

PHOTOGRAPHER: WILLIAM SHEW, San Francisco
SITTER: CLARA WILLIAMS MCNEAR (1837-1866)
DATE: 1860-1866
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COURTESY OF THE ALLEN/WILLIAMS FAMILY



Responding to a letter from her father, Clara Williams McNear, at the young age of nineteen, traveled with her husband, John Augustus McNear, from Mississippi to Petaluma in November of 1856. John became one of the most famous and respected of Petaluma citizens, but Clara, after giving birth to five sons, died at the young age of 29.

Clara's brother, George Roscoe Williams, recorded his thoughts about his sister's death in his memoirs, "My First Fifty Years."

The death of my sister, Clara McNear, on January 17, 1866, a few months after my return to California, caused the first break in our immediate family in twenty-five years, since the passing in infancy of our brother, Almeda. It was a great source of grief to my parents and to all of us who loved her for her many endearing qualities. She was not only beautiful in appearance but in character and had an unusually sweet, refined, and sensitive nature.

The Petaluma historian and "Petaluman of Yesteryear," Bill Hammerman, beautifully wrote of the story of Clara's interment:

The crown of the McNear legacy is Cypress Hill Cemetery. That legacy directly relates to Clara and the love her husband had for her. She died in the cold, rainy January of 1866 at the age of 29. The soil in the community burial grounds, Oak Hill Cemetery, was saturated. Water kept filling in the gravesite. So, John went looking for a high, dry place for Clara. He found it on the highest hill in what is now Cypress Hill Cemetery, where Clara and other members of the family and the community are buried.

Hammerman also clearly stated Clara's Petaluma legacy when he wrote, "Without Clara Williams McNear, there would be no McNear legacy. Three men, her closest kin, are all remembered as having done much for the advancement of Petaluma. George Bailey Williams, her father, John Augustus McNear, her husband, and George Plummer McNear, her only surviving son."