CHAPTER VII

A Confederate Banker

As being part of my public or financial life I may as well right here mention another theater on which it became my unexpected duty to act upon a somewhat similar pursuit.¹

In the meantime many of the southern states had seceded from the government of the United States and had set up the Southern Confederacy.² Tennessee had in effect done the same thing. I early saw, and

¹ See last sentence of Chapter III.

² On April 16, 1859 Dr. Ramsey darkly predicted the course of coming events as he asked Lyman Draper, "What will become of the Democratic Party? And of our loved country? All is gone. The free states will elect in 1860. The union is then dissolved virtually and soon after will be so in form. All north of the Potomac, certainly of the Hudson, will be one mass of isms and will never after act with even the Northwest, much less the South. There can never indeed be enough homogeneousness to keep the two sections together. We are now more hetereogeneous than France and England and can no longer be a united people." (Draper Correspondence)

Returning to the subject on May 10, 1859, he wrote Draper, "I cannot answer your questions about our Democratic Party, only to say someone else than Seward must be president or the constitution and the union will be lost. I do not believe that Douglas can beat him—nor anyone else."

Then, January 14, 1861, he wrote again. "A year has passed since I last heard from you. What changes that year has brought with it. Our union dismembered, our people estranged from each other, war threatened, anarchy probable with all its attendant evils. Even moderate and steady Tennessee in convention and on the point of resuming her delegated powers and setting up for herself. I believe it is full time for separation. If there is so little regard even for the whims and caprices, to say nothing of the rights, of the two sections, that even an unmeaning verbal concession cannot be extorted from the Black Republicans, it is demonstration that we are two peoples and cannot live together in peace. The South will never submit to the rule of a despotic majority and coercion is unauthorized, inexpedient, and wrong."

A month later, he wrote again—but it was a letter counseling his friend to moderation, and giving some intimate glimpses of his own life. Dr. Ramsey had no inkling of the future that was in store for him.

Draper Correspondence

February 12, 1861

"My Dear Sir.

"Your valued favor of January 26 accompanied by your state historical society's volume was received in due time for which I am greatly obliged. Is it possible I have not heretofore presented to your library a copy of my "Tennessee"? For fear I may have been so neglectful as to have failed to do so I now append an order on Keith & Woods, St. Louis, Missouri for it. Please present it at your earliest convenience. Even if you have a copy, a duplicate will be worth its room on your shelves.

"In a previous letter you mention an interruption to your usual good health—(for I will not allow myself to apprehend that it is anything more)—and ask me what you shall do for it? Don't medicate. Study, think, write less. Cultivate the social principle more. Old age

indeed had predicted in a series of letters addressed to the Montgomery Convention some years before, what must be the result if the partial legislation of Congress and the meddlesome and fanatical spirit of the Northern legislatures and people were not curbed, so as to preserve the union and the constitution intact and inviolable, and I had therefore entered into the support of the southern cause with every energy of mind, soul, and body.³

(excuse me, I know you are not old) requires calm, quiet inaction, the otio cum dignitate dignified leisure, with a few intelligent friends of appreciative tastes and preferences. I do not mean to tell you to be idle. That is worse than too much labor, but we are no longer young men and cannot longer endure the heat and burden of the day. Travel is good for you, come further south-come at least to Tennessee this summer-and luxuriate among our plain people and enjoy our primitive modes of civilization. If a visit south should give you or be followed by an intermittent-it will only be the better for revolutionizing your whole biliary and digestive systems and rejuvenating you. At your age I underwent that process and have been better ever since. Diversify your pursuits. Do nothing that is a task. I advise from experience. I care no longer for wealth. Subsistence is enough. Money is of no use to our children and we know it is of no value to ourselves. Look at the forests and the prairies around us. They toil not neither do they spin etc. I select my patients, take only such as I choose to, ride to town three or four times a week, supervise the bank of the state (of which I am just reelected president by a unanimous vote), meet a few literary friends, confer benefits where I can, have all my cares out of doors, sleep like a child, cultivate the domestic and social virtues, have but one enemy that I know of in the world and I have the satisfaction of believing that he hates me only for my virtues. I live yet as an old frontiersman, leaving off his use of whisky and reading by pine light. I take a glass of cold milk and a warm piece of hoe cake just as I go to bed etc. I tell you all these minutiae for the purpose of encouraging you not to allow yourself to be laid on the shelf till the magnum opus of your life, your border history, shall have been completed and published. (Just here let me advise you not to publish yourself. At any time this would be wrong—and at this revolutionary period will be, must be, ruinous. I have only saved myself and will publish no more.) For years to come our political troubles will not be settled. The executive patronage of the general governor has corrupted and will continue to seduce so many of the politicians of all the Northern States and such men as John Bell and Andrew Johnson of Tennessee in the Southern that the conflict will be interminable. The Southern Confederacy (a fixed fact) will soon exhibit the superior virtue and civilization that spring from slave institutions and the providence and authority of God demonstrate their wisdom and necessity. Tennessee, you see, is conservative and tardy, but when her time comes will secede too. Her leaders though cannot resist the seduction of Lincoln's patronage.

Truly yours
J. G. M. Ramsey"

³ The following two paragraphs, penciled in Dr. Ramsey's handwriting, were pinned to the manuscript at this point. They bore the date "October 18, 1876."

[&]quot;1876

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⁵⁷ years ago last August 1 I gave my first vote for General William Carroll for governor of Tennessee against his then competitor, a Federalist though a good man and a patriot. Ever since, at every biennial election in Tennessee and every presidential and congressional election, I have steadfastly adhered to the same political faith and have in every instance always voted for a Democratic candidate and supported the Democratic party.

[&]quot;My allegiance has always been, as I considered as due, first to my native Tennessee and second and through her to the United States. This double allegiance I have never renounced, but have held it inviolable and supreme. But when the voice of Tennessee was uttered in declaration of her states rights I obeyed that voice which absolved me from any allegiance to the union which had violated the constitution under which Tennessee was admitted as one of the parties to the compact forming the federal union. I always held with Jefferson that each state possessed the right not only to decide for herself when the constitution was

A bank convention was considered essential for the regulation of the general finances of the South. Official business called me to Nashville. While there, the subject of the convention of all southern banks at Richmond, Virginia was agitated, though not formally introduced in the convention then called by the parent board at the state capital. Colonel Torbett, the president, and myself concurred in the policy then agitated by the Confederate press of holding the convention of bankers at the Southern capital. Others of my presidential colleagues concurred with us. My own board of directors, on my return from Nashville, proposed that I should attend at Richmond as a delegate.

We met there accordingly on Monday after the day of the first Battle of Manassas. I arrived the day of the battle at four P.M. Telegrams were constantly arriving of the progress of the conflict. I had promised General Vaughn-then Colonel J. C. Vaughn-(whose regiment I had attended while at Knoxville as surgeon, and who had taken to the field the soldiery of my neighborhood and of East Tennessee) that if any of his men should be wounded to telegraph for me and that as soon as steam could take me I would be at his side. As soon, therefore, after I got out of the cars I hastened to the office of the secretary of war-heard that many were wounded and probably needed my professional assistance. To the secretary I was an entire stranger. President Davis, to whom I was well known, was down at Manassas: Mr. Albert Taylor Bledsoe, who was the only officer of the war department whom I could get to see, said the cars were full and declined, very courteously though, to give us the transportation ticket I asked for. I returned disappointed and vexed to the Spotswood House, joined Colonel Torbett there and passed an anxious, sleepless night. I found in the house my good and patriotic neighbor and friend, John Mason Boyd, M.D., just arrived from Knoxville. I told him how solicitous I was to go to the field of carnage and do something for our wounded. He was no less anxious, too, to go to their relief. Next morning we both went early to the war office, saw Mr. Bledsoe again, and met again a cold and unwelcome negative. Dr. Boyd remained longer importuning most earnestly. I knew Mr. Memminger intimately several years before, as a most enlightened and efficient advocate of our old railroad enterprise. He was now secretary of the Confederate States treasury. I entered his office, told him I had unsuccessfully

violated but also the further right to judge of the mode and measure of redress. Then as one of her native born freemen I approved of secession and thus became a Confederate—Call me Rebel if you will."

applied for passports to our camp, and begged him to go with me then to promote my wishes at the war department, or to give me himself the needed order for transportation. He said that could not be done, but that if I would wait a few minutes he would go with and introduce me to Mr. L. Pope Walker, the secretary of war. We found Dr. Boyd still there, but still unsuccessful. Not finding the secretary in his office, Mr. Memminger wrote and handed me a hurried note introducing his two friends, Doctors Boyd and Ramsey, and urging him to send us forward. It was without avail. A short time after, Dr. Boyd's application succeeded. I went up and entered the bank convention. Our deliberations were ended satisfactorily. I returned home, carrying with me some of the trophies of victory won by the valor of my countrymen, but disappointed that I had not been granted the privilege of being on the field of their glory.

This hasty interview with the secretary of the Confederate treasury served to renew the acquaintance we had formed several years before in Charleston, Columbia, Knoxville, and elsewhere while engaged in our railroad enterprises. But I had become still further known to him in the following way. Some of my friends in and around Knoxville, knowing my extreme Southern preferences, and my states rights orthodoxy and my constancy to principle, chose of their own free will to act thus in my behalf. I think it was early in the spring of 1861 (certainly before Tennessee had seceded and therefore before she had any representative in the Confederate States Congress), my personal friend Judge W. S. Swan, never a favorite political friend, as I had often voted against him, got up a memorial or petition to the Montgomery or Richmond authorities asking that I should be considered by them as a quasi member of congress at least till Tennessee, by the action of her people, would make provision for a regular and legitimate representation in the new government. The petition was carried around town, and signed irrespective of the Democratic and Whig parties. It was shown to me and I can still recollect the names of some of the memorialists, viz. Honorable W. H. Sneed, a former congressman from the Knoxville District, and a Whig; Judge Swan, a Whig; Honorable J. H. Crozier, also former congressman, and also a Whig; General J. A. Mabry, a Whig; M. B. McMahon, Esquire, an old line Democrat, and others. On seeing the petition and inspecting the names of the petitioners I expressed myself as agreeably surprised. The metamorphosis I could scarcely understand "novas frondes miratur, non suas." They were all gentlemen and patriots, and I felt and appreciated

the high compliment they were offering me personally and politically, and still I could not conceal my surprise nor withhold the natural inquiry: "Gentlemen, what platform do you expect me to occupy?" They replied without one exception: "The Platform on which you have always stood since 1821—the platform of the South." I replied, in continuation: "By the blood of the Alexanders, and by the hallowed memoirs of Old Mecklenburg, I go for states rights, Southern rights, Southern independence. This is, and shall be, my platform."

The memorial thus signed was at once forwarded to the seat of government. A few days after, Judge Swan brought to my office the response. It was from President Davis. In that he said some complimentary words, and assured the memorialists that Dr. Ramsey would be most cordially received, and for the present would be considered as a quasi member of the Confederate States Congress. Thereafter, my correspondence with Mr. Davis and two members of his cabinet was constant, cordial, and confidential-sometimes advisory and commendatory, but oftener condemnatory of some of the measures of the administration; especially in reference to his military policy in Tennessee. I could wish that in some unexpected manner my official letters may have been preserved and that they might yet see the light.4 In one of them I said: This Southern Confederacy must never become a failure—that were to not only ruin the South but to blight the best hopes of man of human improvement and of freedom everywhere. And to prevent this failure I advised a commercial treaty with France-giving to that power the entire monopoly of our cotton trade for a term of years, and receiving in turn her friendly recognition and the guaranty of our independence of the United States. If this advice had been adopted Illium fuit never would have been said of our Confederacy. (Some of these letters I may hereafter refer to as

⁴ A number of Dr. Ramsey's letters to President Jefferson Davis are found in the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion. As early as November 4, 1861, Dr. Ramsey warned Davis that the enemy planned to invade East Tennessee through passes in Fentress and adjacent counties in a region filled with unionists. He suggested bringing General Arnold Elzey from the Potomac with Colonel Vaughn's regiment to guard the passes. Such action would discourage the malcontents, frighten the enemy in Kentucky, and "incite" the spirit of volunteering—"which I am humiliated to say is very low." Cf., Official Records, series 1, vol. 4, 511-512. See also, for other correspondence, Ibid., p. 540; vol. 7, pp. 721-722; and vol. 50, part 2, pp. 267-8. In April 1864, after Longstreet had withdrawn from East Tennessee, Dr. Ramsey wrote Davis urging that storehouses of supplies for the families of East Tennessee soldiers be established on the border of East Tennessee. The unionist leaders, notably "Parson" W. G. Brownlow and Horace Maynard were successfully appealing in the North for funds to relieve the suffering of unionists in the region. Ibid., series 1, vol. 50, part 2, pp. 655-656. Dr. Ramsey's letters regarding foreign aid to the Confederacy are not preserved.

these recollections may call them to mind.) In 1862, July 17, I received from Honorable C. G. Memminger, secretary of the treasury of Confederate States, his letter of July 9th, informing me that I was appointed *Depositary* under the act of April 15, 1862, increasing the number of depositaries.

At the time this letter of appointment from Mr. Memminger was received, I occupied the position of president of the branch of the Bank of Tennessee at Knoxville. On this account I felt it necessary to say in reply to Mr. Memminger that perhaps there might be an incompatibility in one and the same person holding the two offices, and if so to consider my letter as declining to receive the appointment he had given me of Confederate States depositary. In his second letter he said there was no incompatibility but rather a peculiar fitness in the two offices being filled by the same individual. I accordingly forwarded my official bond and entered on my new official duties. I found them to be exceedingly onerous and responsible. I did not know that I was allowed an assistant, a deputy or a clerk, and continued to discharge all the duties myself-often devoting the entire day and sometimes part of the night to their full discharge. One day Colonel C. Powell, a large merchant, came in the P.M. to my office, and finding me perfectly absorbed in official duties, told me he never saw me on the streets, nor at leisure in my room; that there was not a regimental quartermaster in Knoxville who had not one, two, or three assistants on a salary. I had not inquired on the subject, but began sensibly to feel that I was overworking myself and intruding occasionally upon the time and convenience of the cashier of the bank of which I was still president. Upon my application to him, the secretary promptly gave me authority to appoint such assistants as I found necessary. To know the extent of my labors and cares it is only necessary here to say that from 1862 to April 1865 I disbursed between forty-two and forty-three million of dollars for the Confederate States treasury, and though I had in that interim made seven or eight hegiras and hair-breadth escapes, I never lost one dollar of my funds. Up to November 25, 1862 I had no clerk.

Early in 1863 I was appointed Confederate States tax collector for Tennessee. After holding it some time, I found its duties would call me much of my time from Knoxville, and I declined it.

December 30, 1862 I was called to Atlanta on detective business with Colonel G. W. Lee there. Either on that occasion, or one similar to it, as I passed through Dalton, Georgia, the sound of cannon was heard in

the direction of Chattanooga. Rumors of an invasion of that place and other points in East Tennessee had been in circulation before I left Knoxville, and I determined to go down to Chattanooga to decide for myself whether it might not be wise to return and take the assets, both of my branch and depositary, elsewhere. Accordingly, I got on the train which went cautiously nearly to the depot in Chattanooga. Old Dr. _____ of Cleveland was also on the train with me. On nearing the Crutchfield house, Governor Isham G. Harris came to us, and said: "What has brought you old men to this post of danger?" We replied that we both knew that he would seek the post of danger, and as he was not invulnerable, we desired to be on hand and render our professional assistance to him and his comrades if wounded. He gave us an account of the attack by cannon from an eminence across the river, which he pointed out-informing us that there was little injury suffered, and that the enemy had retired with some loss. Fragments of shells were lying upon the streets—one of which had fallen near to my gallant friend, Major Washington Morgan. He held some of the fragments in his hand and gave them to me to put in my cabinet.

Hearing that my chief, President Torbett, was in town, I went to seek him and found him and the entire Bank of Tennessee corpse in a small house up a dark alley, down towards the river, with arms in their hands, keeping watch over the treasures of the principal bank and the branches in Middle and West Tennessee. John A. Fisher, H. L. Claibourne, and other officers of the bank were all there. From them I received instructions and advice, of which I afterwards availed myself in the removal of my branch assets and our future policy generally. The principal thing he, Colonel Torbett, said was: "as inter arma silent legis your board and you must be a law to yourselves. Our duty is to take care of the money of the people of Tennessee, and to keep it safe and out of the hands of the enemy." They concurred with me in the belief that the present repulse of the assault on Chattanooga would make it unnecessary for me to return then to my branch. I accordingly took the train for Atlanta. Finding Colonel G. W. Lee, he empowered my son, Colonel F. A. Ramsey, then a member of W. C. Kain's Artillery Company, to apply to General _____ for a sufficient guard to penetrate as far into the enemy's lines as Putnam County and arrest _____, ____ known as counterfeiters of Confederate currency. An account of this dangerous but

partly successful achievement will hereafter be given under Services of F. A. Ramsey.

While at Atlanta, I also saw Colonel William W. Clayton, cashier of the railroad bank of Georgia and made arrangements with him for the safe keeping of our metallic capital, and other assets, such as had been or should hereafter be placed in his vaults. I found him to be patriotic and obliging. On my return, a large remittance of issues had been made to my depository from Richmond, and had to be sent to Tullahoma under an escort or guard. This on the 12 February 1863 I sent forward under charge of my son, J. G. McKnitt Ramsey, also a member of Captain W. C. Kain's Artillery. His services will hereafter be more fully given.