

David Ramsay, early American patriot and historian, was born in Drumore

"These Truths," Jill Lepore's engaging history of the United States, compliments Lancaster County native Dr. David Ramsay as a "gifted historian" who would have written Andrew Jackson's biography if the doctor had not been shot and killed by a patient he had diagnosed as insane.

The state history website, ExplorePennsylvania.com, goes further, commending Ramsay as the "Father of American History."

Vacationing in Charleston, South Carolina, several weeks ago, the Scribbler and his spouse admired Ramsay's three-story house on Broad Street. The home was built around 1740 and occupied by Ramsay and his wife from 1783 until Ramsay's patient proved his diagnosis correct in 1815.

These encounters with the story of a man who authored some of the country's first histories and delivered the first smallpox vaccinations in South Carolina have prompted the writing of this column. Once notable but now relatively obscure, people should be remembered from time to time, especially if they were born in Lancaster County.



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THE SCRIBBLER

Ramsay first saw the light in Drumore (now East Drumore) Township on April 2, 1749. His Scots-Irish parents, James and Jane Ramsay, and their three sons lived in a whitewashed stone hut along Conowingo Creek near Drumore's boundary with Little Britain and Fulton townships.

Ramsay attended schools at Chestnut Level Academy and the Carlisle Academy and entered the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) at age 16.

After graduating, he taught school before obtaining his medical degree at the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania) in 1773, according to an address on the occasion of the dedication of a memorial to Ramsay and other Drumore worthies on the east side of Route 222 at Unicorn in 1921.

Ramsay moved with other Scots-Irish settlers to the South Carolina low country. He eventually settled in the Charleston house in which he treated the ill, including the patient who was impatient with Ramsay's evaluation of his mental state and would end the doctor's life not long after his 66th birthday.

But what an extraordinary life Ramsay lived.

The Revolutionary War began shortly after Ramsay arrived in Charleston. The doctor began writing persuasive patriotic prose. He was elected to the South Carolina Legislature and served on the council of safety. Later he became a field surgeon and served during the siege of Savannah.

When Charleston fell to the British in 1780, he was captured and imprisoned in Charleston and St. Augustine, Florida, for nearly a year.

Following the war, Ramsay was a delegate to the Continental Congress and then a South Carolina senator. He ran for Congress in 1789.

After losing that election, he dedicated his life to medicine and historical writing. He



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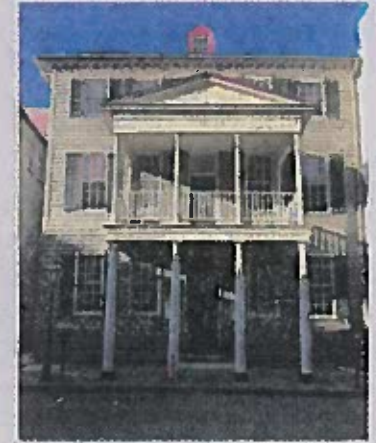
David Ramsay is pictured as painted from life by Rembrandt Peale in 1796. Ramsay's house in Charleston, S.C., is seen at right.

helped found the Medical Society of South Carolina.

Among his books are the first history of South Carolina (1785), a biography of George Washington (1807) and his three-volume "History of the United States, 1607-1808" (published in the year he was shot).

Ramsay was a "moral historian," according to William R. Smith's "History as Argument: Three Patriot Historians of the American Revolution" (1966).

For his own part, Ramsay said in his history of South Carolina that "to recount past events, for the instruction of



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men, ought to be the object of history."

The purpose of Lepore's book, by the way, is much the same. "To unlock the past," she writes, "is to unlock the prison of the present." And she, like Ramsay, is certainly a moral historian. She places slavery and racial and economic discrimination at the heart of the American experience that Ramsay was one of the first to chronicle.

● Jack Brubaker, retired from the LNP staff, writes "The Scribbler" column every Wednesday. He welcomes comments and contributions at scribblerlnp@gmail.com.