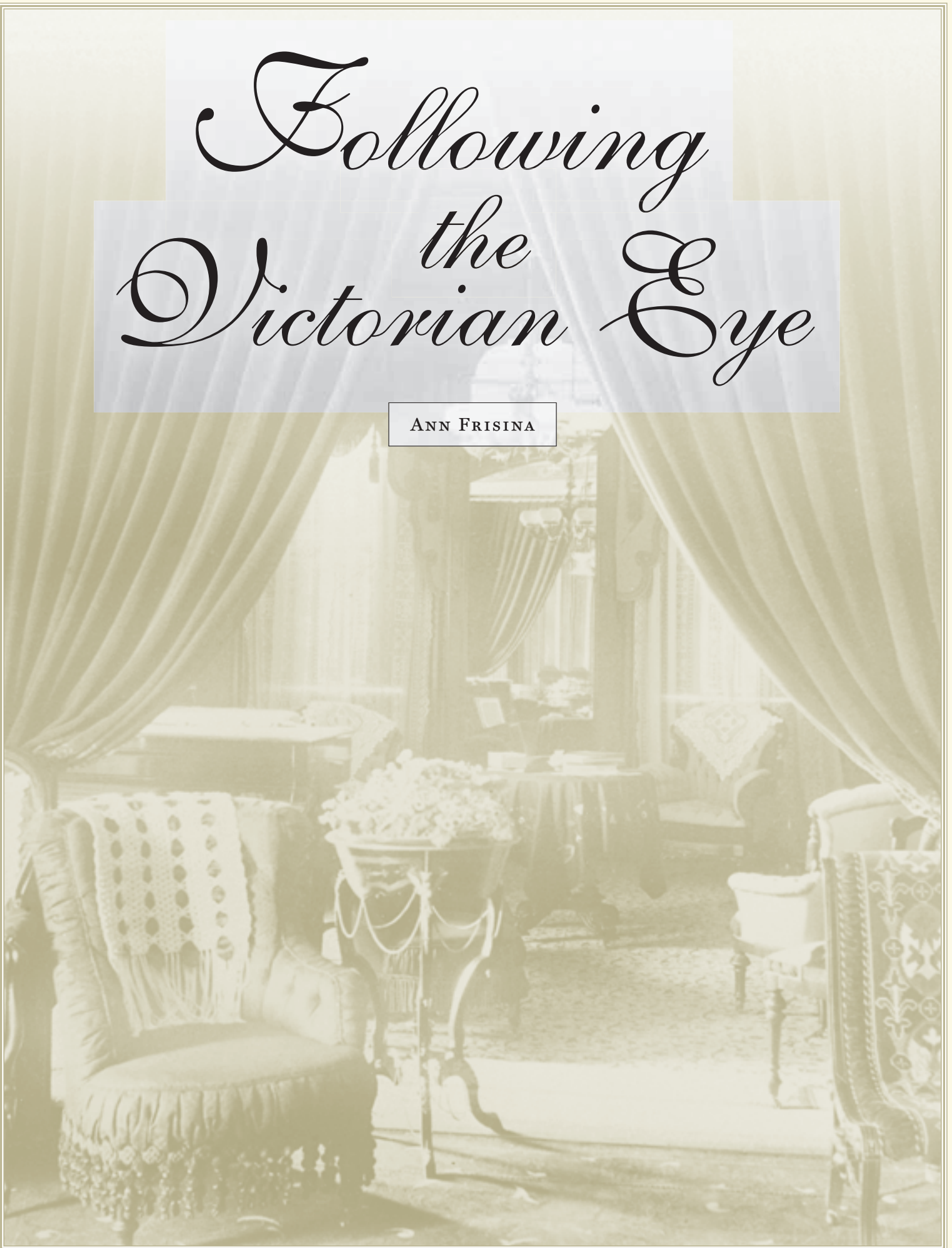


# Following the Victorian Eye

ANN FRISINA



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In 1998 the Minnesota Historical Society launched a project to revitalize the Alexander Ramsey House, the home of Minnesota's first territorial governor and his wife, Anna Earl Jenks Ramsey. Now a popular historic site, the Second Empire-style house had been built between 1868 and 1872 in St. Paul's fashionable Irvine Park neighborhood. Anna Ramsey decorated it to meet the needs of both public and private life. She purchased many of the furnishings on a buying trip to New York's famous A. T. & Stewart Company, America's first department store.<sup>1</sup>

One of our many revitalization goals was to return a suite of furniture bought at A. T. & Stewart to its 1872 appearance. This suite—two side chairs, two armchairs, two lounge chairs, and two sofas—resides in the highly public reception room, a space that was not used for daily family life. Here, Mrs. Ramsey greeted callers, held intimate concerts, and entertained guests. It was a place of grand display where pieces of furniture acted as elegant platforms upon which visitors could perch.<sup>2</sup>

Discovering this suite's original upholstery was a challenge and surprise. In later years, its pieces had been scattered throughout the house and re-upholstered three times (by family members and, later, museum professionals) in wildly different show covers. By 1998 the sofas were covered in pink damask, one armchair in olive velveteen and the other

in red velveteen, the lounge chairs in a heavily patterned jacquard tapestry, and the side chairs in pink and red damask. These choices alone show how our understanding of the past continues to evolve. For instance, the pink damask, considered an appropriate 1870s-style fabric when the sofas were re-covered in 1968, would not be chosen today.

*Fortunately*, the Ramseys had documented their public rooms furnished as they were in Anna Ramsey's time. An 1884 photograph of the reception room shows two lounge chairs, the back of one armchair, and the profile of a side chair.<sup>3</sup> All pieces were upholstered in the same Turkish or Oriental style with two contrasting, solid colors. They were embellished with tassels and finished with a light, contrasting flat trim. The fabric did not appear to be patterned in any way. We were surprised to see that the lounge-chair seats were buttoned—unlike their current, flat

presentation—but the side chair did not appear to be buttoned. From this evidence we speculated that the suite had flat seats, except for the lounge chairs—and that is how we decided to restore it. This valuable picture also revealed the approximate length and style of the tassels.

Armed with this general visual information, I began tacking-edge analysis in hopes of finding remnants of the original show cover. The tacking edge is where upholstery is secured to the frame with tacks or staples. When furniture is re-covered, small fragments and fibers of earlier covers are often left behind. Careful examination of these bits can lead to an informed decision about what type of upholstery to choose for restoration. Our analysis eventually revealed first-generation fibers and small fragments on a lounge chair and a sofa.

The button-backed sofa was the first item to be examined. Removing the modern cover revealed a



ABOVE: *The Alexander Ramsey House at Walnut and Exchange Streets, St. Paul, about 1890* PREVIOUS PAGE: *View from the library (foreground) into the reception room, a detail of the crucial 1884 documentary photograph*

carved panel in the center of the inside back. When the buttoning was added, holes had been drilled through the carving, through which cord was threaded and secured. This was an appalling find by today's museum-preservation standards, but it was completely appropriate for the nineteenth century. Styles had changed; to modernize the piece, the old-fashioned, fussy, carved panel was obliterated. While the Ramseys considered their sofas valuable, they were not sacred. As it turned out, this act of modernization was fortuitous for our conservation efforts.

In all, we sorted through fibers and fragments from at least four upholstery covers. The batting of the buttoned insert, for instance, yielded fibers of red, gold, and pink, indicating a woven, patterned fabric. Finally, we found three tiny fragments of white fabric under a single tack on the outside back edge. These showed clearly their weave structure: a rep fabric, which is woven with pronounced ridges. This rep had fat and thin ridges, making them more noticeable. Another fragment of the same fabric was found along the left inside-back-center tacking edge. This placement offered an important clue. There were very few tacking holes along this edge, as the newer buttoning had covered it. This scarce tacking suggests that only one generation of upholstery fabric had been applied before the carved panel was covered. Thus, the fragment we found was the original fabric.

Next, we examined a lounge chair. Removing the modern jacquard upholstery revealed multiple generations of tack holes and very little physical evidence. Whoever had re-covered the piece had first stripped it clean. This was unfortunate news. The better scenario is an

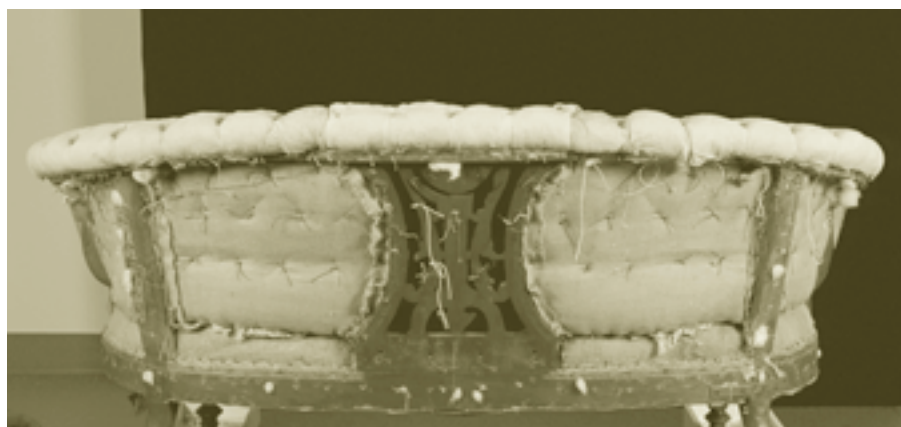
upholsterer who leaves everything in place and stretches new fabric directly over top. However, on the left-side tack rail we eventually found one precious, small red fragment that matched the rep-weave design of the white fragments. The location of the dark and light fabrics corresponded to the upholstery shown in the 1884 photograph. Our search had revealed the two contrasting colors—red and white—and its fiber, ply, and weave structure.

*Interpretation* of historical furnishings is a dicey job. Even educated guesses based on common period examples are often wrong. It is rare



*Fragment found on the lounge chair tack rail*

when the historian, curator, or conservator gets all of the details right. The Victorian eye combined strong, contrasting colors that we would not dare touch. Anna Ramsey's showy red-and-white furniture sat upon a rug with fire-engine-red scrolling flowers and a stippled mauve and off-white ground. The room's windows were covered with bright blue



*Work in progress: Removing the button-backed sofa cover revealed an original carved medallion drilled with holes to secure the newer buttoned insert.*

lambrequins, as noted in the A. T. & Stewart bill. I could not contain my shock at discovering this color combination. How could this discordant color grouping work? Perhaps the larger question for me was: Why would Anna upholster her furniture in white? Was the physical evidence incorrect? All I could think of was dirt, coal dust, and errant footprints. As a modern woman accustomed to steam and vacuum cleaners and a wealth of dirt-removing products, I wondered how she expected to keep this stuff white.

Getting over my shock, I realized that this was a public room. The family lounged in the cozy library, not here. In a room meant for receiving visitors, the home's—and Minnesota's—showplace, white furniture was a sign of prosperity and sophistication.

But was this color combination Anna Ramsey's own ideal of beauty or a style of the time? Visual research turned up John Barnard Whittaker's 1871–72 painting, *The Lesson*, which shows that the color scheme was



*Studio photo of Anna Ramsey, about 1875*

## VISITING THE ALEXANDER RAMSEY HOUSE

While today's guests can't sit on the furniture, they can see it firsthand in one of the best preserved Victorian homes in the country. Guided tours year-round introduce visitors to genteel family life in the 1870s, and special holiday tours highlight Victorian Christmas festivities. Reservations are recommended; call 651-296-8760 or 651-296-0100.

Location	Hours	Admission
265 South Exchange Street, one block south of Fort Road (West Seventh Street) at Walnut Street.	Year round, Friday and Saturday, 10 A.M.–3 P.M.; Thanksgiving to December 31, Wednesday to Sunday, 10 A.M.–3 P.M. Guided tours on the hour.	\$7 adults, \$6 seniors, \$4 children ages 6–17. Free to MHS members and children under 6.

For more information, call the number above or visit [www.mnhs.org/places/sites](http://www.mnhs.org/places/sites).

not Anna's singular design idea.<sup>4</sup> Portrayed in this upper-middle-class Brooklyn Heights parlor is a lounge chair with red-and-white upholstery. The white chair is placed off to the side, and no one is sitting in it. The children and dog are on the floor.

Knowing what we now know, it is interesting to reflect on the "Plan B" we had devised in case we did not find any physical evidence. Based on historical precedent and color ways documented in collections, periodicals, and the room's surviving furnishings, we would have covered the pieces with contrasting light and dark solids: blue and green mohair plush. The blue was to be similar to that of the lambrequins. Our well-educated guess would have been wrong.

Woolen rep upholstery appears to have been more prevalent than we at first had thought. We found an 1872 publication, *The Home Where It Should Be and What to Put into It*, that advised: "A parlor suit . . . of solid walnut, plainly finished, covered with good all-wool rep, with upholstered seats and backs for the easy-chairs, and upholstered seats for the other chairs, can be bought

as low as eighty-five dollars."<sup>5</sup> Anna's choice of woolen rep appears to have been a common one for middle-class furniture. Unfortunately, it is not as hardwearing as mohair plush. Examples of wool rep fabric rarely survive for examination.

*With the fabric* identified, the next question was where to get a reasonable facsimile. Wool rep with even ribs was being made in England, but I found none with the alternating fat and thin ribs of the Ramsey House fragments.<sup>6</sup> This fabric was ingenious in its economical use of warp yarn in a 2/1 threading pattern, a weave structure that saved 25 percent on warp yarn, thus keeping the mill financially competitive and making the fabric more affordable to consumers.

After taking bids, we chose to work with Family Heirlooms of Pennsylvania, a firm that weaves reproduction carpets, coverlets, and fabric for museums and reenactors. The fabric proved demanding to make. First, it was difficult to find yarn of the appropriate size and twist. Then, weaving problems cre-

ated flaws during production. Three strike-offs later, we came to an agreement on yarn ends per inch and overall look. It is hard to know what mills did in the Ramseys' day to facilitate weaving. Most likely, the yarns were made with longer staples and a tighter twist, creating a smoother length. Family Heirlooms persevered, and we got what we believe to be a solid facsimile.

Test Fabrics, a firm that specializes in conservation-quality work, did the finishing. The yardage was scoured for dyeing, removing dirt and impurities in the yarn. Then two lengths were dyed to match our color ways: one red, and the other a bright blue to be used for the lambrequins. The fabric was finally ready for application to the suite.<sup>7</sup>

*So much* about the tacking-edge analysis and subsequent re-covering of the suite was a complete surprise to us. Often, people—including museum professionals—who saw the pieces in the conservation lab at the History Center would ask if they

were finished. Was the fabric cotton-duck canvas? Is that what people used back then? Did they really have white furniture? No one was prepared for red-and-white woolen upholstery. The absolute surprise and subsequent success of the room as a visual whole teaches a valuable historical lesson. Following the Victorian eye leads to unexpected color choices you would never dare suggest on your own. □

## Notes

1. Bill of purchase, Aug. 24, 1872, Alexander Ramsey Papers, microfilm ed., roll 20, frame 210, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. See also Barbara Ann Caron, "The Alexander Ramsey House: Furnishing a Victorian Home," *Minnesota History* (Spring 1995): 194–209. A. T. & Stewart is listed in Andrew Boyd, *New York State Directory 1872–1873* (Syracuse, NY: Truair, Smith & Co., 1872), 412.

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2. The furniture was fabricated by New York City manufacturer-dealer Frederick Krutina; Boyd, *New York State Directory 1872–1873*, 412. In December 1872, for example, Anna Ramsey hosted a "Musical Sociable" charity concert in her newly fin-

ished home: "The elegant residence of Senator Ramsey . . . was, last evening, thrown open to the general public"; *St. Paul Daily Pioneer*, Dec. 21, 1872, p. 4.

On parlors or reception rooms, see Frank and Marion Stockton, *The Home Where It Should Be and What to Put into It* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1872), 51: "A visitor ushered into such a room, at once feels at home, a cordial welcome greets him in the very air."

3. On February 3, 1884, Alexander Ramsey recorded in his diary, "Two photographs of interior of rooms in our house taken some time since. 5.00. Wife paid this out of house money"; Ramsey papers, roll 43, frame 895.

4. Elisabeth Donaghy Garrett, *At Home: The American Family, 1750–1870* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1990), 59.

5. Stockton, *The Home Where It Should Be*, 47.

6. The blue lambrequins and another rusty red sofa, currently in storage, are also covered with this fancy-weave rep.

7. We also commissioned cording, flat trim, and tassels to match our findings.

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*The images on p. 287, 288, and 290 are in MHS collections; p. 289 (top and center) by Ann Frisina, p. 289 (bottom) by Kennedy Furniture and Decorative Arts Conservation, and p. 291 by Eric Mortenson are part of the conservation documentation records.*



*Ramsey House reception room with restored furniture, 2004*