

# MARY ELZABETH PECKHAM MORRISON

## 1816–1881

*When small settlements were formed, the first thought was to build a church—and then a school in which to educate their children. Ah! They were the right kind of people, those men and women whom we call the pioneers of Michigan!* —May Francis Heath

Mary Elizabeth Peckham was born in 1816 in Franklin County, Vermont. Her father died when she was six years old creating financial hardship for Mary’s family. In 1836, Mary visited her sister and brother-in-law who were new arrivals to the village of Allegan, Michigan. While in Allegan, Saugatuck settler Benjamin Plummer invited Mary to become the first teacher in the remote and undeveloped lakeshore area.

Plummer maintained a school in his home until a schoolhouse was built in Singapore in 1837. Mary Peckham received meager pay and boarded with the families of her students. Benjamin Plummer’s son Fred remembers “she taught three terms of school, a term being three months, and she boarded in our home during the time.” Miss Peckham continued working as teacher until her marriage.

After some rivalry between Stephen A. Morrison and Benjamin Plummer’s son Daniel, Mary and Stephen were married in May 1840. Mr. and Mrs. Morrison settled in Saugatuck, where they lived for the rest of their lives. Mary wrote a short memoir of her “pioneer” life which revealed her adaptability and work ethic. Her first house was surrounded by dense forest and functioned as the post office for the area. To ward off loneliness, Mary reports setting out in the morning on horseback to visit her sister in Allegan, “my only guide over the twenty-five miles, the blazed trees.”

In its early years, Saugatuck was overshadowed by the settlement of Singapore and grew slowly. In the 1840s, the Morrison’s residence functioned as a place where travelers could find lodging and refreshment, but no “spiritous liquors” since the Morrisons were staunch advocates of temperance.

Mary’s written accounts from 1846 describe Anishinaabe people inhabiting the area alongside a handful of settler families. In her memoir, Mary wrote, “Our nearest neighbors and friends were the Indians, and true friends they always proved to us. Our house was often surrounded by their wigwams, and oftentimes have I been sitting alone by the glowing fire in the evening, reading or sewing or rocking my babe, when I would suddenly look up and see every window filled with dusky faces.”

In 1857 the Morrisons built a grand house on the corner of Culver and Butler streets. Across the street, Morrison built a two-story structure, called “Morrison Hall” that had a general store on the first floor and an entertainment hall in the upper story.

Mary Morrison’s life story is preserved in the work of her granddaughter, May Francis Heath who wrote that Mary “bore bravely and without murmuring of hardships and privations” the challenges of her early life. Mary generously supported the community especially in the area of education after the family became prosperous.

Mary Morrison was a “firm believer in the equality of the sexes,” and actively assisted her husband in his business enterprises, including tannery, general store, and lodgings. The family prospered and the Morrison daughters and grandchildren remained in Saugatuck and contributed to its growth. Mary passed away in 1881. Her husband Stephen Morrison lived until 1905 and was one of Saugatuck’s most influential citizens.

Mary Elizabeth Peckham researched by fellow  
Team HerStorian, Toni Perrine

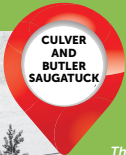
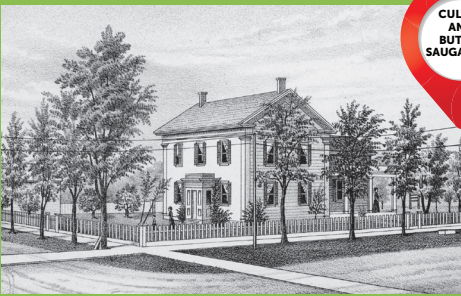
*Toni Perrine*



One-room schoolhouse in rural Michigan similar to kind Mary Peckham managed in Singapore in the 1830s. Photographer: Balthazar Korab, Library of Congress collections.



Photograph of an Anishnaabe woman and children in the Saugatuck area in the 1800s.



The Morrison’s house on Culver Street, later called Leland Lodge, burned down in 1978.



The Morrison family after Mary’s death, with husband Stephen seated and granddaughter May Francis Heath standing behind him.