



PHOTOGRAPHER: LEWIS DOWE (b. 1838)
SITTER: HARRISON TYLER MECHAM (1833-1909)
DATE: 1877-1881
FORMAT: reprint of original cabinet card
PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY & MUSEUM

Harrison Mecham was a highly admired Petaluma pioneer and philanthropist. A true “Renaissance Man,” he was a farmer, businessman and art patron, and his professional and personal life was constantly reported in local newspapers.

In Missouri at the age of eighteen, Mecham met a group of old Californians who had served as guides to Commodore Stockton and joined them on their return west in the spring of 1848. The exciting story of his travels are told in detail by Tom Gregory in History of Sonoma County, and a copy of this document is on the reading table in the center of the gallery. Mecham successfully mined gold in California until 1853 and then began accumulating parcels of land on the outskirts of Petaluma.

Mecham became very wealthy raising animals and growing crops on what eventually became his 7,000 acre parcel, and, later in life, he placed 1,000 of those acres in the Harrison Mecham Relief Fund, the proceeds from which were used to benefit the poor of Petaluma. In an additional act of great charity which had enormous benefit for the community, he subdivided 1,500 acres of his land holdings into small tracts and sold them at a reasonable rate, making the purchase of a home possible for many Petalumans.



Home of Harrison Mecham
Sonoma County Library

Mecham married his “child bride” Melissa Jane Stewart in 1853, but very little is known about her. In 1890 Mecham gave “Garden Valley Ranch” to their daughter, Isabel, as a gift when she married the Petaluma businessman, Walter S. Frisch. It was a landmark property partly due to the extensive grove of eucalyptus Mecham had planted along its border.



Garden Valley Ranch
Sonoma County Library

In a very interesting act of civic charity, Mecham furnished the funds for the erection of a \$1,000 drinking fountain located on Washington Street just up from the corner of Main Street. It was most likely a controversial work of art. It included a semi-nude statue of the Greek mythological cupbearer, Hebe, but also held strong temperance iconographical significance for the pre-prohibition era. Further research on this most important Petaluma work of public art is imminent.

Paula Freund, 2017