



ARTIST: unidentified
SITTER: **WILLIAM HOWARD PEPPER (1824-1906)**
DATE: unknown
OIL ON CANVAS
PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY & MUSEUM

Although Mr. Pepper came to California in 1850 in search of gold, along with thousands of others 49ers; he did not arrive in Petaluma until 1858, the year that the rapidly growing river town officially became a city. Prior to the establishment of a very successful orchard and nursery business, William Howard Pepper and his brother Garrett tried their luck seeking their fortune in Bullard Bar area of what is now Yuba County. Since their quest for riches did not pan out for them, they built a lumber mill in the area in 1851 and supplied timber to the other miners until it burned down in 1857. Then Mr. Pepper, along with other discouraged 49ers, left the gold fields and in his case, relocated in Petaluma; a growing city of over 1300 people.

Over the next few years, he gradually acquired 255 acres of land six miles west of town. His original house still stands near the intersection of Pepper Road and Pepper Lane. It recorded that Mr. Pepper hired local boys to help him in his nursery business. For a brief period, a young lad named Luther Burbank worked for him; as well as Christopher Nissen, the founder of one of the area's prominent families. William Pepper married late in life (age 50), to a widow named Phoebe Perry who had a daughter. As was the custom of prominent and prosperous citizens in the 1880s, Mr. Pepper took a holiday in Europe and while visiting Germany, discovered Dr. Frederic Froebel, who had created a program called, "the children's garden," or in German "kindergarten."



Residence of W. H. Pepper, Petaluma, as illustrated in Thomas H. Thompson's Historical Atlas Map of Sonoma County California

The Argus-Courier announced in its January 7, 1893 edition, "There is a movement on foot to establish a free kindergarten in the city with the primary teacher, Mrs. Kirkpatrick in charge." According to a March 1, 1893 article, Mrs. Gus Fairbanks was circulating a petition seeking pledges to support the kindergarten. In addition, Mr. Pepper offered the use of his property located on the southwest corner of Washington and Liberty Streets under the condition that the city would issue a bond, "the payment of which would not be oppressive to the taxpayers."

Unfortunately, the community and city government did not respond sufficiently to support this innovative educational venture, so Mr. Pepper then donated another \$13,000 to his earlier pledge of \$5,000 for construction purposes and established a trust fund. A Board of Trustees was organized in 1893 to oversee the requirements of the trust. The proposed school, which was to be opened to all children free of charge, regardless of race or creed, was to be built on the property that Mr. Pepper originally offered to the public school district in 1891.

During the second meeting of the Board of Trustees, it was announced that the endowment totaled \$18,003.50. This figure included \$3.50 that was raised by the sale of flowerpots by local community members. The kindergarten opened on December 3, 1894 with an enrollment of 28 pupils. The trust agreement stated that the school was established so that "young children under the age of six years may be trained and educated in habits of cleanliness, truth, industry, physical development and in all things that tend to make helpful and honorable men and women and a credit to this land of the free and that the said school shall be forever known and called the W. H. Pepper Kindergarten School of Petaluma."

Several pieces of furniture and the merry-go-round from the original Pepper Kindergarten are displayed in an exhibit at the Petaluma Historical Museum and Library at Fourth and B Streets. In addition, a portrait of Mr. Pepper, donated to the Kindergarten in 1917 (eleven years after his death) is on display. The original Pepper School was closed and torn down in 1960 due to fire safety concerns. The property was sold and a new building was constructed at 627 F Street. Pepper School is still operated as a pre-school and the Petaluma community celebrated the school's 100th Anniversary in 1994.

As Barbara Kern Confer stated in her master's thesis, "Although Mr. Pepper made his fortune in the nurturing of young plants, his legacy to the community was a school which he founded to foster the growth and development of very young children."

Bill Hammerman

