Erskine Ramsay is a name well known in the coal industry, and in commerce and finance, especially in Birmingham. Born in Six Mile Ferry, Pennsylvania, in 1864, son of Robert and Janet Ramsay, he was of Scottish ancestry. Studying at night after a long day in the machine shop and coal mines, he eventually spent a year in formal schooling at St. Vincent’s College, winning the College gold medal for the best scholastic record.

As a teenager, Ramsay assumed the superintendency of a large coal and coke works and went on in the next two years to the Morewood Coke Company under the leadership of H.C. Frick, a contemporary of Andrew Carnegie. In 1887, he assumed the position as engineer and superintendent, Pratt Mines Division of the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company near Birmingham. From this position, he became a pioneer in coal mining and eventually an industrialist, financier and commerce leader.

Under his direction, the Pratt Division operated eight large mine openings, 806 coke ovens, provided coal for the 300 beehive ovens of the Thomas furnace, the 250 ovens at the Alice furnace and the 250 ovens at the Sloss ovens in Birmingham. An inventor as well as a natural born leader, he perfected shaking screens for coal, installed the first coal washer in Alabama in 1892 and went on to invent a sludge tank for coal washers, a revolving mine car dumper, and many other innovative changes in the mining industry.

Together with G.B. McCormack he formed the Ramsay-McCormack partnership which brought considerable wealth and fame to both. By the time he was 40, Ramsay was a millionaire and associated with at least 18 industrial and financial companies as president, director, chairman or other executive position. Among the most notable of these were the Alabama By-Products Corporation, Avondale Mills, Buffalo Rock Company, First National Bank of Birmingham, Tennessee Consolidated Coal Company, and many others.

Ramsay was a renowned philanthropist and his charitable efforts filled his last years as equally as his industrial exploits did in earlier years. A strong advocate of education, Erskine Ramsay Engineering Hall at the then Alabama Polytechnic Institute was his gift to future engineers. Alabama College at Montevallo was presented a dormitory named for his mother, Janet Erskine Ramsay, and the University of Alabama was the recipient of a scholarship fund in honor of his father Robert. Birmingham-Southern College and Howard College were also recipients of major gifts. Ramsay High School at Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania was a gift to the boys and girls of his old home town. He was awarded the William Lawrence Saunders Gold Medal from the American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers “for effecting improvements in cokemaking that resulted in the establishment of the steel industry in Alabama.”