

#74 The Public Life

of

EPAPHRODITUS RANSOM

Richard Charles Halsey

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Dr. Ivor D. Spencer

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I	Introduction	1
II	Vermont to Kalamazoo Epaphroditus Ransom as a Vermont legislator and Michigan settler.	2
III	Judicial Career Ransom as a lawyer, Associate Justice, Circuit Judge and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.	6
IV	Pre-Gubernatorial Politics Judge Ransom attempts to win a seat in the Senate of the United States.	13
V	Governor Ransom A successful Governor loses popularity over the slavery issue.	21
VI	Post-Gubernatorial Public Life Ransom as a banker, state represent- ative and Kansas settler.	30
VII	Conclusion	36

Despite its prominence among Michigan cities, Kalamazoo has not proved to be a source of able political leaders. Of Michigan's governors only one, Epaphroditus Ransom, was a resident of Kalamazoo. Little known today, Ransom was not among the outstanding executives who have occupied the governor's chair.

His story is of interest for more than its local significance, however, because his tenure as a political leader coincided with the great slavery dispute which split this nation. That issue had caused serious disputes in Michigan as well as in the South. Much of Ransom's political difficulty came because of the political unrest caused by the great strife.

Ransom was, for twenty years, caught in the main stream of Michigan's public life. A full understanding of his career is a guide to the troubled times. It is also an insight into the career of a capable politician. It will show Ransom to be an able administrator, but an unsuccessfully opportunistic politician.

Epaphroditus Ransom was born in Shelburne Falls, Hampshire County, Massachusetts on March 24, 1792,<sup>1</sup> fourth of Ezekiel and Lucinda Ransom's twelve children. About 11800 his parents moved to Townshend, Windham County, Vermont, where Mrs. Ransom's father, the influential General Samuel Fletcher, had provided them with a farm.<sup>2</sup>

Following the practice of most boys of New England, Ransom attended the common district school in the winter and helped work the farms in the summer. As soon as possible he entered into the academy at Westminster, Vermont to continue his studies, but withdrew to attend Chester Academy, a leading educational institution of the day. Upon completion of his studies at Chester he entered into the study of law in the office of Judge Peter R. Taft, grandfather of President William Howard Taft, in Townshend. After two years with Judge Taft, during which time Alphonso Taft, later Attorney General of the United States, was Ransom's companion and fellow student, he left to attend the law school at Northampton, Massachusetts.

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<sup>1</sup>Other biographies cite later dates, ranging from "February, 1796" to "sometime in 1799", but this date is from Ransom's son. W.C. Ransom, Historical Outline of the Ransom Family in America, 1903, Ann Arbor, Michigan. p.139.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

He returned to practice law after graduating with distinction from Northampton in 1823, and while he was not a great financial success, all of Townshend knew him to be personable, honest and frank. Soon after leaving law school he was elected to serve at least one term as the state representative from Townshend Township. While many sources indicate Ransom served in this body from 1825 to 1830, or simply for "several sessions",<sup>3</sup> his son, Wyllys Cadwell Ransom, maintains that he spent those years as Windham County justice of the peace and served in the legislature only during the 1826-27 term.<sup>4</sup>

While in Montpelier, Ransom met and married, on February 21, 1827, Miss Almira Cadwell, daughter of one of that city's leading citizens. Together they returned to Townshend when the 1827 session of the legislature adjourned.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Michigan Historical Commission, Michigan Biographies, Vol. II, 1924, Lansing, p.219.

<sup>4</sup>There is evidence that Ransom served only during the 1826-27 term. Leonard Deming, ed., Catalogue of Principal Officers of Vermont, 1778-1851, Middlebury, Vermont, 1851.

<sup>5</sup>The biographical material which appears above is taken from the following sources- W.C. Ransom, op.cit. pp.139-143; Michigan Historical Commission, Michigan Biographies, Vol. II, 1924, Lansing pp. 219-220; George N. Fullered, Messages of the Governors of Michigan, Vol. II 1846-1869, 1926, Lansing pp. 89-91; C.F. Norton, "Appointments to the Michigan Supreme and Chancery Courts, 1836-50", Michigan History Magazine Volume 30, Number 1, pp. 115-6, Lansing, 1946.

Two of Ransom's brothers and one sister had left Vermont and emigrated to Michigan Territory, and letters of the opportunities and wonders of their new homes interested him. He decided to follow them, and also decided to settle in Bronson, partly because of letters from Lucius Lyons, Michigan's United States' Senator from 1837-39.<sup>6</sup> With his wife and a few valuable possessions he arrived in Bronson on November 14, 1834 after a toilsome four week journey on both land and water.<sup>7</sup>

He spent the first winter in the house of his brother-in-law, John P. Marsh, on the north edge of Grand Prairie. In the spring he moved his family into the log home of Titus Bronson, the first settler of the town, who had just moved into a newer home.<sup>9</sup> The next year Ransom built a new home and law office on Main Street, at the present north-east corner of Main and Burdick.<sup>10</sup>

He lived in this house until 1841, when he moved his family into a house on a farm which he purchased from Senator Lyon.<sup>11</sup> This farm, described later, was to be his home until

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<sup>6</sup>Lawton T. Hemans, Life and Times of Stevens T. Mason, Lansing, 1920, p. 237.

<sup>7</sup>Ransom, op. cit. p. 140.

<sup>8</sup>Albert F. Butler, "Rediscovering Michigan's Prairies," Michigan History Magazine. Volume 32, Number 1, p.29 Lansing, 1948.

<sup>9</sup>Ransom, op.cit., p.29 Lansing, 1948.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

1851, when he moved to a new home at the site of Burdick and South Street after selling the farm. This last home was vacated in 1856 when Ransom left for a new start in Kansas Territory.

Ransom entered the practice of law as soon as he was settled in Bronson. He was admitted to the bar on November 19, 1834,<sup>1</sup> just five days after his arrival in town. The next year he formed a partnership with another young Democrat lawyer who had recently arrived in town, Charles E. Stuart.

Judging from later accomplishments this brief partnership must have been among the most able Kalamazoo has ever known. Ransom went on to become Chief Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court and Governor, while Stuart served in both houses of the American Congress and several Michigan political offices.

Just two months after Ransom arrived in Michigan Territory, in January of 1835, he had risen to a place of political prominence among territory Democrats. He served as vice-president of the Democratic Territorial Convention held in Ann Arbor on January 29 and 30.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mich. Pioneer and Hist. Soc. Colls. Vol. III, p. 135.

<sup>2</sup>Proceedings of the Democratic Territorial Convention, Held at Ann Arbor, on the 29th. and 30th. of January, 1835, (Detroit, 1835, p.p. 16) p.1, as quoted by C.F.Norton, op. cit. p. 115.

The Territory of Michigan, in an overly ambitious manner, adopted a State Constitution and elected a full slate of state officials on October of 1835.<sup>3</sup> On July 16, 1836, Stevens T. Mason, governor of this state, as yet not admitted to the Union by Congress, appointed Epaphroditus Ransom judge of the third Judicial Circuit and Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the State of Michigan.<sup>4</sup> Ransom accepted the post and severed his law partnership with Stuart to assume his new duties.

Since the state had not been recognized by Congress Ransom's position was of equally uncertain status. The Territorial officers, a Governor and three Judges who ran the affairs of the Territory maintained dual roles as authorities along with the newly elected state officers. Before Mason's appointment of Ransom his name had been put before the national Congress as a nominee for one of the Territorial Judges.<sup>5</sup> Despite the strong backing of Senator Lucius Lyon,<sup>6</sup> others in the Michigan delegation opposed his appointment, and he was not given the post,<sup>7</sup> which instead went to Judge Sibley, the incumbent.

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<sup>3</sup>Quaife, Milo and Glazer, Sidney, Michigan, 1948, New York, p. 165.

<sup>4</sup>Detroit Free Press, July 19, 1836, Detroit Public Library, Burton Historical Collection's.

<sup>5</sup>L. Lyon to E. Ransom "Letters of Lucius Lyon" Michigan Pioneer and Hist. Soc. Colls., Vol. 27, p. 473.

<sup>6</sup>L. Lyon to J. Forsyth "Letters of Lucius Lyon" Ibid. p. 475.

<sup>7</sup>L. Lyon to E. Ransom "Letters of Lucius Lyon" Ibid. p. 475.

Ransom's circuit as an Associate Justice comprised virtually the entire western half of the state. He covered originally all that portion of the state from the Indiana border to Mackinac in the western half of the state.

Details of Ransom's tenure as Justice are most difficult to obtain. The Supreme Court was made up of Ransom, Chief Justice, William A. Fletcher, and George Morrell. In 1838 Charles W. Whipple was added as Associate Justice, and took his judgeship in the newly created Fourth District, which stretched into the rather unsettled lumber country of the north from Pontiac, its center. These men served in two distinctly separate positions, that of State Judges in their respective circuits, and, meeting as a group, that of Supreme Court Justices. The Chief Justice presided only at the joint meetings, as he filled his own circuit post. While these two positions were separate functionally they were created together and appointment to one meant appointment to the other as well.

Since the Territorial Supreme Court had only sporadically reported their opinions, the new State Supreme Court

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<sup>8</sup>C.F. Norton, op.cit., p. 334.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

made no immediate provisions to record their opinions. Thus prior to 1838 no opinions are recorded in any form.<sup>10</sup> Ransom wrote the first opinions the Court recorded, in longhand from the January terms of the Court at Detroit and Ann Arbor, a total of six cases.<sup>11</sup> With the exception of one other opinion, these were the only opinions Ransom wrote which have been recorded during his tenure as Associate Justice.<sup>12</sup>

In those opinions which we have Ransom shows a lengthy and laborious style, with exceptionally careful legal principles being pointed out one by one. In comparison with other justices of his day Ransom's opinions seem to be more concerned with legalistic perfection, but are harder to read and run much longer. It has been said that Ransom's decisions were more important legally than those of any other of his contemporaries, and it is certain that his opinions often were exceptionally important in Michigan legal precedent.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 98, The other case was Owen vs Farmers Bank of Sandstone, 1841. See Samuel T. Douglass' Michigan Reports, Vol. II, 1878, Chicago.

<sup>13</sup> C.F. Norton, "Michigan Supreme and Chancery Courts", Michigan History Magazine, Volume 38, March 1946, p. 121.

Ransom himself felt that he had done little of significance in his first few years, saying in regard to the question of whether or not the Court needed a reporter, that the cases which had been brought before the Court in 1838 were not of enough significance to make their publishing worth expense.<sup>14</sup>

Among the most important of Ransom's decisions was the opinion he wrote in the case of Boland vs Detroit Young Men's Society Lessee. Here Ransom claimed that Michigan had been a state from the time its first constitution took effect in November of 1835, and that state officers were sovereign from that time, but that until the state was formally admitted in 1837 the Territorial officers shared that sovereignty.<sup>15</sup> He also wrote many other cases of importance during his stay on the court, mostly written while he was Associate Justice.<sup>16</sup>

Ransom was elevated to the Chief Justiceship by Governor John S. Barry in 1843, when his original seven-year term expired.<sup>17</sup> This made little change in Ransom's career on the bench, except that it increased his salary from \$1500 to \$1600. He retained this post until elected Governor.

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<sup>14</sup>C.F. Norton, "Unreported Michigan Supreme Court Opinions", Michigan Law Review, Volume 42, No. 1, August, 1943; p. 94.

<sup>15</sup>Samuel T. Douglass, op.cit., Vol. I p.119. Douglass was also a friend of Ransom's as well as the Court Reporter.

<sup>16</sup>For examples see Fitch vs Newberry, Farmers and Mechanics Bank vs Kingsley and Bronson vs Newberry, in Douglass, op.cit., Vols. I and II.

<sup>17</sup>Michigan Biographies, op.cit., p. 219.

In his other capacity, as Judge of the Third Circuit, little is known of Ransom's actions. No records were kept and few recollections have been printed. He traveled his circuit on horseback, taking with him often a corps of lawyers, since they were not available in many frontier towns.<sup>18</sup> The towns were wide spread, and often nothing happened to make the trip worthwhile for the judge and his travelling "bar".<sup>19</sup>

Those who remember Ransom on the bench in the many frontier towns left stories of "a man of commanding presence; in height, over six feet; in weight, exceeding two hundred pounds; massive head, with a voice of power."<sup>20</sup> And "I recall his majestic appearance, the dignity with which he presided on the bench,---his common sense as a man, his ability and uprightness as a judge.---"<sup>21</sup>

He made it a habit to meet the farmers as he traveled his circuit, and spent long hours discussing the crops, new techniques and other agricultural matters. His popular appeal was great, and his judicial career made him the West's

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<sup>18</sup>Michigan Pioneer and Hist. Soc. Collections, Vol. III,  
P. 629.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 629.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., Vol. 3, page 135, quotation of H.G. Wells.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., Vol. 11, p. 291, quotation of L.W. Lovell.

leading figure, with solid support from the farmers whom he knew personally all through his circuit.<sup>22</sup>

This was a great asset in his gubernatorial bid.

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<sup>22</sup>George W. Lawton and H.G. Wells in the Michigan Pioneer and Hist. Soc. Collections referred to in the above footnotes.

Epaphroditus Ransom's political ambition was always to be a United States Senator, an ambition never fulfilled. He was a successful politician, having served his state as Chief Justice and Governor, two positions he did not actively seek. His political activity was primarily concerned with the seeking of a spot in the Senate.

While serving as Associate Justice Ransom remained active in political and business affairs in Kalamazoo and Western Michigan. Ransom was one of the Commissioners of Kalamazoo and Lake Michigan Railroad Company,<sup>1</sup> which failed due to lack of investments in March of 1837.<sup>2</sup> He was elected a director of the Kalamazoo Branch of the Bank of Michigan in the same year.<sup>3</sup> In June of 1838, together with Ezra Convis and Sands McCamly, Ransom formed the Augusta Company and purchased the land in Ross Township of Kalamazoo County where the town of Augusta is now located. The land was subdivided and lots were sold, and as the sale was extensive Ransom no doubt earned a sizeable income from the venture.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kalamazoo Gazette, March 4, 1837.

<sup>2</sup> History of Kalamazoo County, Samuel W. Durant, ed., Philadelphia, 1880, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> Kalamazoo Gazette, March 11, 1837.

<sup>4</sup> Durant, op.cit., p. 492-493.

Ransom had been put into the state political spotlight by his appointment to the Supreme Court and was an important member of the Democratic Party. In February of 1839 the State House of Representatives was meeting to choose an United States Senator for the post then being held by Lucius Lyon of Kalamazoo. The House was controlled by the Democrats and because party discipline was secure a Democrat seemed assured of the nomination.

Ransom made no attempt to solicit votes for that seat, but certain of his friends entered his name in nomination. The party had no outstanding leader and the House Democrats could not agree on a nominee. Ransom finished second on at least two ballots to Lyon,<sup>5</sup> and may conceivably have won that seat if Lyon supporters had withdrawn his name as he had asked.<sup>6</sup> In the fall of 1839 the Whigs won control of the Legislature and as soon as they convened elected Augustus B. Porter, mayor of Detroit, to the Senate seat.<sup>7</sup>

Ransom's name was mentioned as a potential Democratic nominee for governor in 1840.<sup>7</sup> He had earlier stated that he

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<sup>5</sup> Kalamazoo Gazette, February 23, 1837.

<sup>6</sup> "Lucius Lyon Letters", Lyon to Thomas C. Sheldon, February 17, 1839, Collections and Researches made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, (hereafter referred to as Mich. Pioneer and Hist. Soc. Colls.), Volume 27, 1897, p. 581.

<sup>7</sup> Oakland Gazette, as reprinted in Kalamazoo Gazette, September 7, 1839.

aspired to no office other than his own, and that he would not accept the governorship if nominated unanimously because he could not afford the expense incidental to the office.<sup>8</sup> Ransom did, however, later admit that he had desired the Senatorial nomination in 1839, and claimed he could and should have been elected to that position while the Democrats had controlled the Legislature.<sup>9</sup>

Not until 1845 did Ransom's name again come into prominence in the political world. The Senate seat of Augustus Porter, a Whig was to be filled by a Democratic Legislature. Ransom wanted the seat and took steps to obtain the nomination. Lewis Cass, an ex-Territorial Governor and Michigan's best known citizen, also desired the seat as the best available spring-board to the nation's Presidency in 1848. Ransom and other potential candidates were persuaded to withdraw, but he was not pleased by this turn of events.

The job Ransom desired, openly now, had been denied him again. He began to feel that he was entitled to be elected to the Senate at the next opportunity, which would come in 1847 when Whig William Woodbridge's term ended.

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<sup>8</sup>Ransom to Lucius Lyon, Lyon Letters, as reprinted by C.F. Norton, op.cit., p.116.

<sup>9</sup>E. Ransom to H.N. Walker, August 22, 1846 H.N. Walker Letter, Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library. Ransom said he would have been elected save for "unfair practices by those opposed to him---."

His feelings were strong enough to cause him to write that if he was denied the seat in 1847 and the Democrats were in control of the legislature it would be a serious injustice.<sup>10</sup>

The Democratic Party of Michigan was nearing a political civil war, a split which would find Ransom aligned with a minority faction. Western Michigan Democrats, including Ransom, felt that they were being ignored in important policy decisions and in filling positions of prominence.<sup>11</sup> This dissatisfied group formed a faction of rebellion within the party. They were joined by a group known as "radicals", led Kinsley S. Bingham (later a Republican Governor of Michigan). The "radicals" were men of small means and anti-slavery sentiments who distrusted corporations, banks and special privileges.

Their opposition within the party was a large and powerful group known as the "conservatives" who had virtually complete control of the party.<sup>12</sup> These men, led by Elon

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<sup>10</sup>E. Ransom to H.N. Walker, Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Willis Dunbar, Michigan Through The Centuries, New York, 1955, credits Ransom with the leadership of this wing of the party. p. 261, Volume I.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. See also Floyd B. Streeter, Political Parties in Michigan, Lansing, 1918, for further details on the split in the party.

Farnsworth of Detroit, Governor Barry and Senator Lyon, felt Governor Mason had spent far too much and the state should be more cautious. A final, and relatively unimportant, faction was made up of Federal office holders led by ex-Senator John Norvell of Detroit.

The most important Democrats of the day were Senator Cass, Governor Alpheus Felch and Ransom. While Cass and Felch were not openly allied with any one faction in the political struggle, they had strong ties to the conservative group. Both were opposed to the Wilmot Proviso and had their closest friends in the conservative faction.<sup>13</sup> They both realized the unfortunate split in the party was very near and could ruin their political careers.<sup>14</sup>

Ransom made no secret of his desire to be Senator and began an all-out campaign toward that goal. He worked hard personally in the western half of the state where he was well-known, but depended on the efforts of friends in the east.<sup>15</sup>

Many other potential candidates began to appear on the scene. The unfortunate race of 1839 had hurt the party badly and left many frustrated candidates. When the "harmony

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<sup>13</sup>L. Cass to A. Felch, February 4, 1847, Felch Papers, Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library.

<sup>14</sup>D.A. Noble to A. Felch, no date, Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>E. Ransom to H.N. Walker, August 22, 1846, H.N. Walker Letters, op.cit.

election" of 1835 picked Lewis Cass it merely prolonged the wait of the potential Senators. Some of the candidates had only withdrawn in 1845 to save the party from a great split and were in no mood to put their bid off any longer.<sup>15</sup>

Ransom's leading opponent was expected to be Governor Alpheus Felch, an ex-Supreme Court Justice. Other men of prominence who announced their desire to hold the Senate seat were ex-Lieutenant Governor Origen D. Richardson, Daniel Goodwin and ex-Senator John Norvell.

When the Democratic legislators met in an evening caucus to pick their candidate Ransom held a slight advantage. He led the first ballot with 25 votes while Felch and Richardson were close behind with 23 and 22 votes respectively.<sup>16</sup> The balloting went on late into the night without any significant changes. On the twenty-fifth ballot Ransom polled 27 votes to 23 for Felch and 20 for Richardson.<sup>17</sup> It was obvious the Felch and Ransom supporters were ready to stay the rest of the night, but the Richardson group represented no particular faction of party and were ready to give up. The Felch supporters evidently made the most lucrative bid to the Richardson voters, for on the next ballot Felch led Ransom,

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<sup>16</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, February 5, 1847.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

38 - 31. On the twenty-eighth and final ballot Felch was nominated, despite the pleas of Ransom supporters who claimed the loss might destroy Ransom as a man.<sup>18</sup> The next day in joint session of the Legislature Felch easily defeated Whig incumbent William Woodbridge.

Ransom was bitter and disappointed at his defeat. His only record of prolonged absence from his judicial circuit was in the month of February, 1847, immediately following this defeat.<sup>19</sup> He returned to his judicial career shortly and was soon to be prominent in party news again.

In September of 1847 the Democrats met in a convention to pick their nominees for state offices. The westerners, not to be put off any longer, demanded the gubernatorial candidate be from among their ranks.<sup>20</sup> Ransom's name was entered in the balloting, but on the first vote he trailed Daniel Goodwin, acting Governor William Greenly and Sanford M. Green and Isaac Crary. By the fourth ballot Ransom was nominated over Sanford Green, 95 votes to 18, after the other candidates dropped out one at a time.<sup>21</sup>

Spurred by the examples of William Woodbridge and

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<sup>18</sup>Michigan Tribune, Battle Creek, February 6, 1847.

<sup>19</sup>C.F. Norton, "Michigan Supreme and Chancery Courts", Michigan History Magazine, Volume 39, March 1846, p. 119.

<sup>20</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, February 26, 1847.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., September 17, 1849.

Alpheus Felch, who had gone from the governor's chair to the Senate, accepted the nomination.<sup>22</sup> He did not resign his judicial position, which was according to precedent,<sup>23</sup> while he campaigned. Since Michigan had been solidly Democratic since 1841 little work was necessary in getting elected. The Whigs, who very nearly approved of Ransom, concentrated their attacks on the Democrats' Lieutenant-Governor nominee, W.M. Fenton, who had voted against a proposal similar to the Wilmot Proviso in the Michigan House of Representatives.<sup>24</sup>

Ransom's opponent was James M. Edmund, whom the Whigs had nominated after a hard fight with William Woodbridge.<sup>25</sup> Edmunds, a Washtenaw County legislator, was attacked by the Democrats for his actions in a bank-solvency investigation committee some years before.<sup>26</sup> Ransom was respected by most for his fairness on the bench, and since the Whigs offered little opposition, Ransom was elected by 24,639 to 18,990 vote. He resigned his Chief Justice position and took on the duties of the Governor of Michigan.

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<sup>22</sup>Detroit Free Press, September 10, 1847, gives Ransom's letter of acceptance.

<sup>23</sup>Norton, op.cit., p. 120. Felch and Farnsworth had also campaigned while on the bench.

<sup>24</sup>Michigan Tribune, Battle Creek, October 16, 1847.

<sup>25</sup>Michigan Tribune, Battle Creek, September 25, 1847.

<sup>26</sup>Detroit Free Press, as reprinted by Kalamazoo Gazette, October 22, 1847.

The Whigs, who had found little fault with Ransom as a candidate, began their attacks as soon as he occupied the executive's seat. They maintained he had freed admittedly guilty defendants on legal technicalities during the November term of the Kent circuit court. The claim was never really substantiated, and seems to have been mostly political.<sup>1</sup> The second attack was that he was only a disgruntled U.S. Senate candidate who was placated by being given the governorship;

"Utterly incompetent as a judge—swayed to and fro by a cunning argument like a reed shaken in the wind—ignorant of the principles of legal science—spending his time about the Legislature to procure himself to be sent the National Senate; and when told his great statesman-like abilities must be dispensed with for the present, rendered sick with disappointment—and finally abandoning the lofty position of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to be the Executive Officer of Logfocoism, and spend his winters in a swamp."<sup>2</sup>

The last part of the statement was in reference to the new state capitol, Lansing, which was hardly even a village. Ransom was the first governor inaugurated in the new capitol, taking the oath on January 3, 1848.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>C.F. Norton, op. cit. p. 120.

<sup>2</sup>Detroit Advertiser, as reprinted in Kalamazoo Gazette, February 4, 1848.

<sup>3</sup>Detroit Free Press, January 9, 1848.

In his first official act Governor Ransom addressed a joint session of the State Legislature, putting forth his proposed program and spelling out his plans and ideals. The speech was very complete, considerably longer than was required for the occasion. He suggested paying the public debt as soon as possible, condemned the Mexicans as aggressors against the United States and called for judicial changes. He also recommended that the Legislature, which met each year, meet instead only every other year for convenience and stability of law. He proposed the building of a canal around the falls of the St. Mary's River, site of the present Soo Locks, and asked for a road and state improvements for the colony of Hollanders who had recently settled on Lake Michigan at what is now Holland. The rest of the speech was a simple statement of statistics and opinions regarding the condition of the state.<sup>4</sup>

The first act of public interest which was pending was the appointment of a Chief Justice and a new Justice to replace Ransom himself. Despite the clamor of Whig papers Ransom did not make the appointments for some time. The Whigs claimed he was being stalled by political promise.<sup>5</sup> The Democrats maintained he was waiting for the Legislature

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<sup>4</sup> George N. Fuller, ed., Messages of the Governors of Michigan, Vol. II, 1926, Lansing, p. 93-112.

<sup>5</sup> Kalamazoo Gazette, January 21, 1848, January 28, 1848.

to act upon a pending Judicial Bill.<sup>6</sup> On February 21, 1848 Ransom named Charles W. Whipple Chief Justice and at the same time switched Whipple from the fourth to third circuit. To the then open fourth circuit Ransom named Sanford M. Green, who also became an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court.<sup>7</sup>

Most of this series of appointments and moves was acceptable, with the exception of the move of Judge Whipple from the fourth circuit to Ransom's own old third circuit. Whipple had served the fourth circuit, centered about Pontiac, for eleven years and was very popular there. The third circuit was even angrier, claiming that Ransom's failure to name a lawyer from within the circuit was an implication that they had no capable candidates for the post.<sup>8</sup> Ransom had been considered the leader of a western wing of the party, a wing based on the claim that the west had few of its own men in important positions. To have their own leader ignore them in a move to gain political support in the east was especially hard for western leaders to accept.

During Ransom's first year in office the upper peninsula of Michigan underwent a period of great growth due

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<sup>6</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, January 28, 1848.

<sup>7</sup>C.F. Norton, op.cit., p. 726.

<sup>8</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, March 3, 1848.

to the rich mining deposits recently discovered there. Many mining companies were incorporated and four new Upper Peninsula counties were established.<sup>9</sup>

During Ransom's first year as governor another significant development was the great increase in plank road activity. Over fifty plank road companies were granted franchises.<sup>10</sup> Ransom's personal persistence also paved the way for the Legislature's grant of money to begin operations to provide the state with asylums for the deaf and dumb and the insane.<sup>11</sup>

Also of some political importance were two vetoes Ransom exercised in his first year. One of these killed a \$ 400,000 subsidy to the Michigan Southern Railroad,<sup>12</sup> bringing Ransom into conflict with many of his own party members. The second refused the extension of the Farmer's and Mechanic Bank of Michigan. This veto was done through the use of a pocket veto which stirred up some opposition from the Whigs.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Henry Utley and Byron Cutcheon, Michigan as a Province, Territory and State, Volume III, 1906, New York, p.315.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 315.

<sup>11</sup>For Ransom's recommendations on asylums see Kalamazoo Gazette, March 10, 1848.

<sup>12</sup>George N. Fuller, op.cit., p.138-142.

<sup>13</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, September 29, 1848, October 6, 1848, October 20, 1848.

They claimed Ransom had used a pocket veto to avoid giving reasons for his opposition to the bill and thereby escaping the political uproar his railroad veto had stirred. Avoiding political enemies would be important to Ransom, they said, if Lewis Cass should be nominated for President and Ransom reached for his vacated Senate seat.<sup>14</sup> Ransom denied this charge later, saying he had not been given the bill until late on the day of the adjournment of the Legislature and had no time to present his objection's to the bill.<sup>15</sup>

The second year of Ransom's term as governor got off to a poor political start. He delivered his annual message to the Legislature as required on January 1, 1848.<sup>16</sup> He summed up his first year in office and gave a very detailed financial report of the state. After explaining his vetoes he urged the Legislature press for a change in the state constitution to require that all state officers be elected.<sup>17</sup>

These routine parts of the message were quickly

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>George N. Fuller, op.cit. p.131-146.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. The full message appears also in Kalamazoo Gazette, January 6, 1849.

<sup>17</sup>George N. Fuller, op.cit., p. 129-146.

forgotten after Ransom delivered the political part of his speech. He called upon the legislature to affirm the Wilmot Proviso, an anti-extension of slavery proposal then being debated in the National Congress, which would have barred slavery from any territories gained by the United States in the war with Mexico. The state Democrats were controlled by conservatives who were not anxious to see such measures adopted, fearing civil war.

Ransom had now infuriated a good many of his own party's leaders and his former political allies failed to come to his support.<sup>18</sup> He was accused of attempting to gain political support in his bid for Cass' Senatorial seat, which had been vacated by the Democrat's presidential nominee, from the Whigs and Free-Soilers.<sup>19</sup> Since Ransom had three times lost the Senate vote within his own party it is likely the claim was valid.

When Cass had resigned his Senate position to campaign for President Ransom had appointed Thomas Fitzgerald to serve until the Legislature convened to pick a successor for Cass. Cass' loss to Zachary Taylor left him the leading

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<sup>18</sup>The Kalamazoo Gazette printed the full message January 6, 1849, and promised comment soon. No further mention of the message appeared.

<sup>19</sup>Detroit Free Press, February 2, 1849.

contender for his old seat, but there was a considerable opposition to Cass this time. Ransom made clear his intention to be elected Senator this time regardless of how party unity might suffer.

The Legislature met in caucuses to select a nominee from each party. The Democrats of the Senate, after considerable debate, chose Ransom as their nominee.<sup>20</sup> The House of Representatives disagreed, choosing Cass with Ransom as third choice.<sup>21</sup> In their joint meeting eleven of Ransom's original seventeen supporter's in the Senate switched their votes to Cass, insuring his election.<sup>22</sup> Ransom's friends seeing they would get no help from the Whigs, tried to stall the election,<sup>23</sup> but failed and Cass was selected as the party nominee over Ransom, 44 - 17.<sup>24</sup>

Ransom's trouble at home grew more serious when he vetoed a bill for Kalamazoo River improvements. Despite his

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<sup>20</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, January 26, 1849.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Kalamazoo Telegraph, January 20, 1849.

<sup>24</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, January 26, 1849.

long and detailed explanation of his veto,<sup>25</sup> the Whig local paper, the Telegraph, attacked the action.<sup>26</sup> The Democratic Gazette made no mention of the incident and offered no defense for Ransom.

While this attack was going unanswered the Telegraph took up another matter of local interest. Ransom was accused of tampering with a law, through a legislative friend, which expanded the limits of the village of Kalamazoo. Though his farm was quite near the center of the village the Telegraph claimed he used his influence to keep his property outside the new limits, keeping him free from village taxes and costs, while he was prospering from the sale of lots on this farm.<sup>27</sup> Once again the Gazette offered no defense for Ransom.

After these few local incidents Ransom became Michigan's forgotten man. He captured some interest when he vetoed the Southern Michigan Railroad Bill again,<sup>28</sup> but this quickly dropped out of the news. In August the Kalamazoo Gazette printed an editorial on who should be the next governor and

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<sup>25</sup>George N. Fuller, op.cit. p. 144-146.

<sup>26</sup>Kalamazoo Telegraph, March 10, 1849.

<sup>27</sup>Kalamazoo Telegraph, March 10, 1849.

<sup>28</sup>George N. Fuller, op.cit. p. 146-154.

never mentioned the name of the incumbent, who came from its home-town.<sup>29</sup> Ransom's political fortunes were at low tide. In August he wrote to the Detroit Commercial Bulletin a letter announcing his declination to be a candidate for re-election,<sup>30</sup> hardly necessary under the circumstances.

In late September the Democrats met in convention and picked ex-Governor John S. Barry as their nominee for Governor. Ransom's name was not mentioned in a convention which seemed interested in patching up party difficulties.

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<sup>29</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, August 3, 1849.

<sup>30</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, August 31, 1849.

It seemed Governor Ransom's political career in Michigan had come to an end. He left the executive's chair with few political allies after a series of maneuvers had antagonized his former friends. His failure to displace Senator Cass as leader of the state Democratic party had completely alienated all the leaders of that group from Ransom. Outside political parties failed to contribute any support in his senatorial bid. He had antagonized his home area at least three times in moves designed to strengthen his political stock in the eastern half of the state.

He now retired, unwillingly, to his farm in Kalamazoo. He had maintained constant contact with new methods and techniques in agriculture throughout his political career. The farm had remained active and under Ransom's care was expanded into one of the largest and most productive in the area. His boundaries reached from present day Lovell Street on the north to Reed Street on the south, and from Park Street east to Pine Street.<sup>1</sup> Ransom was a good farmer, and at a major fair in 1850 he won four blue ribbons with his cattle, more than any other exhibitor.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Compendium of History and Biography of Kalamazoo County, D. Fischer and F. Little, eds., no date, Chicago, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, November 8, 1850.

The State Agricultural Society, which Ransom had helped found as Governor, chose him as its first President.<sup>3</sup> He was re-elected to that spot the next year, more of an honor than a duty. Ransom's renown as a farmer and his progressive methods made him a popular consultant among other farmers of the area.

Governor John S. Barry, Ransom's successor, appointed the outgoing executive to the Board of Regents of the University of Michigan in 1850. Ransom held the post until 1852, when it became an elective position.<sup>4</sup>

While serving as Governor, Ransom had recommended constitutional reforms, and 1849 the voters had called for a constitutional convention to revise the State Constitution of 1835.<sup>5</sup> The delegates to the convention were apportioned to the counties and elected locally. Kalamazoo was allotted three delegates, and Ransom was one of the three candidates nominated by the local Democrats.<sup>6</sup> His demise in political popularity was illustrated by his resounding defeat in the election. While the other two

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<sup>3</sup>W.C. Ransom, op.cit., p. 142.

<sup>4</sup>Michigan Biographies, op.cit. p. 219.

<sup>5</sup>Quaife and Glazer, op.cit. p. 188.

<sup>6</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, May 17, 1849.

Democrats won easily, all three Whigs finished ahead of Ransom and two outright abolitionist polled nearly as many votes as he did.<sup>7</sup> It is unusual that a man with such wide experience and knowledge of the problems could not be elected to the convention where his talents could be utilized.

In 1851 Ransom, pressed for finances, was persuaded to sell his entire farm to Paulus Den Blyker for \$12,000 in Dutch gold,<sup>8</sup> a very high price for even such valuable property. With the money Ransom entered into the banking business with his son, Wyllys. The bank did a brisk business and was particularly active in the financing of plank road companies.

Ransom's political memories must have been unpleasantly stirred by the election held among the state legislators to pick a U.S. Senator in 1851. Lewis Cass held that seat and had no intention of relinquishing it. The election was unanimous for Senator Cass except for one vote, a free-soil Democrat from Monroe named Barnes cast his ballot for Epaphroditus Ransom.<sup>9</sup>

The next April Ransom ran for the post of Kalamazoo

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Fischer and Little, op.cit., p. 90.

<sup>9</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, February 14, 1851.

Township Supervisor and was elected over his Whig rival by 102 votes.<sup>10</sup> Even though the post was unusually insignificant for an ex-Governor, it was the first time in three years he had shown any signs of political popularity.

In October he was prevailed upon to run for state representative from Kalamazoo County. He said he had no desire to take the job, but agreed to run to do his part in preventing the transfer of the Insane Asylum from Kalamazoo to Lansing." He was elected easily and served one term. At the completion of the term he returned to Kalamazoo, having served his state as Chief Justice, Governor and a member of the House of Representatives.

He returned to his banking which was an active concern. The bank extended so much credit that when the Panic of 1855 struck it was forced to liquidate. When the bank closed Ransom attempted to gain control of the Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids Plank Road Company, in which his bank had invested heavily. This move failed, after litigation, and was finally inactive.<sup>12</sup>

In 1856 the Secretary of War honored Ransom with an appointment to the Board of Visitors of the United States Military

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<sup>10</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, April 9, 1852.

<sup>11</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, October 15, 1852.

<sup>12</sup>W.C. Ransom, op.cit., p. 142.

Academy at West Point, New York.<sup>13</sup> Later in that same year he was appointed by President Buchanan to the post of Receiver of the Osage Land Office at Fort Scott, Kansas, and with his wife quickly departed for that city.

Ransom's political ambitions seemed to be revived by the move. Kansas Territory, when Ransom arrived, was in the middle of one of the bitterest of the pre-Civil War slavery disputes. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill of "popular sovereignty" was very unpopular to many northern anti-slavery leaders, one of which Ransom had been in his speech advocating the Wilmot Proviso in 1849. The officials of Kansas Territory were primarily in favor of the bill, and Ransom's record hardly recommended him to become one of their comrades.

But he was appointed, and soon an even more unlikely event occurred. He was nominated by the Kansas Territory Democrats as delegate to Congress in Washington.<sup>14</sup> Ransom's speech before the National Democratic Convention for Kansas showed his change in position since 1849, whether due to a shift of principles or mere political expediency.

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<sup>13</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, April 4, 1856.

<sup>14</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, July 24, 1857.

"I am wedded strongly, and I think, unalterably to the great doctrines of the National Democratic Party of this Union. I subscribe fully and unqualifiedly to the doctrines of the Kansas Nebraska Act \_ \_ \_."

"I hold most emphatically that the principles of the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott case were correct upon that question, and that the true principle is to leave the matter entirely to be settled by the people who are to be settled by the people who are to be effected by it in their particular localities."<sup>15</sup>

These words sound very little like utterances of the man who had said eight years before;

"If then, such be the acknowledged character and tendencies of slavery, should it be suffered to extend a single line into the territory now free? The deep and abiding sentiment of my judgement alike respond, no, never!"<sup>16</sup>

Which was the true Ransom, which the politically expedient, is an impossible question. He was defeated in the election and resumed his duties at Fort Scott. He died in that city on November 12, 1859,<sup>17</sup> and was buried there. His body was later returned to Kalamazoo where he was interred in the Mountain Home Cemetery, January 13, 1861.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, July 24, 1857.

<sup>16</sup>Fuller, op.cit., p. 130.

<sup>17</sup>W.C. Ransom, op.cit. p. 143. Again other sources disagree on the date.

<sup>18</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, January 18, 1861.

Governor Ransom's public life was unusual, if not outstanding. He was a public official in three states as legislator, executive and judge. He lived in cultivated circles at a refined New England academy and in the midst of a violent frontier mob in Kansas.

He was a compromise between extremes, as was his entire age of American History. He allied himself with conservative and liberal politicians. He showed signs of unbending allegiance to principle and also of sham political expediency.

His ambitions and pride drove to him actions he would hardly have condoned in others. He was self-centered, but uncertain of his place among his compatriots. They never fully accepted him, nor did they help him when he needed them. He bore traces of personal grudges reflected in his writings to others.

Still his efforts to help develop asylums for the blind, insane and poor and his concern for constitutional reform showed his desire to help people. He helped his state with his efforts, but they were unappreciated by the men he most wanted to impress.

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