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# Historical Society of Santa Rosa



Santa Rosa High School, 1927  
Courtesy Hill-Lilienthal Collection

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## Prospector Pride: The History of Piner High School

by Mark Holz

*Editor's note: This article is comprised of information from a series featured on the "Piner High School Class of '76 Reunion" Facebook page, which is committed to exploring the rich history of Piner High School and compiling related information into one place. The author, also known as "Prospecting Piner" has dedicated his research to the Class of 1976's 50th Class Reunion coming in September 2026.*

### What was unique about Piner High School?

-Piner was the first high school in Santa Rosa west of Highway 101.

-Piner was the first high school in Santa Rosa that did not have hallways to access the classrooms. Classrooms and offices were all accessed from the outside of each building.

-Piner was the first high school in Santa Rosa where a combination of students and faculty selected the school colors, mascot, and even wrote the school constitution, which was somewhat different than the previous two high schools. The constitution was composed entirely by students who were interested enough to attend three meetings that were held and included such things as a student body card and the structure of student government.

### A New High School for Santa Rosa

Santa Rosa has had only a few high schools in its history. In the early 1960s, there were only three high schools in Santa Rosa: Santa Rosa High School (SRHS), Montgomery High School, and the private Cardinal

Newman High School. Santa Rosa High School was (and still is) the oldest current high school in town, having been housed in a couple of locations before landing at its current address at 1235 Mendocino Avenue. Montgomery High School, named after Billy Montgomery, the first Santa Rosa resident killed in World War II, was the second high school in Santa Rosa, opening in 1958. (See article on *Montgomery High School*, page 4 of this newsletter).



PINER HIGH SCHOOL Felciano & Jeffries AIA & Associates -- Architects

Aerial view of architect's rendering of the Piner High School Campus  
*Press Democrat July 21, 1965*

Cardinal Newman opened in September 1964. The proposed Piner High School was to be only the third high school in the Santa Rosa High School District, and it was a big deal. The population boom of the 1960s had started to tax both Santa Rosa and Montgomery

High Schools, especially SRHS, as its territory covered the expanding west side of the city.

It had been determined that another high school was badly needed to serve the west side as well as another Junior High School (Hilliard Comstock, which opened in 1972 before a campus could even be completed, the situation was so dire).

It is important to note, however, that while the new Piner High School was received enthusiastically in September 1966, it also meant decades of family tradition suddenly ceased as legacy students from Santa Rosa High School became part of a new tradition on the west side of town. Many of you likely have parents (as I do) who graduated from Santa Rosa High School.

*Continued on page 6*

## Message from the Board

The Santa Rosa City School District is undergoing a fiscal crisis and has been working to identify solutions to resolve its financial woes. As the district works to close its budget shortfall, this newsletter looks at the history of a few Santa Rosa schools, and in the case of the Burbank School (page 3), the difficulty in funding its construction.

Exciting news! Through HSSR's partnership with the City of Santa Rosa, walking tours featuring four of Santa Rosa's eight historic preservation districts are now available online on the City of Santa Rosa's website. Use your electronic device and enjoy tours through the Cherry Street, St. Rose, West End, and Railroad Square historic districts.

Maps highlight sites of historic interest with images of notable structures and information about their past along with persons associated with them. Use the QR Code at left or access the tours at:



[srcity.org/HistoricWalkingTours](http://srcity.org/HistoricWalkingTours)

HSSR hopes to expand the tours over time. We hope you'll take a walk and explore historic Santa Rosa!

## Gone But Not Forgotten



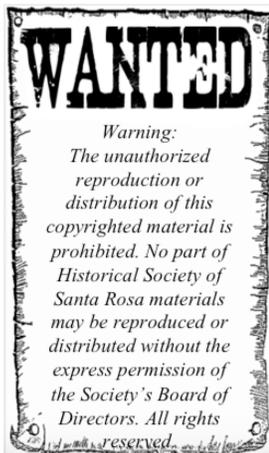
The original South Park School. Built in 1887, it had two rooms, and by 1925 was in disrepair and too small for the growing student population. Its site was also plagued by flooding. The Board of Education funded a new school in a new location on Bennett Valley Road. The school was completed in 1930. It was later converted to a senior center and demolished in 2023 for a housing development.

*1909 Santa Rosa and Vicinity Portfolio*

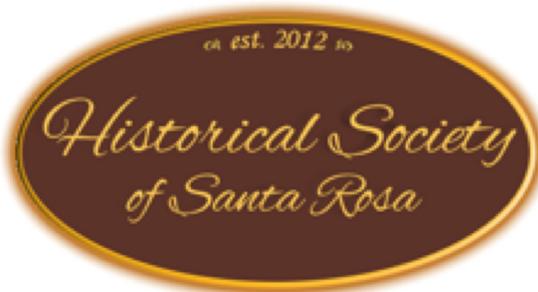
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# Luther Burbank School has Grown Over Time

By Lisa Kranz

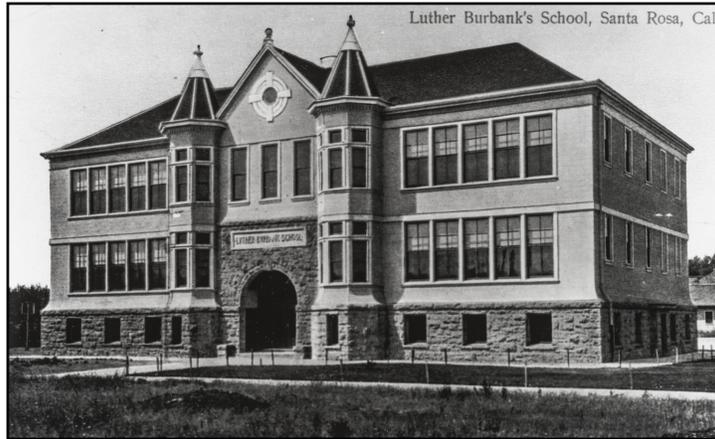
In late 1904, the Board of Trustees of Santa Rosa's Court House School District identified the need for a new school south of Santa Rosa Creek due to the growing population in the south and southwest parts of the city. The trustees determined to build two schools south of Santa Rosa Creek and to build them of brick and stone. A bond measure was proposed to fund the construction. A special election in late 1904 failed, but a second balloting in March 1905 was passed, making the future Luther Burbank School possible.

In February 1906, the Board of Trustees communicated with Luther Burbank to see if he would consent to the new school being named for him. In a letter of response, Burbank said that he felt "... highly unworthy of such a compliment, but if this action is pleasing to the Board I shall accept the compliment, but not without many misgivings as to my ability to uphold the reputation of such a fine institution."

Construction commenced on the eight-room schoolhouse in early 1906 at the corner of A Street and Ellis (now Sonoma Avenue), right down Ellis Street from Luther Burbank's home. But on April 18, 1906, the Great Earthquake devastated downtown Santa Rosa and damaged the unfinished school. In June 1906, the Board of Trustees decided that the building from the basement up would be of wood frame construction, given the severe earthquake damage to brick and stone structures.

The completed school was dedicated on March 7, 1907, Luther Burbank's 58th birthday. School children and adults gathered to acknowledge the significance of the occasion. Mr. Burbank attended, and he spoke to those gathered. He expressed pleasure in meeting the students and told them, "I think every one of you, my young friends and neighbors of Santa Rosa, wish to make the best of your precious lives, to have plenty of friends, to be happy and to win success. I will tell you how, just how. Cultivate kind gentle loving thoughts toward every person, animal and even the plants, stars, oceans, rivers and hills. You will

find yourself growing more happy each day and with happiness comes health and everything you want." He told the crowd that when the grounds were ready, to call on him and he would provide young trees and plants needed for ornament and shade.

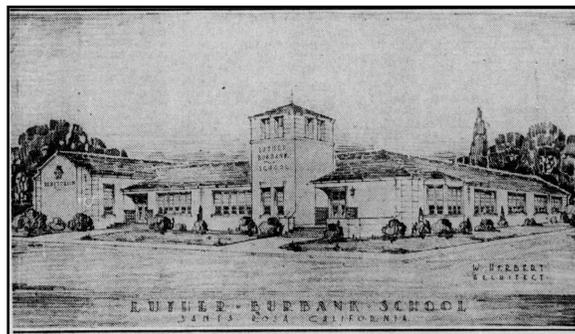


Luther Burbank School, 1910  
*Courtesy Sonoma County Library Photograph Collection*

School enrollment was just under 350 students when the school opened. Newspaper stories over the years related many activities of the school from its own four-page newspaper, to performances of an operetta and puppet shows, election of officers, creation of its own city within a school, and clothes and food drives for those in need.

But in late 1937, the Board of Education determined that, along with the need for a new junior high school, Luther Burbank School needed to be replaced. A September 1938 story in the Press Democrat described the school in a bad state of repair, requiring constant remodeling and costly replacement to keep it in usable condition, along with being a fire trap. A new school had been designed by local architect William F. Herbert, and the plans had been approved by the state department of school housing with the understanding that adjacent Howarth

Memorial Park and playground could be used by the school (*See HSSR Summer 2019 Newsletter to learn about the park.*)



Rendering of Proposed Luther Burbank School  
*Press Democrat, October 1, 1938*

Another school bond was placed on the ballot in September 1938. The proposed projects to be funded by bond revenue included a new Luther Burbank School, a new auditorium for Fremont School, and a new junior high school. The \$410,000 bond would result in \$750,000 for school improvements due to a promised

federal Public Works Administration grant for the balance. The new Burbank School was expected to be funded through \$62,000 in bond proceeds plus \$50,000 from the federal grant.

The day before the vote, more than 3,000 school children from all elementary schools participated in a parade in

*Continued on page 7*

# Lawyer / Judge Hilliard Comstock Lends Name to Middle School

by Denise Hill

If there was a flag flying on Hilliard Comstock's house in Santa Rosa it would have been the flag for the state of Maine, where all eight of his great-grandparents were born. If there was a profession that he was meant to follow it was his chosen profession of law. His father, maternal grandfather, and paternal great-uncle all practiced law. His maternal grandfather, Harvey B. Hurd, was a pioneer lawyer in Chicago spending 30 years updating Illinois state statutes, along with presiding as a judge and holding the role of Dean of the law faculty at the Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. His paternal great-grandfather Eldad Smith was also a judge, while a great-uncle on his paternal side, George F. Comstock, had such a prestigious career as a judge in the mid- to late 1800s that he made the Historical Society of the New York Courts' "Legal Luminaries" list.

Hilliard Comstock was born in 1891 in Evanston, Illinois. By 1909 his family had relocated to Santa Rosa where he apprenticed in the law office of James Wyatt Oates at the young age of 18. Hilliard never attended law school, but "read the law" in the office of his mentor Oates, passing the bar in 1912.

That same year, Hilliard enlisted with the National Guard (Company E, 5th Infantry, California) and in 1916 served as Captain of that militia when it was deployed to the Mexican border to guard against raids by the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa. In 1918, he was called into active service during World War I and served as Commander of the 120th infantry, 30th Division. He mustered out with the rank of Major in August of 1919 and



6483. JAMES' HILLIARD COMSTOCK

James Hilliard Comstock, circa 1918  
*Find a Grave Website*

a month later married Helen Alice Finley, a Santa Rosa native. They went on to raise five children in the home historically known as the "Comstock House" which was originally owned by James Oates and purchased by Hilliard's mother after Oates's death in 1916.

In 1920, Hilliard became chairman of the newly-established City Board of Education, an interesting position for someone who was home-schooled after third grade. But his family had always valued a good education with one of his relatives participating in the establishment of Syracuse University in the state of New York.

Over the nine years he served as the Chair of the Board of Education, it annexed 28 elementary school districts, acquired multiple new school sites, and launched construction of new schools, along with

establishing the Santa Rosa Junior College District. In 1929, he resigned from the school board to accept an appointment to the Superior Court. He served Sonoma County justice in that capacity for a record 35 years, much of it as presiding judge.

He died on September 2, 1967, in Santa Rosa, California, at the age of 76, and was laid to rest at the Chapel of the Chimes Cemetery in Santa Rosa.



The Comstock House at 767 Mendocino Avenue, circa 1909  
*Courtesy Hill-Lilienthal Collection*

In 1969, to honor his years on the Board of Education and other contributions he made to the city, the Board of Education agreed to name the new middle school after him. Hilliard Comstock Middle School opened in 1972. The school is operating as of this writing, but it is expected to be closed permanently in June 2026 as part of Santa Rosa City Schools's campus consolidation plans.

# Montgomery High School's Formative Days

by Karen Stone

In the 1950s, once the decision was made to build a new high school adjacent to the growing Montgomery Village neighborhood, the Board of Education opted to name the school Montgomery High School. Montgomery High School would be the second of five public high schools in Santa Rosa. Santa Rosa High School opened in 1874, Piner in 1966, Elsie Allen in 1994, and Maria Carrillo in 1996.

In 1943, Sonoma County Supervisors had passed a resolution naming an old railroad right-of way linking Farmers Lane with the eastern city limits, in memory of Andrew William "Billy" Montgomery, the first of two Santa Rosa servicemen killed in the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. Montgomery Drive ran along the northern edge of what would become Montgomery Village in the early 1950s.

Billy Montgomery graduated from Santa Rosa High School, Class of 1939. He graduated mid-year and immediately enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He was serving as a gunner's mate aboard the U.S.S. California when he died. Billy was the only child of Joseph and Anna Montgomery.

Local architect Clarence Felciano designed the new high school's buildings. The contractors were local, Paul Wright and Ben Oretsky. Construction began in November 1957 and was complete by September 1958. Dedication ceremonies took place on September 14, 1958.

Attendance on September 15, 1958, the first day of school, was 975. Students were welcomed by the new administration — Principal, Wilfred Rankin; Vice-Principal, Frank McNair; Dean of Girls, Helen Cole; and Dean of Boys, Carroll Milbrath.

Department heads were named — English, Douglas Campbell; math, Robert Gyving; science, Ralph Guyon; social studies, William Walker; boys' physical education, Donald Ellis; girls' physical education, Beverly Coker; commercial (business) studies, Lamona Walraven. Martha Datson was school librarian.

In October 1958, students chose "Vikings" as the name for the school's sports teams. "Vikings" — symbol of bravery

and fortitude — won over the suggestions of Falcons, Rams, Mustangs, and Lions. In keeping with the Viking theme, Odin — Norse god of war, battle, and victory — was named as school mascot. Other mascot suggestions were Rognar, Beowolf, and Vika.



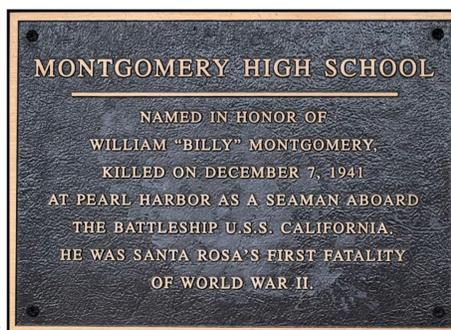
Billy Montgomery in Santa Rosa, 1940  
*Montgomery Hufft Family Photo*

The school newspaper was titled "The Saga." The Old Norse word "saga" means "story," "tale," or "history." "Valhal" — "hall of heroes" in Old Norse — was the name selected for the yearbook.

Students elected representatives of the school's first student government. Fall 1958 Student Body Officers — Student body president, Dennis Eagan; vice-president, Dee Pyke; secretary, Nadine Wiggins; treasurer, Douglas Murphey; commissioner of social activities, Joan Bradley.

Spring 1959 Student Body Officers — Student body president, Dan Kelly; vice-president, Dick Robinson; secretary, Claudia Robinson; treasurer, David Thronson; commissioner of social activities, Carol Osbun; commissioner of rallies, Len Holman.

On November 7, 1958, the Montgomery High School Vikings and Santa Rosa High School Panthers met at Bailey Field for their first football match — the first Big Game in what would become a decades-long cross-town rivalry. Around 4,000 fans watched as the Panthers won 27-6.



Plaque at Montgomery High School

Students enjoyed their first dance, "Beachcombers Ball", on October 11, 1958. "Mistletoe Magic" followed on December 19. The first turnabout dance was on Valentine's Day 1959. The first junior-senior prom was held at the Veterans' Memorial Building on June 13, 1959. The dance was a joint event with Santa Rosa High School. Prior to the

1958-59 school year, students at both schools had been classmates at Santa Rosa High School.

Montgomery High School's first graduating class — Class of 1959 — received their diplomas on June 18, 1959 in the campus "quad." More than 1,000 family members, friends, and faculty attended the commencement ceremony for the 220-member senior class.

## How did Piner High School get its name?

The Santa Rosa Board of Education started meeting in 1965 to choose a name for the new school. At a community meeting (speculation is it was likely a Board of Education meeting) a group met to select the name for the new high school.

Does “Jack London High School” sound far-fetched? According to former Piner High teacher Steve Caperson (as told by Mike Alberigi) famed local author Jack London had been suggested for the name of “The Fulton Road High School” which was the original “working name” of the Piner High School project. This was considered by some to be nothing more than a formality since London was still highly celebrated at the time, but many folks showed up who had known London personally (he had led a “colorful” life) and protested very loudly against it. Given that, London’s existence had been in the not-so-distant past, and in the face of the emotional and dramatic uproar, the Board ultimately voted against it.

At a later Santa Rosa City School Board meeting held the same year, other names were suggested. The timing of that meeting had been delayed as all board members wanted to be present. Despite that, only four of the five sitting board members were at the meeting due to the recent resignation of Alice Zieber. Present at the meeting were Board President John Moskowitz, Stanley Lance, Denman Daw, and James Keegan. Most of the board members felt the school should have a name that tied in with the area.

City Councilman (and future Santa Rosa Mayor) Hugh Coddington was present and contributed to the discussion. Coddington had a penchant for naming different ventures after himself, including the Coddington Mall, Coddington Airport, and Coddington Estates Mobile Home Park. After installing the iconic 70-foot, mid-century “Coddington” neon sign on the Coddington Mall property (*See HSSR Fall 2025 Newsletter for more information on the landmark Coddington Sign*), he noted “I like to see my name up there.” This practice of liking to see his name was likely the source of him bringing up “Coddington High School” as his first choice during the selection process for Piner High School. He also made a major pitch for the name “Northwestern High School.”

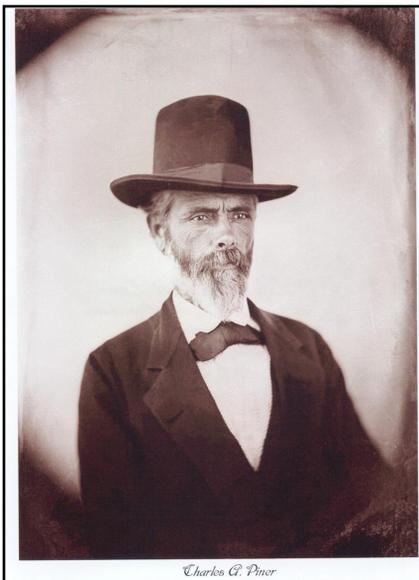
Other names considered were San Miguel, Sotoyome, and George Treder (the first Santa Rosa youth killed in the Korean War). After much discussion, Mr. Lance moved to name it “Piner High School” and the motion was seconded by Mr. Daw. The motion passed by a 3-1 margin with the

lone holdout being James Keegan who had held out for the name “Luther Burbank.”

## Piner Family History

Whom/what was Piner High School named after? The standard statement you will see from several sources, including the school website is “Piner High was named after the Piner family who were among the early settlers in Santa Rosa.” But “Prospecting Piner” has done more digging into their history and here...is the rest of the story...

Stephen (1800-1889) and Sarah (Hendrick) Piner (1799-1868), both born in Virginia, were the quintessential early Sonoma County settlers. There is little known about them, but what we do know is at various times they lived in Tennessee and Missouri before settling in Santa Rosa with their six children. Their two oldest children, David and Mary, were born in Tennessee in 1826 and 1830. The next three, John, Elizabeth, and Stephen were born in Missouri. The youngest, Cynthia, was born in California. Perhaps the first Piner who was a native Santa Rosan?



Charles Anthony Piner, circa 1870s  
*Find A Grave Website*

Stephen came from the East Coast along with many other early Santa Rosa settlers, following the trail blazed by Daniel Boone: out of Virginia, to the Cumberland Road, into Tennessee and then west into Missouri, which was a jumping off place for California, the new frontier.

It is estimated that the Piner family crossed the plains around 1848 as part of the Gold Rush and, while likely originally hoping to strike gold (hence the Piner High School team name “Prospectors”) found the true gold of California to be in the fertile coastal valleys where a good farmer could prosper.

According to a 1990 column by Gaye LeBaron, Stephen Piner was living in Santa Rosa in 1850 (based on the US census for that year). His family undoubtedly lived on the Santa Rosa plain near the trail that became the road that bears their name.

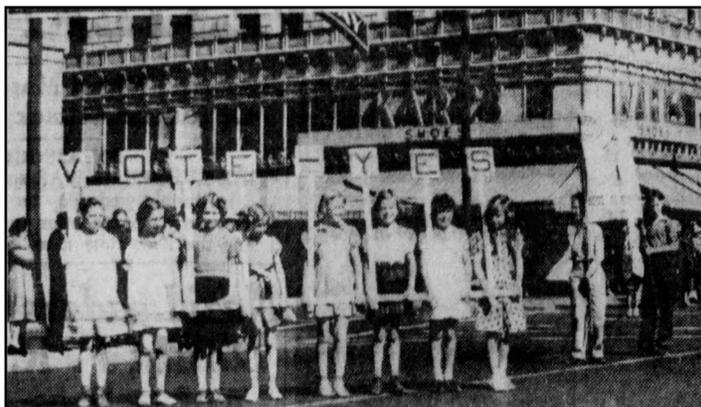
Stephen owned no land, but he had built a house, which means he was a “squatter,” not an unusual situation for that day. He came before the land grant patents promised by the U.S. Lands Commission in the treaty that ended the Mexican War had been granted, so the land grant he settled on without title was Rancho San Miguel, owned by the descendants of Marcus West, who had died the year before

*Continued on page 7*

*Luther Burbank School, continued from page 3*

support of the bond measure. Headed by the Santa Rosa High School and Santa Rosa Junior High School bands, the children marched down 4th Street at 11 a.m. carrying banners urging a “yes” vote. While the bond measure passed, construction of the Burbank School was held up pending approval of the Public Works Administration Grant.

Since the grant did not materialize, another bond measure (again for \$62,000) was presented to the voters for a new Burbank School to be built with bond revenue alone. Another parade of school children promoted a “yes” vote in a march down 4th Street. The measure passed on October 10, 1939, bonds were sold in March 1940, and groundbreaking commenced in mid-June 1940. Contractors sped construction in hopes of completing the school by mid-December. School Superintendent Dr. Jerome Cross anticipated the new school would be the “most modern elementary school north of San Francisco.” Each classroom was to be equipped with its own heating unit and a small library.



Students Parade in Support of School Bond Measure  
*Press Democrat, October 10, 1939*



Newly constructed Luther Burbank School, 1941  
*Courtesy Sonoma County Library Photo Collection*

All rooms would open to a central, open court which would double as a natural outdoor auditorium. A *Press Democrat* article described the school as being “scientifically designed for maximum light, ample heating, and proper ventilation as well as absolute safety from fire and earthquake.”

The new school was dedicated on March 7, 1941, the 92nd anniversary of Luther Burbank’s birth. Superintendent Cross, as Master of Ceremonies, introduced the first principal of the school, Jessie R. Smith, along with Miss Annie Dows, a teacher in the first school, and Jennie Harris, the school’s original janitor. An Irish yew tree was planted and many other flowering plants were presented by other schools at the dedication.

More than 80 years after its dedication, Luther Burbank School is educating more students than ever. With recent school closures due to district budget concerns and cuts, Luther Burbank School has 140 more students enrolled in 2025 than in 2024, according to the *Press Democrat*. A staff lounge has been converted to classroom space, just one of several measures to address overcapacity issues. The

Santa Rosa City School District Board continues to grapple with a serious budget crisis.

*History of Piner High School, continued from page 6*

statehood.

Sometime before 1874, when L.L. Paulson published the first directory of Napa, Lake, Sonoma, and Mendocino Counties, the Piner family had moved to Lake County. In Paulson’s directory Stephen Piner was a farmer in Big Valley, living 7½ miles southeast of Lakeport. His wife Sarah passed away in 1868 at age 69 and is buried in the Pioneer Cemetery in Kelseyville, California.

Stephen later married Mary Miriam Leach and they moved to Yakima, Washington (where there was likely government land that could be purchased) and lived there the rest of their lives. Miriam passed away in 1894, five years after Stephen passed. They are both buried in

Tahoma Cemetery in Yakima. The only picture of a family member I have been able to find so far is of one of their sons, Charles Anthony Piner (1827-1905). In 1849, Charles crossed the plains with his wife and child in an ox wagon, eventually arriving in 1852 in the Santa Rosa area where his parents had settled. Later he relocated his family to Lake County where he became affectionately known as “Uncle Charlie” to the residents there. When he died in 1905, his funeral was one of the most largely attended in the history of Kelseyville.

While, based on the information available, the Piner family was not in Santa Rosa for a long period of time (around 20 years), they were around long enough for the road that ran past their farm to be called by their name, and later the district, an elementary school, and finally, Piner High School.



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## Historical Society of Santa Rosa *Membership Application*

The Historical Society of Santa Rosa intends to build a strong and diverse organization of individuals, families, and groups to investigate, record, and relate the history of the city of Santa Rosa. Membership includes subscription to the newsletter and priority invitations to HSSR-sponsored events.

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