

Petaluma Museum Association

Petaluma Historical Library & Museum

Preserving the Unique History of Petaluma and Providing
Educational and Cultural Services to the Community

Quarterly Newsletter
Digital Edition



A Christmas celebration in Petaluma on Kentucky St, 1916

Fall/Winter 2023

Volume 33, Issue 4

On the Cover



*Outdoor Christmas tree celebration on Kentucky St. 1916
photo by J.C. Wayne — PHL&M Collection*

From our newsletter archives Fall/Winter 2015, Volume 25 Issue 4

A Christmas Celebration in Petaluma by John Benanti

Our newsletter cover photo shows a Christmas celebration in Petaluma a century ago. This 1916 photo from the Museum's collection was taken on Kentucky Street near Washington looking south. The building at the left rear edge of the photo is the old Petaluma City Hall. It served as the city's seat of government for several decades from the 1880's to the 1950's. It was a few doors up from the Museum's home, the Carnegie Library. Today it is the site of the A Street parking lot.

The buildings on Kentucky Street look much the same today as they did a century ago. One exception is the sidewalk overhangs visible in the photo at the front of a number of businesses. The photo also shows that this was a period of transition in transportation. There are both automobile vehicles and horse drawn vehicles in the background behind the crowd gathered to have their collective photo taken with a large Christmas tree and Santa Claus. Santa, however, does not quite fit with today's typical image of a more rotund jolly old elf.

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The Petaluma Museum Association
Newsletter is published quarterly
and distributed to its members.

Thank you to all the contributors and
special thanks to Carl Molesworth, copy
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email mrowe@petalumamuseum.org

Deadline is Jan 1, 2024

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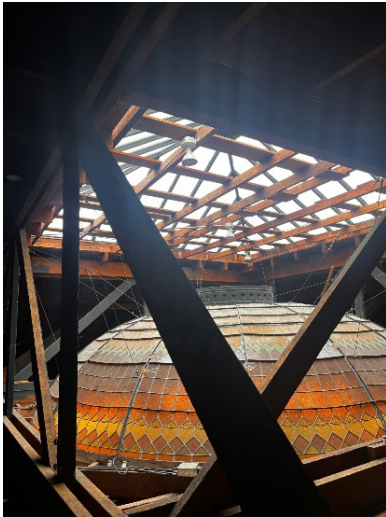
A Message from the Executive Director



Dear Friends,

As I write, the changing colors of the season are painting Petaluma in vibrant golds, russets, and vermilions. While the fall leaves are lovely, we have a colorful view inside the Petaluma Historical Library & Museum that rivals the most exquisite of autumn landscapes. And visitors get to enjoy it year-round!

If you're a frequent museumgoer, you might have guessed that I am referring to our iconic stained-glass dome. The dome has graced the museum's ceiling since the building was constructed nearly 120 years ago. Natural light from above filters through the delicate composition — scores of carefully pieced geometric shapes radiating from a central rosette — to fill the atrium below with a warm glow, even on the drizzliest November day. Petaluma is incredibly lucky to have this treasure, which is the largest free-standing, leaded-glass dome in Northern California!



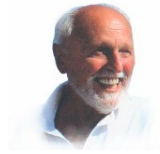
As much as I admire the dome while looking up from below, I am equally fascinated by the view from a decidedly less glamorous vantage point. I recently reviewed some photographs that were taken from the museum's attic. In them, I could see the intricate system of guy wires, the tensioned cables that run between the frame of the dome and the roof of the building. It's these wires that stabilize the dome and ensure its structural integrity. Without them, the parts of the dome would not have the strength to hold together.

It occurred to me that this arrangement of wires — quite literally holding up one of the most cherished parts of the museum — is not unlike another critical support system: you, our members! Your steadfast support not only makes the museum stronger, but it also is absolutely necessary to hold together all the parts of the museum — our exciting exhibitions, educational programs, living history tours, and more. Your membership support is crucial to the life of the museum, and I thank each and every one of you.

I hope I will have the opportunity to share my gratitude in person on December 2nd at our Members' Holiday Sip, Sign, and Shop event. You'll get to meet local authors and pick up signed books — the perfect holiday gift! — and explore fun, new Petaluma merchandise in our gift shop. And don't forget to purchase a gift membership or two, because the more friends we have supporting the museum, the stronger we are!

Warm regards,

Stacey Atchley
Executive Director



Petaluma History & Commentary

by Skip Sommer, Historian

THE STEAMBOATS OF PETALUMA CREEK

“The Age of Steam” propelled worldwide cargo shippers for many decades, but the disasters of boiler explosions and burning craft were violent sidelights of those busy years. Petaluma Creek did not escape those tragedies. It all started here in the 1850s, when rutted paths, rickety wagons and slow horses gave way to a faster and more efficient way of moving merchandise and people: the shallow-draft, paddle-wheeled steamer.

Now designated a river for bureaucratic purposes, Petaluma Creek actually is a tidal slough (AKA an estuary) and is subject to tides, silting and floods. In the 1800s, the creek contained more than 80 twists and turns just from here to San Pablo Bay. Still today, it must be dredged regularly, and that is quite pricey. Early on, the conditions on the creek were too tough for propeller-driven, deep-draft craft, so shallow-draft paddle-wheelers soon became queens of the water here. One of the first was the steamer Red Jacket in 1852. She, and successive riverboats like her, were to ply the Petaluma Creek for nearly 100 years.

Some of the better-known steamer names here, were The Antelope, The Anna Abernathy, The Georgiana, The James Donahue, The Josie McNear, The



Petaluma III under D St bridge

Vaquero, The Rambler, The Kate Hayes and The Pilot. Two were named Steamer Gold, and three named Petaluma. (Some say there were four Petalumas, but I doubt it.) Altogether, about 48 steamboats sailed between Petaluma and San Francisco over those years.

Cargos going out included many thousands of crates of eggs and live poultry, hogs and cattle, hops, butter, hay, grain, hides, wool, wine, and silk. One of the main reasons the Carlson-Currier Silk Mill (now a hotel on Lakeville Street) moved here in 1892, was the handy access of McNear Canal to river shipping. Inbound cargo included items that were not then produced here, such as manufactured machinery, ammunition, cigars, liquor, and tons of seashells to be ground into chicken meal in our Petaluma mills.

Those years were not without mishap. Our river was nearly

impossible to navigate in fog or dark, and the boats' iron boilers (prior to steel) occasionally would blow to smithereens without much warning, if not managed properly. Several tragic events happened here on Petaluma Creek. The steamer Secretary, on her way to Petaluma in 1854, exploded and sank. The steamer Georgiana, taking on cargo in 1855, blew up at the foot of Western

Avenue, killing two people. That explosion damaged the nearby steamer Kate Hayes, scalding several more bystanders. The Petaluma I, carrying a cargo of eggs, leather shoes and silk, caught fire at her pier in Petaluma and sank in 1914. Her engine was recovered and installed in The Petaluma II. In 1920, The Gold I, fully loaded with potatoes, hops and bales of feed sacks, burned to the waterline here, at the foot of Copeland Street. The steamer Fort Bragg was purchased soon after and renamed The Gold II.

But arguably, the most tragic of these events for Petaluma was the explosion of the steamer Pilot in 1883. The Pilot was steaming full bore down-river, passing the “Cloudy Bend” turn near Donahue Landing, when the boiler exploded, scattering debris -- and bodies -- as far as 1,000 feet away.

The Petaluma Argus described it as a “horrible disaster, a sad scene of suffering.”

Five adults and four children died that day, and many others were badly scalded by the blast. The children, ages 1 to 18, were all of the William Mather family, and William himself also drowned that day. He and his four children were buried here at the Liberty School cemetery grounds. It was said that Mrs. Mather, who survived the blast, had gone “crazy with grief.”

One of the other adults killed that day, was Jennie Otis McNear, 26-year-old wife of Petaluma Industrialist George P. McNear and the mother of young Clara McNear. Searchers found Jennie unconscious, a mile and a half from the disaster, sitting upright in the tule mud, her arms firmly clutching a large piece of wood. It was presumed she had struggled through the weeds to try to save herself but collapsed exhausted. Still alive when found, Mrs. McNear died shortly thereafter from a fractured skull.

Jennie McNear was very well respected in the community, and her husband (“Mr. Petaluma” of that time) was a noted banker and owner of McNear Milling, et al. Jennie was buried in Petaluma’s Cypress Hill Cemetery, which had been laid out by her father-in-law, John A. McNear. The Argus commented sadly that day: “The funeral was one of the largest we have ever seen in this city. She was well-known and beloved by all her friends, her husband, and her little babe.”

The explosion of The Pilot had been heard for miles around, and



Small homemade steamboat on the Russian River ca 1900 (Sonoma County Library)

word was quickly sent to Petaluma, requesting that a “relief train with physicians and nurses be immediately dispatched to the Lakeville area.” However, by the time the train arrived, there was little that could be done, although a search was made in all directions through the tule weeds, and more bodies recovered. It was determined that some who had escaped instant death, had drowned and would be found, in time.



Photographer: John Quincy Reed
Sitter: Jennie Otis McNear
Owner: PHL&M
ca 1880-1883
Photo found on petalumapioneers.org

The era of the steam-powered watercraft was sometimes a violent one, as those explosions were all too common. But overall, “The Age of Steam,” as it spread to farm equipment, industrial powerplants, ships, heating and more, was one of great accomplishment. The harnessing of the power of steam pressure had been difficult, yet it improved in safety with the increased usage of steel, which had higher tensile strength for boilers. Time would tell, however, that there were other, better transportation inventions in the offing.

When our last steamboat, The Petaluma III, left here on Aug. 24, 1950, after an estimated 10,000 river trips, that mid-century day ended 98 years of steamer traffic on our waterway. The steamboat had been a vital part of what made our town prosperous, but the gasoline and diesel engines, the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937, better roads and bigger trucks tolled the death of that romantic and exciting era of steam. Too bad, actually ... I wish I could have lived some of that.

In Memoriam



Mike Glose

The Petaluma Museum family lost a treasured member when Michael Richard Glose passed away on September 12, 2023. Mike blended the skills of a dedicated educator with those of an experienced aviator to become a leading figure in the Petalumans of Yesteryear (POY), the organization affili-

ated with the Petaluma Historical Library and Museum that specializes in regular walking tours, specialty tours, and historical presentations.

Mike was a natural fit and first joined POY in the persona of *Fred J. Wiseman*, who in 1911 piloted his biplane in the “first recorded airplane flight sanctioned by a local post office and available to the public.” Mike’s portrayal was an instant success, characterized by his evident love of flying and his abiding sense of humor. The memory of

him as Wiseman, in his flying helmet, goggles and scarf will linger in all who knew him.

But Mike was not content with just one persona. With the role of aviation pioneer under his belt, he next took on the formidable one of *William Howard Pepper* -- a character initially brought to life by the late Bill Hammerman, one of the founders of the POY. Mr. Pepper was an early nurseryman in Petaluma (heard of Pepper Lane?) who became best known for his work as an educator. In 1894, he established Petaluma’s first kindergarten. Mike brought his natural affinity as an educator to that role and did Bill Pepper proud.

Members of the POY know that Mike Glose was so much more than a historical storyteller. In his own gentle way, he spread his personal brand of insight, humor and initiative throughout the group. Our lives are forever better having known Mike. He was inspiring, and he was unique!



Susan Coolidge

It is with heavy hearts that we report that Susan Coolidge passed away on Oct. 4, 2023. Susan was a longtime member of the Petaluma Museum Association and the Petalumans of Yesteryear (POY). She loved history, and through the POY she

brought Petaluma history — and the people who made it — to life. She was a dedicated walking tour guide and coordinator of the walking tour group, a mentor to new members and further supported the Petaluma Historical Library and Museum by serving on the PMA Board.

Susan’s connection with the museum and the POY began when she attended a class offered through the Petaluma adult night school program taught by Bill Hammerman, featuring Petaluma history. She was enraptured. Bill was organizing a new group of history-loving people at that time and encouraged Susan to come to the museum and join the POY. She took him up on his invitation and quickly stepped into the role of Clara Belle McNear, first wife of pioneer businessman John Augustus McNear. Susan studied the McNear family history, and when meeting with decedents she was able to share her knowledge with them, always pleased to make a connection.

Susan later took on the role of Ida Belle McNear (wife of George Plummer McNear) after the passing of POY member Barbara Harden. This role created wonderful opportunities to deliver many presentations, and she was much sought after at The Petaluma Woman’s Club.

Susan was confident, educated, sophisticated, hardworking, fun and kind, the perfect fit for these important roles. She was a leader, always ready to help with projects and presentations. She enjoyed playing her parts, especially to seniors and children. As a POY she served as a guiding light, always eager to embrace a new presentation idea, serve as the walking tour director and be our ever faithful “Scribe,” as she would call herself.

Very recently, Susan participated in our latest new POY event series, “The Secret Life of Victorian Home Interiors.” She helped create her script, provided props and helped with setup and takedown of the set. For the period before, during and following COVID, Susan worked on the large museum exhibit “Finding our Roots” a collaboration of the Petaluma Woman’s Club and Petaluma Garden Club. She was so happy to take part in spotlighting three of her favorite organizations.

Susan was our “go to” person ... the first to receive a call for a word of support, a new idea or input on any level. She was unique, genuine, kind and loved. A true friend, Susan was the heart and soul of the POY. We will carry her wholehearted and enthusiastic spirit with us always. That was Susan’s gift to us. We will miss her deeply but are so grateful to have shared this time with her.

“Women in the Military”

A PHL&M Exhibit
opening on Nov. 9 through Dec. 10

WOMEN SERVING in the military and female veterans are the focus of an exhibit the Petaluma Historical Library and Museum is hosting from Nov. 9 through Dec. 10.



Air Corp, WWII shown at Lockbourne Air Force Base in Ohio

While women have contributed significantly to our nation’s military services, they are often not given the same recognition as their male counterparts. This exhibit will highlight the many contributions women have made and the vital roles they have within our military. Additionally, the exhibit will recognize how their service contributes to the mission of our armed forces.



Molly Pitcher at the Battle of Monmouth - American Revolutionary War

The exhibit begins with a timeline of when and how women first became involved with the United States military and includes a tribute to those who have given their lives in support of our nation’s freedom. Beginning with the Revolutionary War and continuing through today, women have served in all branches and military occupational specialties of our armed forces. Looking at the photos and reading the biographies included in the exhibit will help visitors to learn the stories of some of our nation’s female veterans.



Women Veterans Panel Discussion

December 10, 2023
15:00-17:00 (3-5 pm)

The Petaluma Historical Library & Museum proudly presents a panel discussion with six incredible Women Veterans. Hear them share stories about their 70 years of service from 1953 through 2023. Panelists include:

- Emily Wingo Sousa, US Navy 1953-1954
Korea
- Rose Kostink Nowak, USAF 1959-1962
Cold War
- Kate O'Hare Palmer, US Army 1967-1969 Active Duty
Vietnam 1969-1971 Reserve
- Maura Mooney US Navy, Retired 1981-2001
Desert Shield/Desert Storm
- Lisa Lim, US Army 2010-2013
Afghanistan
- Bethany LaRosa USCG Active Duty 2007-Present



Petaluma Museum ★ 20 4th Street, Petaluma CA 94952 ★ 707-778-4398 ★ petalumamuseum.com

Buck - Pingpank - Doolittle Petaluma Airport

Third in a Series

By Terry Park and Carl Molesworth



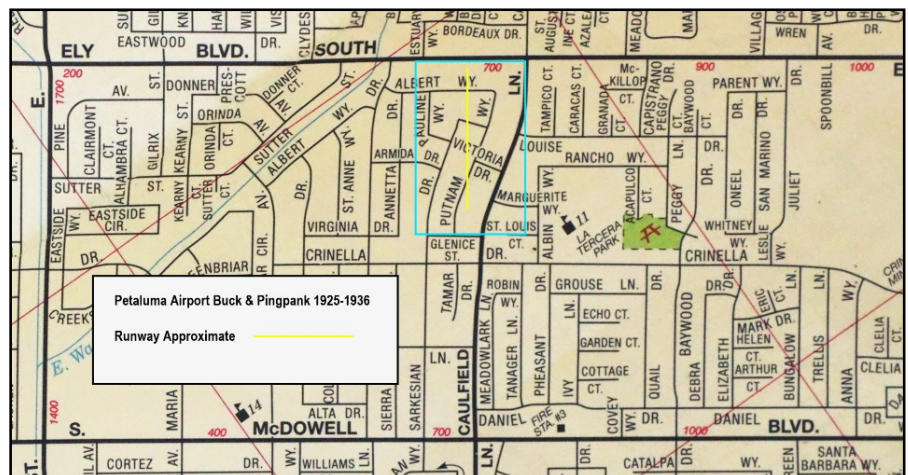
Pingpank and Buck post 1925: This aerial photo shows the Petaluma Airport located on Ely Road, which runs diagonally across the upper right corner of the photo, circa 1930. Aerofiles.com incorrectly stated the airport began in 1915, but it opened in 1925. www.aerofiles.com

PETALUMA GAINED AN early place in the history of aviation when, on Feb. 17, 1911, pioneer aviator Fred Wiseman took off from the town's horse-racing track, Kenilworth Park, on what would be recognized as the world's first airmail flight. Kenilworth was the site of at least one more flying event in the next few years, but Petaluma would have to wait more than a decade for its first actual airport to open for business.

Petaluman George Buck, a licensed pilot, formed a partnership with mechanic Lawrence A. "Pinky" Pingpank in 1925 to establish a number of enterprises on a 40-acre ranch property on the west side of Putnam Road (now Ely Blvd) between Washington Street and Casa Grande Road. The planned business was to include a public landing

field, a flying school, and an aircraft and automobile factory. The airfield was named Petaluma Airport, and flying lessons were provided, and aircraft sold. But there is no indication the automobile factory was built. Pingpank had previously built and serviced aircraft, so that was his job, while Buck, 24, handled the flying.

Buck made news throughout 1925 including an aircraft race, an air circus over Petaluma, his marriage to Miss Alice Turner, and moving into his new house on the airport premises. It should be noted Buck's mother Mary purchased the 40-acre property for the airport.



Petaluma Airport Buck & Pingpank — street map showing the property outline (blue) & runway location



13.7 79-180.1

This Fairchild FC-2W2, serial number 140 and registration number NC8006, was used by Admiral Richard E. Byrd on his Antarctic explorations of 1929 and 1934. It stopped at Petaluma Airport on a promotional tour in 1935. It is now on display at the Virginia Aviation Museum.

(Petaluma Historical Library and Museum)

On April 1, 1926, Buck took a job with the Varney Air Mail Company to fly a U.S. mail route from Washington state to Nevada. He remained the owner of the Petaluma airport, but in his absence Pingpank was in full charge. On April 8, 1926, Buck had a motor problem and crash-landed, but he and his companion suffered only minor injuries.

Eventually, Buck's wife and friends convinced him flying was too dangerous, so he took a full-time job with the Varney Air Mail Company in its Oakland office.

Various owners of the Petaluma Airport came and went through the late 1920s, including Buck and Pingpank, but no records of the various sales have been found. By 1929 Pingpank had moved on to a job with the Wing Company in Salt Lake City.

Subsequent airport owners included William G. Fletcher,

Ralph Sherzer and the last owner, Harry Doolittle. Historian Ed Fratini, in a 1981 broadcast on KTOS, recalled that Bill Fletcher was a salesman at Sanderson Ford and also owned one of the first airplanes in Petaluma. When an aviator arrived at Petaluma and needed a ride into

town from the airport, he would buzz the Sanderson dealership downtown, and Fletcher would drive out to Ely Road to meet the plane. A few years later, Fletcher took a job flying for Shell Oil. He died in a plane crash in 1933. The Great Depression took its toll on airport business, and in June 1935 Doolittle put Petaluma Airport up for sale. A high point that year was the visit to Petaluma of a Fairchild monoplane, "Stars and Stripes," used by famed explorer Richard E. Byrd in his 1928-29 Antarctic expedition.

Finally in January 1936 the American Trust Bank foreclosed on the property because Doolittle defaulted on a loan payment. The property probably was put back into agricultural use before houses there were built there following World War II.



13.7 79-180.2 Harry Doolittle owned this Fleet 2 biplane, constructor's number 183 and registration number NC617M, when it was photographed in front of his hangar at Petaluma Airport in February 1935. It is now on display with Planes of Fame-Grand Canyon, Valle Airport, Grand Canyon, AZ.

(Petaluma Historical Library and Museum)

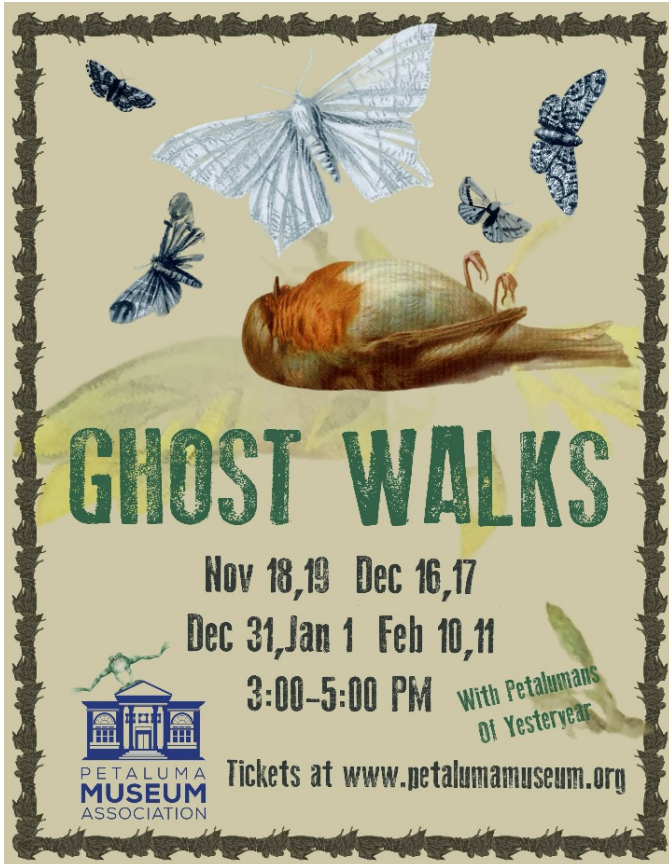


Image credit: @Petaluminaries.com

GHOST WALKS

Through Historic Downtown Petaluma with the Petalumans of Yesteryear

Join the Petalumans of Yesteryear for a Ghost Walk through Historic Downtown Petaluma, starting outside the Petaluma Historical Library & Museum. A host of historic ghosts will tell stories that transcend time beyond the grave! You'll hear true tales of mysterious old Petaluma: tragic fates, ghostly sightings, and dark crimes in a frontier town. Plus, discover the real dangers of everyday life in Victorian times.

Dates: Nov 18, 19, Dec 16, 17, Dec 31, Jan 1, Feb 10,11, Rain Dates: Jan 20, 21

Time: 3:00-5:00 PM

Price: \$15

20 Max. Per Walk

Walks start outside the Petaluma Museum

Tickets at: [URL: https://www.petalumamuseum.com/calendar-event/ghost-walks/](https://www.petalumamuseum.com/calendar-event/ghost-walks/)

Not yet a member of the museum?
Join now at [PetalumaMuseum.org](https://www.petalumamuseum.org) and receive a promo code
for one free Ghost Walk ticket!*

*applies to new memberships only

**Saturday
Dec.
2
4-6PM**

members' holiday
**sip, sign
& shop**

Petaluma Historical Library & Museum members are invited to a festive afternoon of holiday shopping, champagne sipping, and book signings with local authors!

Not a member of the museum? Don't miss the holiday fun! Visit petalumamuseum.org to join.



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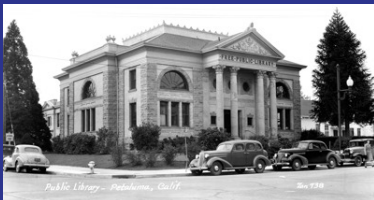


Lots of exciting events are happening at your museum!

For all the latest updates for events and exhibits please visit us on our website at:

<https://www.petalumamuseum.com/events>

Museum hours: Thursday–Sunday, 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM
Exhibits are free to the public — Donations Accepted



Alexander J. "Zan" Stark (1889-1967)
"Public Library - Petaluma Calif."
Real photo postcard #738, March 1941

You have made the Petaluma Museum a part of your life. Now, we hope you will consider making the Petaluma Museum Association a part of your lasting legacy by leaving a gift in your will or trust.

Your bequest will ensure that the PMA remains a vibrant organization that welcomes our community in the historic Carnegie Library Building and passes down our history to the next generation of Petalumans. Petaluma Museum Association is a 501c3 tax-exempt organization.

To make the PMA a part of your estate plans, contact your financial planner. To find out more about how your will or trust might sustain our educational mission, contact Stacey Atchley, Executive Director, PMA at 707-778-4398.



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PETALUMA THEATRE SQUARE
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Christine Bennett, MA

Cleantech Communication, Inc.
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O: (707) . 763 . 5475
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90 South E Street Suite 200
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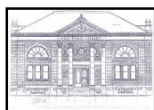
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