

One of the most interesting and delightful collections of letters in the College Archives is that of Alexander Ramsey, Class of 1836. Our letters are typescripts made from copies held by the Minnesota Historical Society; the originals are presumed to remain in private hands. The letters are written to his cousin Rudolph Kelker and other family members in Harrisburg, Ramsey's home. The ten letters written from Lafayette date from the only year that he was in attendance, 1834-35. Unfortunately, there was no financial aid to enable the college to retain this high-achieving, intellectually curious student.

Ramsey was forced to go to work teaching school in Kutztown until he was able to enroll in the Dickinson College Law Department, from which he graduated in 1840. Three years later he was serving Pennsylvania in the U.S. House of Representatives. He went on to become Minnesota's first territorial governor, its second governor following statehood, and eventually its U.S. Senator. He would return to Lafayette in 1880 for the rededication of Pardee Hall with President Rutherford B. Hayes, in whose cabinet he served as the Secretary of War.

September 7, 1834

. . . La Fayette College is situated to the north of Easton on Mt. La Fayette, a knoll rising to the height of 160 feet.* Bushkill creek, a fine mill stream passing along the foot of the hill and separating it from the borough of Easton. The view of the college and adjoining scenery from Easton presents a most beautiful and varied landscape. . . . There are at present seventy-five students in the institution, from ten to forty years, coming from thirteen different states. . . . We all board at one table, and the fare is such as beggars all description. At breakfast we have coffee (so-called), sometimes a mackerel of the herring species, appropriated to about eighteen persons, a little cold meat in the same proportion, and bread and rank butter. At dinner beef, potatoes unskinned, water and dry bread. Supper a decoction of tea in warm water, bread and molasses. This is positively our bill of fare, and the fare is not so great an objection as the manner in which it is served, all on the wholesale principle . . .

September 21, 1834

. . . I am gradually accommodating myself to my new sphere of action and daily becoming more pleased and attached to it, yet my time thus far has been anything else than learned leisure or literary ease, having I believe worked harder with jack plane and saw at Lafayette college than ever I did in Jacob Colestock's carpentry shop;** however, I enjoy study in prospective, and as one our [lads] said the other day when licking his empty plate when there was naught left wherewithal to replenish it, I am "conceiving this to be soup"; so I shall for the time being conceive this to be learning and ease. . . . When I arrived I purchased a cot, bedding and other necessary furniture, and this exhausted my little treasury. I had but two pair of pantaloons along, and Oh Horriden!!! on descending the hill in front of the college I fell and tore one of them past all redemption, so that one pair at this time has to answer me for Sunday-go-to-meeting dress and work pants. I have commenced the study of the Latin. I had a grammar with me, and if I shall

find myself able to purchase the necessary books, I shall next session commence German, and if a box of instruments, I should like to add surveying, that being a very useful study and might probably be rendered available some day in a pecuniary sense. . . .

January 1, 1835

. . . I am coming on finely with the Latin, and very well pleased with the language, and have the satisfaction of standing in this as in all my classes, just where you or I would wish to be. Mr. Smith, with whom I am studying German, is a learned man, having a grammatical acquaintance with the Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, English, French, Spanish and Italian languages. He spent nine years at the University of Munich in Bavaria, of which country he is a native. He is not more than twenty-three or twenty-four years old, and is as goodlooking a German as I have ever seen. We are at present translating Schiller's tragedy of Mary Stuart. In addition to this I am studying Euclid. . . . I recite four times each day, Saturday excepted, on which day there are exercises in composition and declamation before the Faculty. We have, as at all institutions of the nature, two rival literary societies, among which the spirit of emulation which they are intended to foster is nursed into bitter opposition and a feeling predominates very near akin to the clannish feeling among the Highlands of Scotland. The one is styled the Franklin Literary Society and the other the Washington L.S. With the former I have the pleasure of claiming membership, and of which on Tuesday last I had the honor to be elected vice-president. About and concerning our proceeds there is much secrecy and mystery as among the ancient and honorable society of free masons. Of this I hope you will say nothing at Harrisburg lest it might reach the ears of Mr. Stevens,*** who would consider it his duty promptly to call for an investigation; then alackaday. . . .

February 14, 1835

I shall commence by asking your pardon for this seeming neglect, but which I assure you was unavoidable, arising from a concatenation of incontrollable contingencies. . . . The holidays here were not as at home ushered in amid the slaughter of turkies, the baking of pies, the scolding of women &c., but all in that respect was calm and still as an October day. At our breakfast we found the usual fare, thick coffee, unbaked bread, stale butter and a beggarly account of poor consumed mackerel. Dinner came and with it came the muttered curses (for being under strict Presbyterian jurisdiction such things are choked) of many a disappointed lad, for as a matter of course this being Christmas we all expected something extra according to custom, but Oh, horrible to relate! there was seen that which drew a tear from many a gallant fellow—beef poorly broiled, potatoes, rice, molasses, and nothing more. . . . In the earlier part of the session I had as roommate a fine clever young fellow just of age, by the name of Horace Chambers of Philadelphia. . . . He was without doubt the most intelligent student in college. He had been to Calcutta, the East and West Indies &c., but was addicted to habits of intemperance and he with another student was expelled by the faculty. . . .

March 21, 1835

. . . With the students all is life and bustle; preparing for home examinations and the approaching [literary society] contest, which is to take place on the final eve of the session. This literary tournament in which the champions of the two learned belligerent powers are to combat for the wreath of fame, is preceded by all the preparations, surmises, suspicions &c. common to small communities upon the eve of some great, some mighty Lilliputian feat. . . . However I presume there will be little blood shed. We have at present upwards of a hundred students, as many as the buildings can conveniently accommodate, and there are said to be fifty applications for the ensuing session so we shall soon be very near as much crowded as the Missouri squatter. As far as I have advanced I am very much pleased with the Latin and the German languages; the latter in the rich treasures which it contains, amply repays the toil of the student. I hope soon to be enabled to write it freely and speak it as fluently. . . . My expectations as to the advantages offered by this institution from a pecuniary point of view were rather too extravagant to be realized, and notwithstanding all my parsimony and industry, instead of having a balance in my favor as I had anticipated, it will be the contrary. . . .

*Lafayette was then in its third year of existence, having just moved to “Mt. La Fayette” (College Hill) from south side Easton in the spring of 1834.

**For its first seven years, 1832-1839, Lafayette College was a manual labor academy. In addition to their academic work, students were also expected to work in the fields or in the carpentry shop for several hours each day, which would help defray their tuition.

***Thaddeus Stevens (noted abolitionist and Pennsylvania congressman) was then serving in the Pennsylvania Legislature, to which he had been elected in 1833 on the Anti-Masonic ticket. Ramsey secured an honorary membership for Stevens in Lafayette’s Franklin Society later in the spring of 1835.