

The Rumsey Family

By Guest Author Dana Pepowski, LFHS '16

An April 29, 1921, *Lake Forester* headlining article reports the passing of “Captain Israel Parsons Rumsey... Civil War Veteran and Pioneer Member of Chicago Board of Trade.” Within the writeup, however, Rumsey’s “years of comradeship” and “unusual closeness [with the community]” indicates a man dedicated to the betterment of Lake Forest in its early days. The Rumsey family is sprinkled throughout Lake Forest’s history, personifying the initiative and patriotism vital to the early development of our town as a community.

Captain Israel Parsons Rumsey, born 1836 in rural Stafford New York, was among the thousands of men drawn West by desire of adventure and meaning to his work. At age seventeen, he began clerking at an Iowan dry goods store before being relocated to the growing city of Chicago in 1857. The fast-paced metropolitan trade community attracted Rumsey, and by 1860 he had established one of Chicago’s first commission houses: Flint, Hoyt & Rumsey – later transforming into the independent Rumsey and Company.

On May 2, 1861, a mere two weeks after the attack on Fort Sumter and the beginning of the Civil War, Rumsey co-founded Taylor’s Battery in Chicago and was quickly mustered into United States Army Service in July. He was elected Second Lieutenant by his fellow soldiers. The Battery was widely lauded as a “fine artillery,” joining the Union in battles at Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Atlanta. In 1863, Rumsey was promoted to Captain and left in charge of the unit. He was noted for his courage and intelligence on the battlefield. The Battery was honorably discharged in July 1864.

Returning to Chicago, Rumsey became increasingly involved in reform politics. Deeply inspired by President Lincoln, Rumsey saw his immediate neighborhood as an opportunity for societal betterment. He was elected President of the Citizens League against the spread of alcohol in 1877, raising public consciousness against the boom of saloons and gambling.

Like many affluent Chicagoans, the Rumseys enjoyed summer vacations on the lakefront in Lake Forest. After the Civil War, the young town reflected changing ideals and a growing community; Mary Rumsey noticed “in this place of young people there are all sorts of ideas.” Attracted by the town’s energy, Rumsey, his wife Mary, and their five children moved to Lake Forest permanently in 1887 to live on the old Quinlan property at 404 East Deerpath Road. Their carriage house is the current location of the Historical Society.

In Lake Forest, Captain Rumsey fit well with the vitality of the growing town. His passion for his country and community made him into a small-time local celebrity. As a former officer of the

United States Army, he appeared on a white horse to celebrate the town's patriotic occasions. Rumsey was regarded for his "characteristic determination that the right must win," founding and serving as an elder at Grace and Sixth Presbyterian Churches. In April 1916, Rumsey donated a flag pole to Lake Forest College. A town-wide celebration with Rumsey's former army officers raised the pole with prayer, speeches, and music.

The five Rumsey children also represented a generation of new values and spirit within Lake Forest. Unusually for the time period, all three daughters were formally educated. The eldest, Juliet, graduated third in her class from Lake Forest College in 1889. Henry Axtell Rumsey, the eldest child, was elected mayor of Lake Forest in 1919. His campaign depicted Henry as an all-American man-about-town. After leading construction on the new Chicago Board of Trade building and becoming its first president in 1930, Henry Axtell Rumsey chose to continue living in Lake Forest, on Illinois Road. He often umpired for local baseball games.

To Lake Foresters, the Rumsey family represents the growth of our community as a haven for passionate, determined leaders. Among the hundreds of affluent families leaving Chicago for the North Shore, the Rumseys represent those who were eager to give back and make a community even better than the way it was.