Alexander Ramsey House

Pre-Visit Materials  Design Classes

Minnesota Historical Society
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Architecture/design classes pre-visit materials for the Alexander Ramsey House, Minnesota Historical Society

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Dear Teacher,

The staff of the Alexander Ramsey House welcomes you and your students! We hope you find our new classroom materials helpful and interesting. Your students' experiences at the Ramsey House will be more meaningful if they are prepared for their visit, and if they have the opportunity to reflect afterwards. With this in mind, we have created activities to extend learning in many subject areas, focusing on varied learning styles.

Our Educational Tours provide a more age-appropriate experience and engage multiple senses. We hope you and your students will enjoy the tours and ask that you take a few moments after you have toured the house to fill out a short survey. We will use the information you provide to further tailor our tours and classroom materials to fulfill your needs and preferences.

Please spend some time with your students and chaperones discussing museum behavior. Rules of etiquette were important to Victorian people, and we have some of our own. To preserve the house and its artifacts, please do not bring gum or candy, food or drink. Cameras and cell phones may only be used outside of the house. And of course, please refrain from touching unless otherwise instructed.

We want to encourage your students to ask questions and share their own ideas. We recommend reminding chaperones that our Educational Tours are tailored to the children, with the goal of involving them as much as possible.

If you have questions or requests not addressed in this packet, please contact us. We look forward to seeing you at the Alexander Ramsey House!

Sincerely,

The Alexander Ramsey House Staff
Educational Tours Teacher Survey

1. Which educational materials did you use with your students?

2. Were the materials helpful in preparing your students for their experience at the Ramsey House?

3. Are there other types of materials you would have liked?

4. What would have made you more likely to use the educational materials?

5. What did you feel was the most valuable part of the tour?

6. What part of the tour do you feel could be improved?

7. Do you have any other feedback for us?

Thank you so much! Please return this survey in the envelope provided. We hope to see you next year!
Alexander Ramsey was born in 1815 in Pennsylvania. Alexander married Anna Jenks in 1845. Four years later Alex, Anna, and their three year old son traveled by steamboat, stagecoach, and canoe to the new Minnesota Territory where Mr. Ramsey was to be the first governor. Mr. Ramsey's job was to buy land from the Dakota and Ojibwe Indians so that settlers could move to Minnesota. In 1860, Mr. Ramsey became the second governor of the state of Minnesota and held that position during the Civil and Dakota Wars. He showed his pride in Minnesota as the first President of the Minnesota Historical Society and as a U.S. Senator. He loved his family very much and lived with his daughter and grandchildren in what he called his "Mansion House" until he died in 1903.

Anna Jenks Ramsey was born in Pennsylvania in 1826. She was different from many girls at the time because she learned to read, write, and do math. When her husband told her in 1849 that they were moving to Minnesota, Mrs. Ramsey did not know what to expect. The first years in Minnesota were difficult. Two of their young children died, and Mrs. Ramsey told her husband she would "never want to winter again in St. P." She later came to love Minnesota as much as her husband did and was active in planning and building the present Ramsey House. Mrs. Ramsey bought all the furnishings in New York for the "Mansion House." Mrs. Ramsey traveled to Europe and to the American West before she died at 58 years of age.

Marion Ramsey Furness was the third child born to Alex and Anna and the only child to live to be an adult. When she was nineteen, her family moved into the present Ramsey House, and on her twenty-second birthday, she married Charles Furness in her home. Marion and Charlie had four children, but their second son died as a baby. Then Charlie became sick with a mental illness and had to live in an institution the rest of his life. Marion moved back to St. Paul and raised their three children in her parents' home. She was very active in St. Paul's social life and loved music. She lived in the Ramsey House until her death in 1935.

Anita, Ramsey, and Laura Furness were Marion and Charlie's children. Anita was born in 1876, and when she was six years old, her mother described her as "aggravating + then fascinating as usual." Ramsey, a year younger than Anita, was described by his grandfather as "a daredevil sort of fellow." Laura, born in 1882, described herself at thirteen as a "great sport" who rode a bicycle every night. When Ramsey grew up he moved to Missouri, but his sisters lived together in the Ramsey House until they died in 1956 and 1964. They chose to give their house to Minnesota Historical Society so we can learn about their family today.
Victorian Houses

Objectives: To understand that home architecture is influenced by individual families and by society. To see and create a house plan from bird's eye perspective.

Background Information

Alexander and Anna Ramsey planned their house carefully according to their own needs, while remaining mindful of what was proper in their day. In the 1800s, it was customary to separate rooms for entertaining from work spaces because the home was meant to be a needed retreat from the industrial workplace.

Activity

Look at the blueprint for the Ramseys’ first floor.

How can you tell the Ramseys were interested in entertaining? ______________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

How did the Ramseys use architecture to separate the servants from the family and their guests? __________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

Which rooms do you consider important for a house today? Why? ______________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

Which rooms are unimportant for a house today? Why? _____________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

If you were designing your own Mansion House, what special purpose room would you want that the Ramseys do not have? ______________________________________________________

Where would you put it? Why?
________________________________________________________________________________________

On the back of the Ramseys' blueprint, draw the first floor of your Mansion House.
Do not forget to include doors and hallways!
Decorative Arts in the Alexander Ramsey House

Anna Ramsey decorated her “Mansion House” with fashionable, yet affordable styles of her day. She did much of her shopping at A. T. Stewart’s department store in New York, buying mass-manufactured goods. In this way, she was able to outfit her home in a grand style, at a lower cost than would have been feasible with handmade items. The primary styles she used are described below. On the following page are short descriptions of the same styles. You may want to bring them with you to the Ramsey House for easier identification of furniture styles.

Empire Style: 1815–1840
Empire design, first introduced in Paris at the start of the 19th century, did not become popular in America until about 1815. The delicacy of the earlier Neoclassicism gave way to heavier classical forms with more emphasis on outline than on carved detail. As the style of the Napoleonic empire, it was a revival of Roman (and Greek) forms that were adaptable to 19th-century living. Roman-inspired symbols, furniture, and even hairdos were part of an ambitious scheme to relate Napoleon to Emperor Augustus as the French government was transformed from a republic into an empire. Adopted in dozens of countries during the first decades of the 19th century, Empire design did not go completely out of fashion until mid-century.

The style, which was appropriate for furnishings for all classes of society, could be well done whether its execution was very elegant and costly or very plain and inexpensive. Empire furnishings, with their undulating scrolls balancing heavy geometric shapes, complemented the Greek Revival architecture of the period. Ornament was carved in high relief; inlays were abandoned in favor of stenciling and gilded brass or bronze decoration. Other pieces were kept simple by omitting carving and emphasizing overall line. Richly grained mahogany or rosewood, veneers, and marble were common.

A French émigré, Charles-Honoré Lannuier, was one of the first cabinetmakers to introduce the style in America. Working in New York between 1803 and 1819, he combined belated Louis XVI and early Empire designs. His gilded caryatids on tables and chairs provided an elegance that had great appeal; other cabinetmakers tempered this stylishness with great restraint.

Inspiration for Empire forms was derived from ancient models illustrated in a number of contemporary publications. Periodicals and books printed in London provided such designs, some adapted or plagiarized from French sources, others based on the work of prominent English designers such as Thomas Hope.

Klismos chairs, scroll-end sofas, ornamental center tables, sleigh beds, and récamiers and méridiennes (the last two being daybed forms) were all widely available in simple as well as elaborate models. While Duncan Phyfe’s workshop produced restrained but elegant Empire designs in the 1820s and 1830s, more flamboyant pieces with lavishly carved details were executed in Philadelphia and Boston. Later American design books from the beginning of the Victorian period, such as those by John Hall of Baltimore (1840) and RobertConnor of New York (1843), still included Empire designs. Because fashionable Empire furnishings were made at every price level, there was a significant democratization of fashion after 1820. By the 1830s, an expanding market had created a nationwide industry—based on machine production—that began to replace craftsmen’s workshops. The output included simple veneered pieces as well as furniture for “cottage use,” meaning painted furniture for modest homes. The public could also choose among such other popular pieces as Sheraton painted Fancy furniture, Windsor chairs, and a wide variety of country designs.
Decorative Arts in the Alexander Ramsey House

Renaissance Revival Styles: 1850–1880
The Renaissance Revival style is often considered a reaction to the Rococo, even though it was in use as early as 1850. It is characterized by an eclectic use of both Renaissance and 18th-century Neoclassical motifs on straight-lined forms loosely based on 16th-century French models. Porcelain, bronze, or mother-of-pearl plaques were popular embellishments on pieces with inscribed, linear classical motifs. Furniture from the 1870s ranged from works made in shops employing skilled craftsmen to the products of large midwestern factories. The New York shops, in particular, produced work with elegant detail and elaborate inlays, while the factories, centered primarily in Grand Rapids, produced pieces with turned and cut elements that could be produced more readily in volume and at lower cost.

Since the Renaissance Revival style was based on rectangular shapes and prominent motifs, it could be successfully interpreted with either type of production. Walnut was the most popular wood, with some veneer introduced as surface decoration. Light woods were favored in reaction to the prevailing dark woods of the Empire and Rococo Revival styles. Common motifs were flowers, fruit, cartouches, medallions, contoured panels, caryatids, scrolls, classical busts, and animal heads, as well as architectural elements, usually without any structural intent, such as pediments, columns, and balusters. Upholstery was prominently featured on chairs and sofas. Ornament from the then-current Louis XVI Revival—popular with elegant New York cabinetmakers, who favored ebonizing and ormolu—was sometimes incorporated in the work of the 1860s. The Neo-Grec (or Neo-Greek) and Egyptian Revival styles were elaborate and exotic substyles of the Renaissance Revival.

Rococo Revival Style: 1840–1870
The Rococo Revival style was not introduced in America until about 1840, though it was illustrated in earlier English design books. It became the dominant mid-century style and lasted through the 1860s. Referred to at that time as the Louis XIV style—though it is even closer to the Louis XV style—the 19th-century Rococo style is easily distinguished from its 18th-century counterpart by its boldness. Ornament was carved in higher relief and usually rendered more realistically than on 18th-century models, and the forms themselves are distinctly 19th-century in taste. The most notable American expression of the Rococo Revival style was the work of John Henry Belter of New York. His was one of several workshops using laminated wood for intricately carved Rococo forms. Rosewood, mahogany, and walnut were the favored woods during the Rococo Revival. The style is characterized by richly carved ornament—roses, leaves, grapes, scrolls, and shells—on curving forms inspired by 18th-century French Rococo furniture. Craftsmen produced it all over America, but pieces from New York, Boston, and Philadelphia are the best documented. The style was most commonly used for parlor and bedroom furniture; elaborate parlor sets included sofas or settees, chairs, center tables, and accessory forms. Center and side tables often had marble tops and scalloped shapes. The tête-à-tête, or conversational sofa, was a popular new form. All furnishings were made in exaggerated curving shapes. Many chairs had balloon-shaped backs and, like most Rococo Revival pieces, cabriole legs. Upholstery, frequently tufted, became an important feature as concern for comfort grew and inner springs were perfected. The Rococo style was also popular for forms cast in iron and used outdoors.
Decorative Arts in the Alexander Ramsey House

Eastlake Style: 1870–1890
The Eastlake style was conceived in reaction to the excesses of the preceding historic revivals. Named for Charles Lock Eastlake, an influential English architect, author, and lecturer who advocated design reform, the style eventually encompassed much shoddy or overly elaborate American furniture that he would have abhorred. In his book *Hints on Household Taste* (1869; published in America in 1872), Eastlake decried the poor construction, overblown designs, and the ornate decoration of Victorian furniture. He called for a return to careful craftsmanship, honest use of materials, and reconsideration of the basic relationship between form and function. He emphasized bold 17th-century forms, sometimes combined with Renaissance and medieval borrowings, to produce simple sturdy furniture.

Because classical motifs had become overly familiar, new sources of ornament, particularly Middle Eastern and Far Eastern, were sought. Eastlake emphasized the beauty of wood grains, favoring oak and cherry, as well as rosewood or walnut if not obscured by dark varnish. In spite of his suggestions, however, many American furnituremakers used ebonized wood for Oriental decoration on otherwise essentially Eastlake pieces. Eastlake forms were strongly rectilinear and had geometric ornament, turnings, brackets, trestles, and incised linear decoration—all easily executed with machines. Eastlake designs were displayed at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876 and remained popular until about 1890. The first glimpses of modernism can be seen in Eastlake reforms and other reactions against the poor quality of Victorian design.

19th-Century Innovations: Patent Furniture, Wicker, Cast Iron, and Bentwood
One trend in 19th-century furniture design that does not easily fit into the sequence of stylistic evolution was the growing use of patented innovations and new materials. As early as the 1820s, patents were obtained for furniture that folded, swiveled, reclined, or converted into other forms. Another innovation was the platform rocking chair, which was able to rock in place. New construction techniques included the laminated process perfected by John Henry Belter.

Cast iron was used for components of some patented pieces as well as for outdoor furniture; the latter was produced in a variety of styles by the rapidly growing foundries around the country. By the 1850s iron inner springs were used to make upholstered seats more comfortable. Cushioned chairs and sofas with metal frames as well as tubular-brass beds were popular at the end of the century.

Wicker furniture—made of rattan, bamboo, willow, and various exotic materials—was imported from the Orient before 1840 and has been widely produced in America ever since. The most elaborate wicker designs were made in the last decades of the 19th century, when new machines were developed for weaving and shaping rattan and for bending wooden frames. Bentwood was another innovative furniture material, and imported pieces, made primarily in Austria-Hungary, became a staple of American homes. Other new materials for furniture included animal horns as well as bark-covered stumps and branches, all expressing the late 19th-century American yearning for rusticity and the wilderness.
Decorative Arts in the Alexander Ramsey House

Describe furniture in the Ramsey House as it fits into these styles. In which rooms do you see these examples?

**Empire Style: 1815–1840**

*Appearance:* Massive and bulky.

*Essential elements:* Heavy geometric shapes. Bold carving in high relief, emphasizing outline rather than detail. Oversize classical motifs. Stenciling or gilded brass or bronze decoration.

*Veneer usually present.* Scroll-shaped legs. Large scroll, ball, or carved animal feet, sometimes in gilded brass. Marble tops.

*Brass, glass, or wooden knobs.*

*Primary woods:* Walnut, cherry, mahogany, rosewood, or grained maple; pine, birch, or other local woods for country pieces. Various mahogany and walnut veneers. *Secondary wood:* Usually pine.

*Major construction methods:* Dovetailed, pegged mortise-and-tenon, and nailed construction.

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**Renaissance Revival Style: 1850–1880**

*Proportions:* Medium to large.

*Essential elements:* Rectilinear shapes. Prominent Renaissance and Neoclassical motifs such as columns, pediments, cartouches, rosettes, and carved masks; also plaques in porcelain, bronze, or mother-of-pearl. Occasional Egyptian motifs. Veneer panels, often framed by applied molding. Inscribed linear decoration. Turned or cutout parts on factory pieces; carving or elaborate inlay on finer examples. Forms sometimes adapted in cast iron. *Woods:* Walnut; also ash or pine for less expensive pieces.

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**Rococo Revival Style: 1840–70**

*Proportions:* Medium to large.

*Essential elements:* Curving overall shapes. Bold and naturalistic piercwork or solid carving of flowers, fruit, and leaves framed by scrolls. Cabriole and scrolled legs. Tufted upholstery and inner springs. Marble table tops. Laminated wood used on some pieces. Forms sometimes adapted in cast iron. *Woods:* Mahogany or rosewood; also walnut for lower-priced pieces.

*Notable forms:* Balloon-back and upholstered-back chairs. Fully upholstered sofa with serpentine back, méridienne, settle, and tête-à-tête. Side and center tables. Elaborate beds.

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**Eastlake Style: 1870–1890**

*Proportions:* Medium and delicate.

*Essential elements:* Simple rectilinear shapes. Geometric or floral ornament, often carved in low relief. Inscribed linear decoration.


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**Discussion/Writing Ideas**

Which style do you prefer? Why?

Anna Ramsey was seeking to impress visitors with her interior design. Which style do you think would have been most impressive? Why?

How would you describe the Victorian style of interior design?

Which furniture style do you think most epitomizes Victorian design? Why?