1870*, there has been renewed interest in Confederates in a section of Tennessee long noted for its Unionist sympathies during the Civil War. No single person was a greater exemplar of pro-slavery East Tennesseans loyal to the South than Dr. James Gettys McGready Ramsey (1796–1884). Dr. Ramsey was a multifaceted individual whose activities left a permanent imprint on the political, social, and economic development of antebellum East Tennessee. He was a physician, public official, religious leader, banker, railroad advocate, scholar, staunch secessionist, and writer of an invaluable early chronicle of Tennessee history in 1853, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century*.

Perhaps no one better demonstrates the complexity of capitalism in the antebellum South than does Dr. Ramsey. An early supporter of efforts to build a canal system to bypass navigational hazards on the Tennessee River in order to connect Knoxville merchants and regional farmers to markets in the wider world through the Mississippi River, Ramsey by the 1830s had turned, against the wishes of many of his fellow boosters, to railroads as providing the best economic avenue for East Tennessee to reach larger markets. His efforts culminated in the completion by 1855 of the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad, connecting Knoxville to both Virginia and South Carolina. As Todd Groce points out, the railroad bound East Tennessee much more closely to the lower South, which was in need of the region’s wheat, corn, beef, and pork. Likewise, Kenneth W. Noe argues that this same railroad through Southwest Virginia would link that region politically and economically to the rest of Virginia and the South. Interestingly, Dr. Ramsey favored all commercial development but frowned on industrialization; for other Knoxville railroad advocates, such as William G. Brownlow, who saw the railroads as an avenue to industrialization, he had only contempt. Indeed, Parson Brownlow would become Dr. Ramsey’s major antagonist long before the Civil War.

The war would prove disastrous to Ramsey and his family. Long a staunch states-rights Democrat, he publicly and enthusiastically supported secession
in 1861 and later faithfully served the Confederacy as a treasury agent and field surgeon. Union occupation of Knoxville brought the destruction of his home, Mecklenburg, and the burning of his library of four thousand volumes and original documents of early Tennessee history. In exile in North Carolina after the war, he would write his autobiography, which dealt mainly with the family’s experience during the Civil War. His autobiography is especially notable in chronicling Ramsey’s attitudes and emotions during the conflict, as well as actual events, such as the death of one of his sons while serving in the Confederate army. In 1954, William B. Hesseltine edited the autobiography, which, together with an introduction and numerous letters Ramsey wrote to his friend and fellow historian in Wisconsin, Lyman C. Draper, was published in a single volume by the Tennessee Historical Commission.

The sufferings so graphically related of the Ramsey family during the Civil War are primarily instructive to social historians interested in attitudes and self-images of families like the Ramseys in a critical border state divided in its loyalties. Historians have long been intrigued by the paradox that so many southerners exhibited characteristics that were virtually indistinguishable from those of other Americans in the nineteenth century. Ramsey is a paradox within a paradox—a pro-southern advocate who nevertheless extols the democratic virtues of East Tennesseans in the Watauga Association and the aborted “state” of Franklin as quintessentially American. He attacks George Bancroft unfairly for not giving more weight to his frontiersmen’s role at the Battle of King’s Mountain in determining the outcome of the American Revolution, yet sees no contradiction in invoking the memory of these liberty-loving early frontiersmen in Tennessee to justify secession and the defense of slavery.

Dr. Ramsey’s eventual return and readmittance to an honored position in Knoxville society illustrates the change and continuity in East Tennessee following the Civil War. He remained blatantly racist, and largely unreconstructed politically, but his earlier reputation as a historian and civic leader would once again bring praise and acclaim during his declining years. He continued his work with the East Tennessee Historical Society, which he had earlier helped to found in 1834, and served as president of the Tennessee Historical Society between 1874 and 1884. In its poignant description of life during the Civil War and Reconstruction, Ramsey’s autobiography is thus an extremely readable and valuable social history of East Tennessee, demonstrating graphically both the upheavals and the persistence of community during these turbulent years.

Finally, I am intrigued at the traces of later images of the region from Ramsey’s writings, which would appear during the 1870s and 1880s in the fiction of local colorists who used East Tennessee to create enduring stereotypes
of southern Appalachia, as outlined by Henry D. Shapiro's *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness*. So many of the characteristics of Mary Noailles Murfree's isolated southern mountaineers, for example, seem to borrow heavily from Ramsey's *Annals of Tennessee*. Could Dr. Ramsey, with the best of intentions, have unwittingly contributed to the construction of some of these stereotypes?

The introduction to Dr. Ramsey's *Autobiography and Letters* is written by Professor Robert Tracy McKenzie, whose own excellent book, *One South or Many? Plantation Belt and Upcountry in Civil War–Era Tennessee*, was published in 1994. Dr. McKenzie, now at the University of Washington, Seattle, is presently working on a study of Knoxville during the Civil War, and Dr. Ramsey's autobiography accordingly (and serendipitously, as Dr. Ramsey would say) intersects his own current research interests. Consequently, he ably contextualizes Dr. Ramsey within both Appalachian historiography and the many current debates in southern and Civil War history about capitalism and entrepreneurship as important agencies for southern nationalism. Dr. McKenzie also manifestly uses the Ramsey autobiography to challenge stereotypes concerning both Appalachian isolation and the overwhelming Unionism of East Tennessee.

**Durwood Dunn**

**Tennessee Wesleyan College**
Introduction

When the Tennessee Historical Commission first published the autobiography and correspondence of Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey nearly a half-century ago, distinguished Civil War historian William B. Hesseltine emphasized in his introduction the physician’s signal contributions to his community, to his state, and to the South. Such emphasis was not misplaced. Born near Knoxville only a year after Tennessee entered the Union, James Gettys McGready Ramsey devoted most of his eighty-four years to the economic and intellectual improvement of his native East Tennessee. Without question, he was a man of extraordinary energy and wide-ranging interests. His “first” profession was medicine, which he followed—with occasional interruptions—for some six decades, conducting an extensive practice that frequently took him twenty to thirty miles from home by horse or buggy. Between the early 1820s and the end of the 1850s, he also managed his large farm outside of Knoxville, served as a trustee of three colleges and director of two railroads, sold bonds as an agent for the state of Tennessee, was president of two banks, and in his “spare time” published a history of Tennessee from the beginnings of white settlement until 1800. During the political crisis of the 1850s, Ramsey was a staunch advocate of southern independence, and after Tennessee seceded from the Union he also labored tirelessly on behalf of the Confederacy, adding to his already numerous responsibilities the role of Confederate treasury agent. Sixty-eight years old when the Civil War ended and financially devastated as a result of it, he scaled back his public service after 1865 but continued to think and write about the history of the Volunteer State, and for the last ten years of his life he served as president of the Tennessee Historical Society.

In and of itself, Ramsey’s remarkable and multifaceted lifetime of public service warrants the republication of this volume, and it is indeed a good thing that it will again be widely available in print. The publication is timely for other reasons as well. Like any autobiography, Ramsey’s is not about himself only; it provides a window into the world that he inhabited, or at least that world as he understood and remembered it, and would have wished us to
understand and remember it. Ramsey's world was that of southern Appalachia during a crucial period—a world affected profoundly by economic change and turned upside down by the community conflict, material devastation, and personal tragedy brought about by civil war. Ramsey's Autobiography and Letters, consequently, offers important insights into the fields of Civil War and Appalachian history, and it perfectly complements a number of striking recent trends in the way that scholars are approaching those areas of study. These trends inform the questions we might wish to ask of Dr. Ramsey, and they will undoubtedly influence the significance that we attach to the historical record he has left us.

In the field of Civil War studies, two broad developments over the last generation are particularly pertinent. First of all, historians are beginning to pay more attention to "life behind the lines" during the war. In sheer quantity, no aspect of the Civil War has been studied in more detail than its military dimension. To cite but one example, the Library of Congress contains 304 titles on the Battle of Gettysburg alone, and interested readers can now read entire anthologies of essays on each individual day of that three-day battle, as well as an entire monograph on the afternoon of the first day. My guess is that the printed word in this case accurately reflects popular values. It is probably no exaggeration to say that, for most Americans, the history of the Civil War is the history of its contending armies.

Taken as a whole, the thrust of Civil War scholarship over the past few decades has been aimed at forging a much more complex, multidimensional understanding of the conflict. An important part of the process lies in finding more room for the home front relative to the front line, and in so doing giving a greater voice to that mostly silent majority: southern civilians—black and white, slave and free—who were caught up in the conflict and yet never experienced it from the vantage point of Devil's Den or Seminary Ridge. The republication of

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1 For an overview of recent scholarship, consult the essays in Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand, ed. James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper Jr. (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1998), in particular the essay by James L. Roark, "Behind the Lines: Confederate Economy and Society," 201–27.

2 The number of works that deal seriously with the Confederate home front has grown considerably in the last fifteen years. See, among many, Stephen V. Ash, Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860–1870: War and Peace in the Upper South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1988); Martin Crawford, Ashe County's Civil War: Community and Society in the Appalachian South (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 2001); Durwood Dunn, Cades Cove: The Life and Death of a Southern Appalachian Community, 1818–1937 (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1988); Wayne K. Durrill, War of Another Kind: A Southern Community in the Great Rebellion (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990); Thomas G. Dyer: Secret Yankees:
Ramsey’s *Autobiography and Letters* will help in precisely this way. Too old to shoulder a gun in 1861, the physician and historian was nevertheless caught up in the maelstrom of war. Readers will experience, vicariously and imperfectly, the passion of his commitment to the Confederate cause and his anguish when the cause claimed the lives of two sons and two daughters. They will observe the countless small acts of defiance on the part of his daughters during the Union occupation of Knoxville, and follow their father’s flight from his lifelong home. Finally, they will perceive in Ramsey’s postwar writings the stubborn persistence of the ideology that undergirded his wartime commitments.

Perhaps because of their increasing attention to the home front, scholars of the Civil War have also laid to rest the concept of an undifferentiated, monolithic Confederacy. In part, this has been a byproduct of historians’ greater sensitivity to the geographic diversity of the South; we are now far less likely to equate the history of “the South” with the history of the cotton belt writ large. Historians have also recognized that the stress of war often (but not always) divided southerners along lines defined by class, race, gender, partisan loyalty, or commercial orientation, among other factors. As a consequence, much recent scholarship focuses on upcountry regions of the Confederacy in which resistance to Confederate authority was the most pronounced. Again, Dr. Ramsey’s *Autobiography and Letters* seems tailored to address historians’ recent concerns. Ramsey’s home was the Valley of East Tennessee, a prosperous small-farming region containing few large slaveholders or plantations. In 1860 less than 10 percent of free farm households owned slaves, and less than one in a hundred owned as many as twenty. It was a stock-raising and grain-growing region, and locals were fond of calling it the “Switzerland of America.” In sum, the valley was a “poor man’s rich land” strikingly different from the plantation belt of the Deep South that for so long

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*Citations*


3 In addition to the works by Crawford, Dunn, Insoe and McKinney, and Noe cited above, see the essays in *The Civil War in Appalachia: Collected Essays*, ed. Kenneth W. Noe and Shannon H. Wilson (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1997).
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has captivated historians. The area was politically distinctive as well; when
the majority of Tennesseans voted to separate from the Union in June 1861,
East Tennesseans voted against secession by more than two to one, and the
region immediately became the leading stronghold of Unionism within the
Confederacy.

The Autobiography and Letters also complements recent trends in the study
of nineteenth-century Appalachia. Southern Appalachia has prompted more
than its share of crude stereotypes, and much of the small but growing litera­
ture on the region is dedicated to exploding them. Two such stereotypes seem
particularly relevant to Ramsey's East Tennessee. The first involves the widely
held view of southern Appalachia as a land almost wholly isolated from the
broader economic currents that swept across America during the decades after
the War of 1812. Several recent studies of the area, however, agree in finding
an impressive degree of market involvement among Appalachian households.
We now know that by the eve of the Civil War the production patterns of the
region's farmers ranged across a broad continuum, from small subsistence
"homesteaders" who eschewed the market entirely and eked out a marginal liv­
ing, to far larger operators who concentrated primarily on the export of food­
stairs to consumers in distant markets. In between these extremes lay the
majority of Appalachian households which, although never enmeshed entirely
in the market economy, nevertheless produced significant surpluses for com­
mercial exchange. Most apparently desired to perpetuate the independence and
security of the family homestead while turning a profit as well.

Dr. Ramsey devoted much of his energy prior to the Civil War to enhanc­
ing East Tennessee's connections to distant markets. He served as a commis­
ioner on a state board overseeing river improvements, and he was a supporter
of a steamboat company established by his brother with the goal of bringing

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reliable steamboat service to Knoxville. He never placed much stock in these undertakings, however. Struck by the natural obstacles to the smooth navigation of the Tennessee River, as well as by the sheer physical distance to Memphis and New Orleans, Ramsey was convinced that the region’s future prosperity lay in trade with the South Atlantic states, not with the Southwest. Toward this end he worked assiduously for nearly three decades to promote the construction of a railroad that would connect Knoxville with the markets of Georgia and the Carolinas and, through them, with northern and international markets as well. Such a railroad, he firmly believed, would revolutionize the region’s “insulated position,” drive up land values and agricultural prices, and stop the “constant emigration of the industrious and enterprising from East Tennessee to sections of the country having greater commercial facilities” (18). Ramsey’s vision was realized in 1855 with the completion of the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad (of which he was a director), which connected Knoxville with Dalton, Georgia, and, via Dalton, with the South Atlantic seaports of Savannah and Charleston. The benefits that he anticipated were also immediately forthcoming, at least with regard to agricultural prices. As late as 1850, corn sold in Knoxville at more than 40 percent below prices quoted in national market centers such as Charleston or Philadelphia. By the end of the 1850s, however, the price differential had decreased by nearly three quarters, indicating that East Tennessee was being rapidly integrated into the national economy.7

A second pervasive stereotype of southern Appalachia concerns the region’s supposedly “non-southern” or “anti-southern” characteristics before and during the Civil War. Although it comes in a number of versions, this stereotype portrays the region as one untouched by extensive involvement with slavery and untainted by disloyalty to the Union. Whites in southern Appalachia were largely ignorant of the South’s “peculiar institution,” according to this view, and largely as a consequence they “clave to the old flag” during the war, as Berea College president William Frost put it.8 Interestingly, two Knoxvilleians were among the earliest and most important architects of this image. The first of these individuals figures prominently in Ramsey’s autobiography, although Ramsey never deigned to mention by name the man he called the “one enemy that I know of in the world.” This adversary was William G. “Parson” Brownlow, an outspoken Methodist minister and the caustic editor of the Knoxville

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Whig. A staunch Unionist, Brownlow damned both secession and the Confederacy in the columns of the Whig until local authorities finally charged him with treason in November 1861. Banished from the Confederacy a few months later by order of the Secretary of War, the editor traveled to the North and immediately embarked on a triumphal speaking tour. Addressing large and enthusiastic audiences from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Portland, Maine, Brownlow identified himself as an “unconditional, straight-out Union man.” To underscore the depth of his loyalty, the “martyr missionary” declared that, if supporters of the “so-called” Confederacy “are mad enough, if they are fools enough to make the issue of Slavery and no Union, or Union and no Slavery—I am for the Union.”

As historian Richard Drake has commented, to many northerners the “Fighting Parson” came to embody the typical southern mountainer: the “hard-pressed lover of freedom who held strongly to the Union.”

A generation later, another Knoxville Unionist labored to reinforce this stereotype. Ironically, Thomas W. Humes was the step-brother of J. G. M. Ramsey, although Ramsey alluded to him but briefly in his autobiography and made no mention of the connection. Before the Civil War, Humes had served as rector of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Knoxville, and for almost two decades after the war he held the post of president of East Tennessee University (now the University of Tennessee). In 1888 Humes authored The Loyal Mountaineers of Tennessee, a wholly uncritical work that one modern reviewer aptly labels a “four-hundred-page rhapsody” on the theme

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9 Portrait and Biography of Parson Brownlow, the Tennessee Patriot (Indianapolis: Asher & Co., 1862), 30. Brownlow interrupted his lecture tour long enough to pen an account of his experiences under the Confederate “reign of terror.” Sales of the volume, known popularly as “Parson Brownlow’s Book,” reached 100,000 before the war’s end. See W. G. Brownlow, Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Secession (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1862); a condensed edition has recently been published as Secessionists and Other Scoundrels: Selections from Parson Brownlow’s Book (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1999), edited by Stephen V. Ash. At the time that Ramsey was writing his autobiography, Brownlow was U.S. Senator from Tennessee, having just completed two terms as governor of the state. For an overview of Brownlow’s life, see E. Merton Coulter, William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highl(ands (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1937), recently republished by the University of Tennessee Press and including a new introduction by Stephen V. Ash.


11 Thomas Humes was the son of Margaret Cowan Humes, the third wife of Dr. Ramsey’s father, Francis Alexander Ramsey. Humes was only five years old at the time of the ill-fated marriage (F. A. Ramsey died of pneumonia only six months later), and was eighteen years younger than his step-brother. See The French Broad-Holston County: A History of Knox County, Tennessee, ed. Mary U. Rothrock (Knoxville: East Tennessee Historical Society, 1946), 431–32, 471–72.
of Appalachian patriotism. 12 East Tennesseans presented to the nation a “splendid example of unadulterated patriotism,” Humes maintained, which was grounded in a “deep and strong love for their whole country.” Their commitment to slavery, on the other hand, paled in comparison:

The mountaineers, strictly speaking, felt no concern about the institution of slavery itself, and knew but little [of it]. . . . Generally they looked upon slavery as something foreign to their social life, but they had no imperative, philanthropic impulses to contend against it. They would have been displeased at its coming near their homes in the imperious majesty it wore in the cotton States. At the same time they were satisfied to let men of the South keep serfs at pleasure, but they counted it no business of theirs to help in the work. If the perpetuity of the Union or that of slavery were the question at issue, they would have no hesitation in deciding. Let slavery perish and the Union live. 13

Ramsey’s Autobiography and Letters undermines considerably such assertions of Appalachia’s distinctiveness during the Civil War. Ironically, had the autobiography been published in the form that Ramsey intended, i.e., without any accompanying correspondence, it would have served to reinforce Humes’s contention that slavery was an unimportant issue to Appalachian whites during the Civil War. Ramsey owned eight slaves when the war began, but one would never know it from reading his autobiography as initially drafted. There are a couple of brief references to Ramsey’s son’s “boy” Wesley, a vague allusion to “some Negroes” traveling with his wife and daughters (108), and a brief description of a nearby Unionist as a “humane and indulgent master” (121). Beyond these, one could read the original version of the autobiography without ever suspecting that slavery existed at the time of the conflict, much less that it was an issue of crucial significance. As such, Ramsey's autobiography was consistent with a larger trend in postbellum southern literature aimed at minimizing the role of slavery in the sectional struggle. 14

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Happily, when William Hesseltine decided to edit Ramsey's autobiography for publication seventy years after his death, he determined to supplement it with two important forms of correspondence. The first was a large number of letters, spanning four decades, from Ramsey to Wisconsin historian Lyman Draper. Those from the antebellum period Hesseltine inserted rather early in the autobiography, as a chapter entitled "Annals of Tennessee: Letters of a Historian"; the remaining and more extensive postwar correspondence he arranged to constitute the final five chapters of the work. Under the title "Industrial Necessities of the South," Hesseltine also included a series of seven letters that Ramsey wrote in 1858 to L. W. Spratt, an official with the Southern Commercial Convention held that year. These candid missives—which Ramsey expressly indicated were not to be published as a part of his autobiography—are particularly revealing. In them he characterized slavery as a blessing both to master and slave and as central to the irrepressible struggle between the regions.

Ramsey began with the assertion that the South suffered from a serious shortage of labor, a deficiency that could only be eliminated by removing the congressional ban on the transatlantic slave trade. Dismissing European immigrants as ignorant of southern agricultural methods and ill prepared for the southern climate, he insisted that "the South can depend on African labor and on the African laborer alone" (87). Inasmuch as it would rescue African savages from paganism and cannibalism, the importation of additional slaves, he insisted, was "humane, benevolent, scriptural, Christian, patriotic, and perhaps politic and expedient" (88).

The doctor framed his call for the renewal of the international slave trade with a general defense of slavery per se as a natural and socially beneficial institution. Echoing George Fitzhugh, the most famous proslavery apologist of his day, Ramsey derided the concept of perfect human equality as an absurd abstraction that existed nowhere in reality. Some form of servitude obtained

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15 A long-time professor at the University of Wisconsin, Hesseltine first became interested in Ramsey's autobiography while conducting research for a biography of Draper, the founder of the Wisconsin Historical Society. See William B. Hesseltine, Pioneer's Mission: The Story of Lyman Copeland Draper (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1964).

16 Spratt was a newspaper editor from Charleston, South Carolina, who had been appointed head of a committee charged with investigating the desirability of reopening the international slave trade. See Vicki Vaughn Johnson, The Men and the Vision of the Southern Commercial Conventions, 1845-1871 (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press), 143-48.

17 For the similarity between the proslavery arguments of Ramsey and Fitzhugh, see George Fitzhugh, Sociology for the South; or, The Failure of Free Society (Richmond: A. Morris, 1854), especially 82–95.
in every society and was “inseparable from civilization” (89). Slavery was only a more intense and more perfect form of servitude, and Africans were uniquely suited for enslavement because of their inherent racial characteristics. “The Negro is below the white race in his physical, moral and intellectual nature,” he explained. The Negro race “is remarkable for its improvidence, indolence, submissiveness to the superior race, adaptation to labor under a tropical sun, its capacity to resist malarian influences, . . . and its incapacity for civilization and culture” (91). Fortunately, the African laborer was also “at home and happy in the field” (87).

Beyond its benefits to the slaves themselves, slavery was also responsible, in Ramsey’s view, for the South’s superiority to the free-labor North. Slavery—and slavery alone—was the cause of the South’s higher form of civilization, due to its “tendency not only to improve but to elevate, refine and ennoble society and to foster a spirit of freedom and independence” (93). It is in this context that one must understand Ramsey’s scathing indictment of northern character, both in his correspondence and in his autobiography. If northerners were “less intelligent, less virtuous, less sensible of their personal rights and personal liberty” (40), Ramsey attributed those deficiencies directly to their free-labor economy and to egalitarian doctrines that would ultimately end in “agrarianism, radicalism, . . . anarchy and ruin” (96). The stark differences in northern and (white) southern character meant that “we are essentially two people” (94), and to the doctor’s mind this implied that separation was ultimately inevitable. All his talk about Jeffersonian theories of state sovereignty notwithstanding, the doctor was convinced that the days of the Union were numbered, less because of any particular policy initiative of the federal government than due to a fundamental incompatibility between the slave and free states.

Significantly, most white East Tennesseans appear to have shared Ramsey’s commitment to slavery when the secession crisis developed, although few would have gone so far as to call for a reopening of the slave trade (which even Ramsey would not do publicly). Like Parson Brownlow and Thomas Humes, modern historians have sometimes portrayed the region as a bastion of “unconditional” Unionism, meaning that the vast majority of whites were prepared to choose the preservation of the Union without slavery over the perpetuation of slavery without the Union. As the likelihood of a national rupture grew steadily, no Unionist leaders in the region came forward to declare their willingness

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to sacrifice slavery rather than jeopardize the Union. To do so would have been political suicide. Instead, they worked to alleviate tensions by emphasizing that slavery was not in imminent danger, all the while stressing their willingness to defend the institution should northern Republicans take unconstitutional measures against it. Even Brownlow—who appeared before northern audiences during the Civil War as an “unconditional, straight-out Union man”—expressed his willingness prior to the war to die for the southern cause if the federal government became a tool of abolitionists. As he told a Philadelphia audience in 1858, the right of “Hamitic servitude” was guaranteed by the Constitution and the laws of God, “and these rights we intend to enjoy, or to a man we will die, strung along Mason and Dixon’s line, with our faces looking North!”

When Knoxville Unionists parted ways with Ramsey after the attack on Fort Sumter, they did so in large part because they saw the Deep South—not the North—as irresponsibly forcing an unnecessary showdown, and because they fully expected slavery to survive the legitimate efforts of the federal government to reestablish its authority. They were wrong in this expectation, of course, but the momentum of events unleashed by the war carried them to ever more radical positions concerning slavery, including, ultimately, a willingness to stand firm by the Union even at the expense of the extinction of slavery itself. In a sense, then, “unconditional unionism” was a position that most East Tennessee Unionists developed during the Civil War, not before.

If the original version of Ramsey’s autobiography had little to say about white East Tennesseans’ attachment to slavery, its descriptions of wartime Knoxville speak vividly to the bitter internal divisions within Appalachia during the Civil War that Humes also chose to de-emphasize. It is no exaggeration to say that the secession crisis split Knoxville right down the middle. Although the rural areas of Knox County were overwhelmingly pro-Union (voting against secession in the June 1861 referendum by more than four to one), the voters of Knoxville were almost evenly divided, ultimately opposing separation by a mere thirty-six votes out of more than seven hundred cast. Although its population was just over four thousand when the war began, the “metropolis of East Tennessee” (as boosters liked to call it) was still the largest town within a radius of more than a hundred miles and was

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20 The votes for Knoxville and rural Knox County are based on figures reported by the Knoxville Daily Register, June 11, 1861, altered to exclude the votes of 436 Confederate soldiers from other counties who were training on the outskirts of Knoxville at the time of the state referendum and allowed to vote. The Register included the soldiers’ votes in its tally and reported

Long after the Civil War, ex-Confederate president Jefferson Davis exhorted the future historians of the South to eschew impartiality and work instead to vindicate the honor of the region. “I will frankly acknowledge,” Davis told a gathering in New Orleans in the 1880s, “that I would distrust the man who served the Confederate cause and was capable of giving a disinterested account of it. . . . I would not give twopence for a man whose heart was so cold that he could be quite impartial.”\footnote{Quoted in Pressly, Americans Interpret Their Civil War, 113.} There was no need to worry with regard to one Tennessee historian, at least. Ramsey’s autobiography is no “disinterested account.” By his own report, when the war came Ramsey “entered into the support of the southern cause with every energy of mind, soul, and body” (99), and that level of commitment did not fade after Appomattox, but rather continued to infuse the autobiography that he drafted five years later. One cannot read it without feeling the doctor’s passionate resentment of the “Yankees” who had driven him from his family, burned down his home, and taken the lives—as he reckoned it, at least—of four members of his family, “lost in a righteous cause though not lost cause” (259). Thus readers should not approach the latter half of the autobiography as an objective narrative of how things “really were” in wartime Knoxville, but rather, in a sense, as a perpetuation of the war by the pen if not the sword.

It is unfortunate, but perhaps not accidental, that Ramsey had relatively little to say about the period prior to early September 1863, during which Knoxville was continuously under Confederate control. There are brief references to his occasional services as a physician for local troops, as well as somewhat fuller treatment of his appointment as a Confederate “Depository,” or
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agent for the Confederate Treasury Department. Otherwise, Ramsey focused almost exclusively on the period after the Confederate evacuation of the town, during which Unionist sympathizers frequently manifested great bitterness and a considerable taste for retribution. The origins of such animosity, however, were in large measure rooted in experiences from the first half of the war. In the aftermath of Tennessee’s secession, most Knoxville Unionists appeared to desire, above all, to be left alone. A handful made the dangerous trek through Confederate lines to Kentucky, where they could enlist in Union regiments, but the vast majority did not, because they were either unwilling to abandon their families or convinced that resistance was futile. These effectively issued their individual declarations of neutrality—a notoriously difficult path to follow in the midst of civil war.

In the beginning, Confederate authorities pursued a lenient policy in East Tennessee, essentially tolerating open expressions of political disagreement as long as they stopped short of tangible assistance to the enemy. This policy ended abruptly in November 1861, however, as the Confederate government cracked down hard on the region after small bands of Unionists burned down five railroad bridges between Bristol and Chattanooga in anticipation of an expected Federal invasion of the region. Although no Knoxvillians were directly implicated, and several of the town’s leading Unionists denounced the uprising, the environment of toleration was shattered irrevocably. Martial law was immediately imposed, Knoxville’s jails began to fill with political prisoners (including Parson Brownlow), and a gallows was erected for the execution of convicted bridge burners. Thereafter all outspoken Unionists became suspected saboteurs, and, by necessity, local loyalists adopted a policy of “prudent silence,” as a Knoxville attorney labeled it.23 Nothing did more to embitter them, however, than the implementation of the Confederate conscription act in April 1862. With the exception of those old enough, rich enough, or clever enough to avoid the draft, neutrality was no longer even a possibility. Conscription led to an emotional hardening, it seems, among Knoxville Unionists. Most had originally preferred to sit out the war, manifesting their “unionism” by their refusal to support the Confederacy in any active, positive way. The draft law forced them either to fight for a cause in which they did not believe or to abandon their families to the mercies of Confederate authorities while they served in the Union Army on some distant field. As they saw it, they had been literally driven from their homes, and it is no great wonder that they were angry when they finally returned.24

Ramsey’s autobiography offers compelling insight into the period of Union control over East Tennessee. Because the doctor’s responsibilities as Confederate Depository required that he leave Knoxville before the Union Army arrived, he learned second-hand of the burning of his home not long after his departure. After “the torch of the incendiary was applied to the beautiful old family mansion” (171), everything he owned there was either stolen or destroyed. Certainly the loss of his home of more than forty years was a great blow, but Ramsey repeatedly maintained—sincerely, I believe—that the greater tragedy was the loss of his historical manuscripts, including his draft of volume two of his history of Tennessee, the product of years of labor and love. That Ramsey’s house was singled out because he had been an outspoken secessionist is beyond dispute. There is no evidence, however, for his thinly veiled insinuation that Parson Brownlow had bribed a Michigan soldier to perform this act of “low revenge and private and personal hate” (173), an allegation that speaks volumes about the depth of passion and pain harbored by this mild-mannered physician. The same is true of his fantastic speculation that his son J. Crozier Ramsey, who died on New Year’s Day 1869, might have been poisoned by unnamed enemies who sought to foil his efforts in the local courts to regain the family’s Knoxville properties. The historical “truth” revealed by such charges consists in their testimony to the bitterness and bereavement of the father, not to the actual cause of his son’s early death.25


25 Equally unsubstantiated was William Brownlow’s insinuation that J. C. Ramsey was suffering from venereal disease. In early 1865 the editor reported that Crozier Ramsey was plagued by a “loathsome disease.” Long afterward, Brownlow’s son wrote in the margins of the same issue that the younger Ramsey died of this “loathsome disease, having become so rotten & loathsome that no decent boarding house or restaurant would board him & he was compelled to live and die in his hired batchelor [sic] quarters with an old negro to bring him his food.” See Brownlow’s Knoxville Whig and Rebel Ventilator, Jan. 11, 1865.
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While Ramsey was a refugee in Georgia, his wife and two of his daughters remained in Knoxville, and his account of their experiences offers an interesting glimpse into Union-occupied Knoxville. By convention, female civilians had been allowed somewhat greater latitude in revealing their political sympathies, if only through small symbolic acts such as paying visits to the Confederate wounded or stepping off the sidewalk into the street in order not to pass under the U.S. flags flown by Unionist merchants. Federal military authorities became increasingly impatient with such petty acts of feminine defiance, and Parson Brownlow—who resumed publication of his newspaper in November 1863 under the new title Brownlow’s Knoxville Whig and Rebel Ventilator—did all that he could to call attention to such acts. Brownlow complained in January 1864 that Knoxville was full of “hateful and disagreeable rebel women . . . as brazen as the devil” and argued that such “she-rebels” ought to be sent South.26 Within months the Union Provost Marshal had ordered above forty pro-Confederate civilians beyond the Union lines, many of them “she-rebels,” one of whom was Ramsey’s teenage daughter, Sue.27 Her main transgression, according to her father, was her concealment of a wounded Confederate soldier in her sister’s house south of Knoxville, an offense rendered all the more odious by her insulting habit of ignoring the attentions of Union officers.

The passions that made Knoxville inhospitable to Confederates after the arrival of the Union Army continued to smolder for years thereafter. After Sue Ramsey’s banishment, Ramsey’s wife and another daughter soon followed her into western Virginia, and much of the family eventually reunited in North Carolina around the end of the war. There they began life anew, renting a small farm near Charlotte that Ramsey styled “Exile’s Retreat.” With forty-two dollars to their name, Mrs. Ramsey became a tutor and, at age sixty-eight, the doctor resumed the practice of medicine, finding to his dismay that he now lived in an “exceedingly healthy” country (233). For several years they deemed it unsafe to return to Knoxville, where Unionists, encouraged by Brownlow’s scathing editorials, were seeking revenge through the courts against leading Confederates. Although he did

26 Brownlow’s Knoxville Whig and Rebel Ventilator, Jan. 9, 16, 1864.
not mention it, well before the war’s conclusion Dr. Ramsey and all four of his sons had been charged with treason against the United States by a grand jury impaneled by the U.S. Circuit Court in Knoxville. The charges were ultimately dropped, although in the case of J. C. Ramsey, not until February 1869, the month after his death. Doctor Ramsey does allude briefly to the difficulties he faced in regaining his property in East Tennessee. At about the same time that he was charged with giving aid and comfort to the enemy, the federal government ordered the confiscation of his two farms east of Knoxville as well as his three-story office building in town. Much to the doctor’s misfortune, the newly appointed U.S. Treasury Agent in charge of abandoned property was none other than his arch nemesis, William Brownlow.

J. G. M. Ramsey and his wife eventually moved back to Knoxville in 1872, but their life there bore little resemblance to the more pleasant times they had known before the war. Not only did their prewar mansion lie in ashes, but the town itself had been transformed in the doctor’s eyes. “Antagonisms were visible everywhere and in all pursuits. . . . The people were ruder and coarser, less gentle, less amiable” (253–54). Above all, Ramsey’s autobiography testifies to the stubborn persistence of the doctor’s antebellum world-view. The passions and convictions that framed his loyalty to the Confederacy in 1861 had become, if anything, more deeply entrenched. The doctor remained firmly committed to the doctrine of state sovereignty. He abhorred the postbellum political revolution that gave a “controlling voice” in public affairs to “his faithful [black] carriage driver” while disfranchising “the greatest benefactor of my native state” (247).

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28 “List of Parties Indicted or Presented in the United States Circuit Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee, for Treason and Giving Aid and Comfort to Those in Arms Against the United States,” entry 9, box 1, folder 3, Record Group 60, General Records of the Department of Justice, National Archives and Records Administration.

29 Minute Book B, 1865–1870, 528, U.S. Circuit Court, Northern Division, Knoxville, Eastern District, Tennessee, National Archives and Records Administration—Southeast Region.

30 Brownlow ordered the confiscation of real estate owned by J. G. M. Ramsey and his son Robert Ramsey, as well as personal property from the office of J. C. Ramsey. See “Papers of William G. ‘Parson’ Brownlow Received from the First Auditor’s Office,” Record Group 366, Records of Civil War Special Agencies of the Treasury Department, National Archives and Records Administration. Extensive materials related to Ramsey’s efforts to regain his Knoxville office building may be found in the Thomas A. R. Nelson Papers, McClung Historical Collection, Knox County Public Library.
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nearly himself. And he remained firmly convinced that the southern rebellion had in fact succeeded; it had “disintegrated the union forever and forever,” and time could never “heal the wound inflicted by the coercive policy of the Lincoln dynasty” (259). One of the most telling components of Ramsey’s personal papers is a handwritten sheet attached to his autobiography containing the poem “Lines from an Ex-Confederate.” The verses were set to music and became a popular postwar song (in the South) under the title “O I’m a Good Old Rebel.” After exulting that the Rebs had killed three hundred thousand Yankees—and wishing that it had been three million—the song concluded with a declaration that the unrepentant Ramsey might have written himself:

And I don’t want no pardon
For what I was and am,
I won’t be reconstructed
And I don’t care a dam.32

ROBERT TRACY McKENZIE
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

31 Ramsey’s views concerning black inferiority did not fade after emancipation. In a letter to Lyman Draper in 1871, he encouraged the Wisconsin historian to consider relocating in the South and touted the advantages of cheap Negro labor. “If they are well and justly treated by us Caucasians they never scruple about our supremacy. None of them aspire to equality. They are savages and barbarians, know it and submit to the inferiority it implies. Keep their stomachs full and with plenty of feed and sunshine they are more contented and less vicious than the white servants of the North” (265).

To

Frank W. Prescott
Citizen of Tennessee
who also has given his energies
to civic improvement.
Dr. James Gettys McGready Ramsey, Tennessee historian, left a deep and lasting impression on the life of his native and beloved state. Although later generations remembered him only for his historical writing, his contemporaries knew him as a man of exceptional versatility whose varied activities extended from the practice of medicine to the financing of railroads. He was a canal commissioner and a school commissioner, the president of banks and a farmer, a Presbyterian elder and a poet, a register of deeds, a contributor to magazines, a Confederate treasury agent, a postmaster, an operator of a ferry, a trustee of colleges, and a philosopher who thought deeply upon the problems of the South and the nature of Southern people. He was a fit representative of a Southern tradition, running back through Thomas Jefferson even to William Byrd the first, of cultured gentlemen who read the classics in their own libraries, took an active part in politics, contributed to the intellectual advancement of their communities, and stood in the forefront of movements for civic improvement.

"Patriotism," announced Dr. Ramsey as he was called upon to offer a toast at a banquet celebrating the arrival of the first steamboat in Knoxville: "Patriotism;—Something else than party zeal or a selfish scramble for offices." By that definition, Dr. Ramsey was a patriot. He loved his country of East Tennessee, his native state, and the South of which it was a part. He loved the federal union and mourned when selfish partisans scrambling for office seized its government, perverted its constitution, and sent its armies on a mission of plunder, and violence, and arson. "Have I a country to love?" he asked pitiably after the old order had passed away. As a patriot he had loved his land and given his energies, not to partisan zeal, but to social betterment.

His patriotism began with his family. He was proud of his Scotch-Irish ancestors, Alexanders and Ramseys, who had come as pioneers to western North Carolina and Tennessee. They had integrity, a respect
for learning, a sturdy devotion to liberty. They made the Watauga Association, the state of Franklin, and the state of Tennessee. They stood defiant at Alamance, and they adopted, so Dr. Ramsey firmly believed, the Resolves at Mecklenburg which were the first American Declaration of Independence. Part of Dr. Ramsey's patriotism found outlet in preserving from oblivion the story of the heroic deeds of these backwoods patriots.

He raised his own family in the tradition of his ancestors. He surrounded his eleven children with books and learning. He established a school for their instruction, sent his sons to college, and encouraged their intellectual development. He raised them in the rigid piety of the Presbyterians. He took pride in their youthful prowess and their early success in law, and business, and politics. He established them, as they came of age, as landed gentlemen. He gave them to the army of the South, and although he grieved at their misfortunes and he was heartbroken when his youngest son, Arthur, his "Benjamin," fell in battle, he had no self-reproaches. His patriotism and that of his children was the stern heritage of his pioneer ancestors.

In the same patriotic spirit he served his community. He began by studying medicine in Knoxville, and after attending lectures at the University of Pennsylvania he returned home to practice. He built "Mecklenburg" at the juncture of the French Broad and the Holston, maintained a ferry across the Tennessee River, and farmed the land between the two converging rivers. Across the Tennessee in time there arose Riverside, the home of his daughter Margaret Jane and his son-in-law T. Howard Dickson. At Mecklenburg he maintained a library of four thousand volumes and manuscripts and documents of early Tennessee history. There he entertained Presbyterian divines, statesmen and politicians, historians and literary men. Like his father's house at Swan Pond, he made Mecklenburg into a house of prayer and a seat of culture.

Yet his very residence at the exact spot where the Tennessee River began emphasized to him the unique nature of the Tennessee Valley. Throughout American history, settlement had followed the river valleys, and those who came to each successive valley first to occupy the fertile bottoms and control the strategic crossings possessed the wealth-producing locations and became the local leaders. Frequently they, like Dr. Ramsey, became the local aristocrats, dominating church, local government, and the institutions of culture in the community. But the Tennessee River
was not like the other rivers of America which flowed into the sea. For all practical purposes the Tennessee River, which began so promisingly at Dr. Ramsey’s doorstep, flowed, as a river, only to Moccasin Bend at the foot of Lookout Mountain. A freak of geology had interfered with geographic logic. Lookout Mountain, thrusting its precipitous cliffs across the river’s logical path to the Atlantic or the Gulf of Mexico, dispersed its waters and sent them uselessly westward around Moccasin Bend, over unnavigable Muscle Shoals, the Suck and the Boiling Pot. Only in a far-off corner of Alabama did the waters, gathering themselves together, find a channel northward to the Ohio. The Tennessee River was two rivers: one that ran from Knoxville to Chattanooga, the other from Florence to Paducah. For long years men of East Tennessee dreamed dreams of dredging a channel or cutting a canal to join these two widely separated rivers which shared the same water but had nothing else in common.

But not Dr. Ramsey. Though he cooperated with his neighbors in efforts to defy the accidents of nature and bring steamboats to Knoxville, and though he became a canal commissioner in futile efforts to salvage the wasted waters of the Tennessee, he put no faith in the river. He knew that the water from Mecklenburg to Moccasin Bend was, in effect, a land-locked lake with no navigable outlet. He turned his gaze away from the beautiful siren which stretched before his door to lure men on to Muscle Shoals. He looked instead across the mountains and saw a vision of a substitute river that ran on iron and could be made to go where men willed.

He succeeded his father on the board of a Knoxville bank, and he joined his brother, William B. A. Ramsey, in business enterprises. But his business instincts told him that water communication with far-off New Orleans was not the answer to the problem of East Tennessee’s isolation. He became the leading spokesman for a railroad which would link Knoxville to Charleston. This was the “Mecklenburg Politics,” and to promote his ideas Dr. Ramsey went to Charleston and aroused enthusiasm among South Carolina’s business leaders. Back in Knoxville, he sponsored public meetings and railroad conventions. When eventually his efforts bore fruit, he became president of a railroad bank, sold Tennessee bonds on the New York market, and bought the equipment for the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad.

His railroad interests—the whole logic, in fact, of the Mecklenburg politics—bound Dr. Ramsey to the South and to the domain of King
Cotton. But more than interest bound him to the land of Dixie. His whole emotional nature was enlisted in the Southern cause. He exemplified in Mecklenburg the highest ideal of Southern society: the landed gentleman of public and private virtue, of culture, of civic responsibility which was more than a scramble for offices. He was a patriarch guiding the lives of his slaves, his tenants, and his poorer neighbors and responsible to his Creator for their moral growth. He took pride in his Southern ancestors and in their achievements. He believed his own grandfather and his grandfather’s neighbors had gathered at Charlotte to write the Mecklenburg Resolves. He believed his Scotch-Irish forebears had struck the first and most valiant blows against British parliamentary absolutism. He studied their history and he wrote the *Annals of Tennessee* in a patriotic effort to glorify their deeds. In politics he was a Democrat, following the states’ rights principles of Thomas Jefferson and John C. Calhoun, voting for Andrew Jackson and James K. Polk. His politics and his social orientation combined with his economic interests to make him a Southerner and to lead him into the Southern Confederacy.

But Dr. Ramsey’s attachment to the South was not shared by all his East Tennessee neighbors. The people of the thirty mountain counties of East Tennessee were not agreed that their destiny was wrapped up in the Southern cause. Some of them, like “Parson” William Ganaway Brownlow, fiery editor of the Knoxville *Whig*, foresaw industrial potentialities in the coal and iron of the Tennessee hills and the power to turn the wheels of mills in the streams that poured into the Tennessee River. The hopeful industrialists placed their faith in making the Tennessee navigable through federal aid and in attracting Northern capital to the region. Brownlow proclaimed himself an Alexander Hamilton–Henry Clay–Internal Improvement Whig. Others there were like Andrew Johnson, senator who represented the small farmers and the hill folk, who despised the Southern aristocrats like Dr. Ramsey at the same time that they rejected industrialism. For long years Brownlow and Johnson, fit representatives of their divergent interests, fought in the verbal battles of Tennessee politics. Then, on the issue of secession, they united momentarily against the common enemy of cotton capitalism and Southern aristocracy which Dr. Ramsey represented. Yet as soon as secession was stamped out, the two old antagonists sprang again at each other’s throats. But, in the meantime, Dr. Ramsey and the Southern tradition which he typified, had gone down in ruin.
Dr. Ramsey might, conceivably, have lived with Andrew Johnson. The agrarian democrat and the landed aristocrat might differ in point of view but they had a common bond in the soil and in the history of East Tennessee. But between Dr. Ramsey and Parson Brownlow there was a fundamental antagonism. Dr. Ramsey had no use for the Northern capitalist, the industrialist, the "Bogus-Aristocrat" of wealth whom he had seen in the Northern cities. He saw no beauty in smokestacks, in blast furnaces, in the power loom. Moreover, as he saw it, the lust for money had perverted the old Puritan into a crass Yankee, cringing, subservient, and grasping. "We are essentially two people," he repeated—heterogeneous, incompatible. For the Brownlows who would industrialize East Tennessee he had only contempt. For Brownlow himself, Dr. Ramsey had a personal hatred. He counted the vituperative editor his greatest—in fact, his only—personal enemy, and he firmly believed that Brownlow had hired the arsonist who burned Mecklenburg. Whatever the facts may have been, in a symbolic sense Dr. Ramsey was right.

When secession and civil war came, Dr. Ramsey was sixty-four years old. Behind him lay a long record of service to his community and substantial achievements, ranging from a railroad to a volume of history, to attest to his efforts for his region's material and cultural well-being. He looked forward to laying aside his civic duties, his professional and business responsibilities, and spending his last days in quiet and honored retirement. Instead, he became a Confederate treasury agent, collecting and paying out funds for a war-torn government. In addition, he followed the armies as a surgeon, ministering to the wounded on the battlefields. When the enemy descended on Knoxville, he carried the funds of his depository and of his bank to Atlanta, and then, driven out before the advancing foe, he went to Augusta, to Charlotte—and even, in the end, planned to flee across the Mississippi.

Meantime, his sons were in the Confederate army, and one of them lost his life. Two of his daughters died—one, at least, as a result of devotion to the South. His wife and daughters abandoned Mecklenburg, and an arsonist in the federal army set fire to the mansion at the head of the Tennessee River. His youngest daughter was exiled from Knoxville, and his wife, homeless and bereaved, became a refugee. The world of Dr. Ramsey fell apart, and the smoke from the books, the manuscripts, and the records of Mecklenburg mingled in the darkened sky with the smoke from the burning ruins of the Southern way of life.
Dr. Ramsey was sixty-eight when he gathered the remnants of his family under a rented roof in Charlotte, North Carolina, borrowed a horse and a doctor’s saddle-bags, and resumed the practice of medicine. He returned to his historical interests, and set about to tell the story of his services to Tennessee in days of peace and to the Confederacy in the long years of the war. He told, in an Autobiography, the story of his own and his family’s services, their misfortunes, and their bereavements. He was a historian with a historian’s sense of the importance of the record. Carefully he recorded his wanderings, his emotions, his frantic haste to save the money of the government and the people entrusted to him. He added the circumstantial items, told the lore—and carefully distinguished the personally known fact from the story as told to him by others.

But through his Autobiography there ran a theme. It was not alone a recounting of experiences: The experiences added up to a running exposition of the differences between Southern and Northern character. They were, indeed, two peoples. The ancient virtues of the Scotch-Irish, the Presbyterian, the liberty-loving sons of the old border—honor, probity, integrity, social consciousness, learning—were concentrated in the South while their antitheses were Northern characteristics. Instance after instance gave support to the thesis. The lack of chivalry, the ignorance, and the vice displayed by federal soldiers proved again and again that a union of Southern and Yankee could be maintained only by the bayonet.

In March 1870 Dr. Ramsey brought his Autobiography to a close. But even yet he had a contribution to make to history and to culture. A quarter of a century earlier he had come in contact with historian Lyman C. Draper, eighteen years his junior, who was gathering manuscripts and lore on the lives of the pioneers of the period of the American Revolution. Dr. Ramsey sent Draper information about Daniel Boone, John Sevier, the Shelbys, and the men of Watauga. When he wrote his *Annals of Tennessee* he compared notes with Draper. In 1852, Draper moved to Wisconsin, founded and built the State Historical Society, and continued to collect manuscripts, documents, and oral traditions of the “Old Border.” A Democrat with pro-southern sympathies, he had much in common with Dr. Ramsey. When the rising “Black Republicans” defeated him for a second term as state superintendent of public instruction, Dr. Ramsey urged him to move to Tennessee, reform the common school system, and invigorate the historical society.

The Civil War brought a momentary halt to the correspondence be-
tween the two historians. Then in 1870, just as Dr. Ramsey was completing his Autobiography, Draper wrote him again. For more than a dozen years Dr. Ramsey wrote to Lyman Draper about early Tennessee and Southern history. His own collections of manuscripts, rare imprints, and recorded lore had been destroyed in the holocaust of Mecklenburg, but much that he had gathered remained in his memory where arsonists inspired by personal enmity or war psychosis could not destroy them. These memories he shared with Draper, telling him “nursery tales” he had heard in his boyhood, discussing critical points of fact on the men of Watauga, the signers of the Mecklenburg Resolves, the battles of the Revolution. In 1872 Dr. Ramsey moved back to Knoxville, practicing medicine until a fall from a horse made him a cripple. But even as a pain-wracked invalid he continued his letters. Sometimes he interviewed old residents of Knoxville, and sent their family traditions to Draper. Draper saved them, using them to write his own book on *King's Mountain and its Heroes*—a volume which Dr. Ramsey inspired and blessed.

Thus it was that even as an octogenarian invalid Dr. Ramsey continued to make, as he had made throughout his life, a vital contribution to the culture of his community and of the South. Much that he had done, through a patriotism which was something else than partisan zeal or a scramble for offices, has turned out differently than he had planned. The railroad which he built still runs, and its huge trestle, crossing where Dr. Ramsey's ferry once ran, blocks the view down the Tennessee from the site of old Mecklenburg. The industry which he deplored has come to the very spot where he worshipped, and the dust of a marble quarry sifts down upon Dr. Ramsey's neglected grave in Lebanon churchyard. The river has become navigable and its floods have been harnessed by the federal government and the men of the Brownlow tradition to turn the wheels of other industry. Mecklenburg has gone with the way of life that it represented. But his *Annals*, his Autobiography, and his letters constitute still a lasting contribution which Dr. Ramsey has made to an understanding of the American heritage.

* * *

I first met Dr. Ramsey, through his Autobiography, nearly a quarter of a century ago when, as a citizen of Tennessee, I was investigating the impact of the civil war on East Tennessee. Miss Laura Luttrell, then in charge of the McClung Collection in the Lawson McGhee Library in
Knoxville called to my attention the typed copy which Dr. Philip M. Hamer had obtained for the library. Miss Luttrell and I talked a little about editing the Autobiography for publication.

Years later, as a resident of Wisconsin, I became interested in the career of Lyman Copeland Draper, whose collections of historical material on the early history of the Trans-Allegheny region are the richest treasure of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. In Draper's personal correspondence I found Dr. Ramsey's letters to the Wisconsin historian. My search for Draper's letters to Dr. Ramsey proved futile, but it led me back to Dr. Ramsey's Autobiography, and the story of the high-minded gentleman, filled with public and private virtue, which it revealed. I was delighted when Miss Pollyanna Creekmore, Miss Luttrell's successor in the McClung Collection, suggested again that I prepare the Autobiography for publication. Miss Mary U. Rothrock of Knoxville interested herself in the proposal, and presented it to Dr. Robert H. White and the Publications Committee of the Tennessee Historical Commission. To each of these I am grateful for the opportunity to present Dr. Ramsey's story.

In the process I have tried to use Dr. Ramsey's letters to supplement and to round out the Autobiography. On matters which Dr. Ramsey discussed, I have used his letters, in whole or in part, as footnotes to supplement the text. Dr. Ramsey made only passing reference in his Autobiography to his Annals of Tennessee. I have broken the Autobiography at an appropriate place to insert a chapter of his letters to Draper which give an intimate picture of the historian at work. Dr. Ramsey attached to his Autobiography an appendix containing seven letters on the subject of slavery and reopening the slave trade. Ignoring his strict injunction not to publish them, I have inserted these letters as a chapter on "The Industrial Necessities of the South." The letters which he wrote to Lyman Draper after he finished the Autobiography I have used as the later chapters.

For the most part—and certainly for the most valuable part—these letters have not before been seen. Most of them are in the "Draper Correspondence" in the library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Some are in the "Draper Manuscripts," wherein Draper put his collections on early American history. The criteria for the division are not always clear to his biographer. Items which might well have appeared in the "Manuscripts" remained in his private "Correspondence." Since calendars of the "Tennessee Papers" in the Draper Manuscripts have been
published and the entire collection is available in various places on microfilm, I have omitted a few letters and parts of letters which contained biographical sketches or extracts from printed sources. None of the letters, whether from the “Correspondence” or the “Manuscripts” have been printed before.

For permission to publish them here I am grateful to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. To Dr. Clifford L. Lord, able director of the Society and worthy successor of Lyman Draper, I am further obligated for the services of a typist to transcribe the letters. To the Department of History of the University of Wisconsin I owe similar thanks for a typist who copied the Autobiography. To the typists I owe a singular debt—not for efficiency, but for confirming my belief in the human interest in Dr. Ramsey. Both typists dallied over their keys while they read ahead in the old doctor’s story.

Dr. Ramsey wrote his Autobiography—four hundred and eighty pages of it—without a break for chapters and frequently without separating it into paragraphs. Sometimes, too, a chain of thought led him back to add more information on matters he had discussed before. Such occasions were rare, but I have rearranged a few pages to bring matter on the same subject together. I have indicated these places in the footnotes. For convenience of the reader, too, I have divided the Autobiography into chapters and supplied chapter titles.

The other changes I have made have been few and simple, and, I trust, do no violence to scholarly standards or to the proper functions of an editor. Dr. Ramsey was a literate gentleman who knew well enough how to punctuate, but in his holograph manuscript and his letters he relied almost exclusively on the dash. I have translated his dashes into more conventional punctuation marks. I have tried to bring his old-style capitalization into conformity to present-day usage. So, too, I have modernized his spelling, rendering parlour as parlor and neighbour as neighbor. Dr. Ramsey used two r’s in car, two g’s in wagon, and doubled the “I” in scholar. He used an ampersand for and, abbreviated freely, and used initials in place of names. To have left these things would have offended the eye and have given a false impression of the writer.

One of Dr. Ramsey’s faults in his *Annals of Tennessee* was his failure to give full names, and sometimes, when more than one person of the same surname appeared in his history, the account was confusing. His Autobiography had the same fault, and sometimes he left blanks for
names he could not remember. Occasionally, he had clearly misunderstood a name and spelled it wrong. Whenever possible I have supplied full and corrected names—without using brackets to indicate my additions. Only in a few cases have I felt it necessary to identify further the names in the Autobiography or the letters. For aid in supplying such data, as well as for proofreading and supervising typists, I am especially indebted to Larry Gara, able and efficient research assistant in history at the University of Wisconsin.

The original of the Autobiography was in the hands of Dr. J. R. Alexander of Charlotte, North Carolina, when Dr. P. M. Hamer, sometime professor of history in the University of Tennessee, copied it for the McClung Collection. I have worked from the carefully prepared and collated typescript which Dr. Hamer made. A small part of the Autobiography was published by Samuel G. Heiskell in his *Andrew Jackson and Early Tennessee History* in 1920. (Cf. 2:82-122.) The entire story as it came from Dr. Ramsey's pen, and his letters relating to Tennessee history deserve a wider audience, and I am happy to have been the agent to prepare them for publication.

William B. Heseltine

Madison, Wisconsin
January 11, 1953