

Welcome to the Petaluma Museum Association's exhibition, "Portraits of Petaluma Pioneers, Private Images and Public Stories of a California River Town." This exhibition is displayed in the Petaluma Historical Library & Museum, a 1906 architectural gem that originally served the pioneers and their children as a Carnegie Library.

Inspired by recent scholarship and an exhibition at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, the Petaluma Museum Association took stock of the PHL&M's early portrait collection and realized what treasures had been resting in the offsite storage boxes. The quality of the artifacts inspired an immediate desire to plan an exhibit and create an accompanying website, petalumapioneers.org.

Research quickly revealed that Petaluma was a favorite location for entrepreneurial photographers: during the second half of the 19th century, our small, booming, frontier, river town was home to over 20 photography studios. Petaluma's pioneers took full advantage of the services offered, preserving for us the opportunity to observe their faces and demeanor in rich, intimate detail and connect them to the stories of their accomplishments and to the history of Petaluma. Scrutiny of the portraits revealed several masterpieces especially among the works of Bryan R. Johnson (active Petaluma, c. 1863-1867) and George Ross (active in Petaluma 1862-1893). Both were exceptionally skilled portraitists, and their work is featured in the exhibit.

To compliment the portraits, a collection of early celluloid photo albums, Victorian graphoscopes and selections from the PHL&M's extensive textile collection are also on display. David Silver, President of the International Photographic Historical Organization, has installed artifacts from his collection, providing exhibit visitors the opportunity to observe a 19th century photo studio, and Barbara Maxwell's near life-sized canvas of a Petaluma photographer's studio façade completes the experience. Educational videos, courtesy of the George Eastman Museum, explain the early development of photography, and a reading table is available where visitors have access to primary documents written by Petaluma pioneers, including overland journals and diaries of everyday life. Additionally, you are welcome to attend the many free events scheduled to compliment the exhibit. Make certain to pick up a list of them available at the entrance desk.