

# Mathew Turner Benicia's shipbuilder extraordinaire

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One of the things I enjoy doing is visiting the historical sites I write about.

In some cases, virtually nothing remains and in others there is still much to see. In many cases, historical preservation in communities reflects pride in their heritage and intelligent planning for the future. In others, historic preservation is haphazard at best.

While I was in Benicia a while back, I decided to see what was left of the Matthew Turner Shipyard. What I found was a nice little 30-acre park with a sign, "Matthew Turner Shipyard Park." In the park there was a small remnant of the shipyard's building ways and a concrete pad that probably once held a capstan for hauling ships onto the ways. I understand that the wreck of the Stamboul, a whaler sunk to be used as a work platform, is visible at low tide.

Matthew Turner was born in Geneva, Ohio, on the shores of Lake Erie in 1825. During his young life he learned the fishing and shipbuilding trade from his dad.

He married in Ohio, but both his wife and child died in childbirth. Shortly after, in 1850, he succumbed to gold fever when he learned of the California gold rush. He boarded a ship on the East Coast and traveled to California to become one of the hordes of fortune seekers of the time.

For the next couple of years he endured the backbreaking work of gold mining and succeeded in amassing a small fortune. With his money in hand, he returned to the East Coast and bought a schooner, the Toronto, which he sailed back to the West Coast.

Returning to the trade he learned from his father, Turner joined forces with Capt. Richard Thomas Rundle in the lumber trade by shipping lumber from the Mendocino coast to San Francisco. Their operations were so successful he was able to trade up to a larger schooner, the Louis Perry, and increase his profits.

Four years later he upgraded once more, trading up to the East Coast brig, Temandra, and sailed for the Sea of Okhost near Alaska. Initially he transported cargo, but discovered an immense number of codfish, which were selling for a high price in San Francisco. He bought another ship, the Porpoise, and sent it to work the fishing grounds while he engaged in trade in Tahiti where he organized a successful trading

company.

His desire to expand his Tahiti trade sent him looking for faster ships. He couldn't find any that satisfied his demanding specifications, so in 1868 he designed his own and had the Nautilus, built at a Eureka shipyard. The Nautilus was so successful and fast that he decided to go into the shipbuilding trade on his own near Hunters Point as well as continuing with his San Francisco-to-Tahiti cargo trade.

Though the death of his wife and child in childbirth had been traumatic, he finally married again, to Capt. Rundle's widow, Ashbeline, in February of 1876.

In 1882, he was forced to move his expanding and flourishing operations to Benicia, settling on property located on the south side of K Street, extending for a block east and west of West Twelfth Street, down to the water. Joining with partners, Horatio Turner (his brother) and a man named John L. Eckley, he blasted an entrance to the new shipyard out of solid rock 220-feet long, and resumed operations.

When correspondent M.J. Sanderson of the San Francisco Call visited the new Turner and Eckley yard, he described the marine ways to the west of the wharf as the largest in the country. About 30 men were at work and Benicia quickly became the homeport and residence of the West Coast's only shipyard, equivalent to the Atlantic Coast's major shipbuilders.

It was the beginning of a career that would encompass 33 years and result in the building of more sailing vessels than any other person in America.

Recalling his experience with the Tahiti trade and the need for fast ships, Matthew Turner's sailing ships were designed for speed. In 1901, the 1,109-ton, four-masted, Amaranth set a sailing record of 23 days from Shanghai to Astoria, which stands today. The William C. Irwin made a passage from San Francisco to Kahalui, Maui, of only eight days and 17 hours.

Turner was a master of marine architecture and ship design. His ships were built with an eye to being practical with innovative modifications to the hull and sails, resulting in most of them not being considered beautiful. None of his vessels sported the fancy scrollwork on the bow and stern that was popular in his day.

Perhaps Turner's finest ship was the Galilee, which he built in 1891. She set a sailing record of 22 days on the long voyage to California from Papeete and averaged only 28 days on normal runs. In 1905 she was chosen to be the ship to carry out the Carnegie Oceanic Magnetic Survey until a ship could be specially built for that scientific task. Sold in 1911, she was re-rigged as a three-masted fishing schooner.

When she was retired, she was run into the muddy shallows of Sausalito's Richardson Bay in 1936 to serve as a clubhouse. Later abandoned, her rotting hulk sank into the mud off "Tiki Junction." The San Francisco Maritime Museum rescued her stern, cutting it off and setting it up on the grounds at Fort Mason. The bow section was rescued and is now located behind building 7 at the Camel Barn Museum.

Turner also built some of the fastest racing yachts in the world, proven out during the famous races sponsored by the San Francisco Yacht Club, of which Turner was a charter member. One of the more famous Turner-built yachts was the Lurline, built for William Matson, and which won three of the first four San Pedro-Honolulu yacht races.

The 1906 earthquake provided an excess of repair work for the shipyard that Turner still personally supervised. Turner finally decided to retire at the age of 81 after overwork and a stroke coincided with the fact that steel hulls were fast-becoming primary in building ships. He lived less than three more years and died in Berkeley on Feb. 10, 1909.

Turner's legacy of records in shipbuilding stands today. He launched more sailing vessels than any other man in America - 228 of them in 33 years, 154 of which were built at Benicia.

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