

Michigan Lawyers in History

Epaphroditus Ransom

By Carrie Sharlow



The state of Michigan was built by the lumber and auto industries, agriculture, and the lawyers who lived, studied, and practiced here. The articles in this occasional series highlight some of those lawyers and judges and their continuing influence on this great state.

Since 1835, Michigan has had 47 unique governors, all but two of whom have been men. There have been two Freds,¹ Franks,² Henrys,³ and Jameses;⁴ four Williams;⁵ and five Johns.⁶ At least one was better known by his nickname than his given name.⁷ One had a first name that was the same as another's last name.⁸ There was an Aaron, Charles, David, George, and Murray.⁹ But the most unusual name was Epaphroditus.

Epaphroditus Ransom's family had an affinity for biblical names, however obscure. Epaphroditus had uncles named Jabez, Elisha, Hazael, and Ichabod,¹⁰ and cousins named Erastus, Zeviah, Amasa, and Epaphras.¹¹ There was even a second Epaphroditus.

In many ways, the story of the Ransoms is the story of the United States. The family immigrated from England in the mid-1600s and settled in New England. After more than a century in the New World, many Ransoms enlisted in colonial militias and served during the American Revolution.

Epaphroditus's father, Ezekiel, was one of those.¹² Family legend says he enlisted at age 14, fought at Saratoga, and later served on Gen. George Washington's staff.¹³ In 1791, after Washington had been inaugurated and the Constitution was ratified by Vermont, Ezekiel Ransom married Lucinda Fletcher, the daughter of his former

commanding officer.¹⁴ As the new country found its footing, the Ransoms built their family.¹⁵ By 1816, the United States had six new states and a multitude of territories,¹⁶ and the Ransoms had 12 children.¹⁷

Epaphroditus was their first son, and a great deal must have been expected of him.¹⁸ The Ransom children were raised on a farm in Townshend, Vermont, and agriculture remained in their blood even as they pursued other professions. One son went to medical college and became a physician,¹⁹ another was a merchant and postmaster,²⁰ and a third ran a meat market and served as a college trustee.²¹

Epaphroditus became an attorney. He attended the local schools and Westminster and Chester academies before reading law in the office of Judge Peter Taft and studying at the Northampton Law School.²²

Following in the footsteps of other attorneys who became politicians, it wasn't

long before Epaphroditus was involved in Vermont politics. His unique name was probably both a blessing and a curse; you weren't going to forget it easily, but could you spell it accurately on a ballot? By 1826, he was doing double duty as local justice of the peace and representative to the capital in Montpelier.²³

Epaphroditus's legislative service indirectly led to his marriage to Almira Cadwell, whose father was a Montpelier merchant. The couple met during Epaphroditus's first year in office and married during his second. Later, the Ransoms returned to the family's home base in Townshend,²⁴ where Epaphroditus set up a law practice and the couple had three children in a four-year span.

The story could have ended there were it not for Epaphroditus's siblings. Westward expansion was in full swing, and over a three-year period beginning in 1830, three

He was the first to serve in all three branches of the government, helped establish Lansing as an accessible capital, had a hand in the founding of what is now known as Michigan State University, and had the most unique name of any Michigan governor.



Photo courtesy of the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society

Epaphroditus Ransom

siblings moved to Michigan.²⁵ They sent back glowing reports of the new land, and other Ransoms considered moving from Townshend to a small Michigan Territory village named Bronson.²⁶

It took four weeks, but the Ransoms arrived in Bronson on Friday, November 14, 1834. Epaphroditus formed a partnership with another local attorney.²⁷

Things progressed quickly for both the territory and the Ransoms. Within three years, Michigan Territory became a state, Bronson was renamed Kalamazoo, and Epaphroditus was appointed “judge of the third judicial circuit and associate justice of the supreme court” by Gov. Stevens Mason, who was also an attorney.²⁸

Epaphroditus’s rise continued when Gov. John Barry appointed him as Supreme Court chief justice and he successfully ran for governor five years later.²⁹ It was said that he enjoyed the “confidence of every member of his party in the State of Michigan” as well as being “esteemed and respected by his political opponents” and his friends.³⁰

As the first governor to be inaugurated in the new capital city, Epaphroditus had a hand in changing its reputation of a “log cabin settlement” with poor accessibility.³¹ Maybe it was because of his experience riding circuit as a court justice. Shortly after his inauguration, a new direct mail route was established from Detroit to the capital

via the Grand River Road.³² To ensure that the mail could actually make it between the two cities, Gov. Ransom championed the plank road: “[D]uring his administration a general plank road bill was passed which provided specified standards”³³ and a large amount of land was appropriated “for the building of state roads.”³⁴ Finally, to avoid any postal issues, he approved the name change of the capital city to Lansing; it had previously been known as Michigan.³⁵

In 1849, Gov. Ransom created the Michigan State Agricultural Society and was appointed its first president, making “an eloquent allusion to the pride which he felt in being able to call himself a practical farmer.”³⁶ The society, of course, called for the establishment of a local agricultural college, but by the time the school welcomed its first students, Epaphroditus was long gone from Lansing. As a result of his stance “against the extension of slavery into territory then free,” he lost his party’s nomination for governor in 1850,³⁷ though he was elected to the state legislature a few years later.³⁸

Epaphroditus Ransom later moved to Kansas, where he died on November 11, 1859. His body was returned to Kalamazoo for burial; though he was born in New England and died in the Plains, he was a Michigander through and through. He was the first to serve in all three branches of the government, helped establish Lansing as an accessible capital, had a hand in the founding of what is now known as Michigan State University, and had the most unique name of any Michigan governor—and maybe of any Michigan lawyer. ■

Carrie Sharlow is an administrative assistant at the State Bar of Michigan.

ENDNOTES

1. Fred M. Warner (1905–1910) and Fred W. Green (1927–1930). All information about the governors and years served comes from *Michigan’s Governors, 1835 to Present*, State of Michigan <<https://www.michigan.gov/formergovernors/0,4584,7212-54132-00.html>> [<https://perma.cc/FF3P-76KM>]. All websites cited in this article were accessed September 8, 2019.
2. Frank D. Fitzgerald (1935–1936, 1939) and Frank Murphy (1937–1938).

3. Henry H. Crapo (1865–1868) and Henry P. Baldwin (1869–1872). Of course, there was also Harry F. Kelly (1943–1946).
4. James Wright Gordon (1841) and James J. Blanchard (1983–1990).
5. William Woodbridge (1840–1841), William L. Greenly (1847), William A. Comstock (1933–1934), and William G. Milliken (1969–1982).
6. John S. Barry (1842–1846, 1850–1851), John J. Bagley (1873–1876), John T. Rich (1893–1896), John B. Swainson (1961–1962), and John M. Engler (1991–2002).
7. G. Mennen Williams (1949–1960).
8. William Woodbridge (1840–1841) and Woodbridge N. Ferris (1913–1916).
9. Aaron T. Bliss (1901–1904), Charles M. Croswell (1877–1880), David H. Jerome (1881–1882), George Romney (1963–1969), and Murray D. Van Wagener (1941–1942).
10. Ransom, *Historical Outline of the Ransom Family of America and Genealogical Record of the Colchester, Conn., Branch* (Ann Arbor: Richmond & Backus Company, 1903), pp 79–80.
11. *Id.*, p 95.
12. *Id.*, p 80.
13. *Id.*, p 98.
14. Fuller, *Messages of the Governors of Michigan, Volume II* (Lansing: Michigan Historical Commission (1926), p 89.
15. *Historical Outline of the Ransom Family*, pp 97–98.
16. *List of US states by date of admission to the Union*, Wikipedia (2019) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_US_states_by_date_of_admission_to_the_Union> [<https://perma.cc/6SUP-2YT3>].
17. *Historical Outline of the Ransom Family*, pp 97–98.
18. *Id.*, p 97.
19. *Id.*, p 144.
20. *Id.*, p 150.
21. *Id.*, p 159.
22. *Messages of the Governors of Michigan*, p 89 and *Historical Outline of the Ransom Family*, p 139.
23. *Historical Outline of the Ransom Family*, p 140.
24. *Id.*, p 140.
25. *Id.*, pp 137, 147, 158.
26. *Id.*, p 140.
27. *Id.*, p 141.
28. *Id.*
29. *Id.*
30. *Democratic Nominations*, Daily Free Press (September 29, 1847), p 2.
31. *State capital named Lansing*, The Battle Creek Enquirer (July 4, 1976), p 37.
32. Greenebaum, *Michigan, Michigan: The Story of the Little Known Capital of the Wolverine State* (Saginaw: M. Greenebaum, 1958), p 5, available at <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015071358231&view=1up&seq=5>> [<https://perma.cc/4UQR-VFXD>].
33. *First Berrien circuit judge to be recognized Friday*, The Herald-Palladium (October 15, 1987), p 4.
34. Rockhill, *Michigan’s Governors: Elected 100 Years Ago*, Lansing State Journal (March 21, 1948), p 8.
35. *Michigan, Michigan*, p 8.
36. Holmes, *Transactions of the State Agricultural Society with Reports of County Agricultural Societies* (Lansing: E. W. Ingals, 1850), p 2.
37. *Historical Outline of the Ransom Family*, p 142.
38. *Messages of the Governors of Michigan*, p 90.