

‘Glasgow’ pushed for Mare Island

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From 1848 until 1850, the U.S. Navy conducted an extensive survey to determine whether to install a naval shipyard on Mare Island. Once the survey results were determined to be satisfactory, the United States government went ahead and purchased the island in January of 1853.

On Sept. 16, 1854, Commodore David Glasgow Farragut arrived at Mare Island with the order to establish a naval shipyard. He was accompanied by his wife, Virginia Loyall Farragut and their 9-year-old son, Loyall.

Their trip across the continent, starting in Norfolk, Va., was long and full of hazards. They journeyed west via Nicaragua. On arriving in San Francisco, the family first lived aboard a ship, and afterwards in a small cottage. It took nearly two years before the commandant's house was finally finished.

In 1855, Lt. Farragut was promoted to captain, another step in an illustrious career that eventually saw him become one of the foremost admirals of his day.

James Glasgow Farragut (he would adopt the name David later in honor of his patron, Capt. David Porter Jr., but was known as Glasgow to his friends and family) was born on July 5, 1801, along the Holston River in Tennessee. His father, Jorge Antonio Magin Ferragut, originally from the Balearic Islands of Spain, had changed his name to George Farragut after he became a citizen of America. He married Elizabeth Shine in 1795 and moved with her into new territory, which would eventually become Tennessee.

For a short time, they lived in Knoxville, where their first son, William, was born in 1797, but eventually the family moved to the Holston River.

One of Glasgow's earliest childhood memories was an Indian encounter at their log cabin while his father was away. One morning, his mother observed a group of Indians approaching their cabin. She hid Glasgow, William, his sister Nancy, and the baby, George, in a separate building, the kitchen loft. After she returned to the cabin, the Indians came to the door, asking for whiskey. One of them tried to stab Elizabeth. She was able to bar the door and waited inside, clutching an ax until the Indians finally left.

Glasgow's father was a noted seafarer himself and instilled his love of the sea to his

sons. In 1803, the governor-general of the newly created territory of Louisiana had George Farragut appointed as a sailing master in the United States Navy. A few years later, in 1897, the family moved to Lake Pontchartrain, near New Orleans.

While George was away at sea, his wife Elizabeth, five months pregnant with her last child, a daughter to also be named Elizabeth, moved herself, her four children and her livestock on a boat down 1,700 hundred miles of Mississippi.

United again, the family settled near Lake Pontchartrain, but tragedy struck the following year: Elizabeth Farragut died of yellow fever in 1808.

A close friend of the family, Capt. David Porter Jr., offered to educate one of the Farragut children. Glasgow was the chosen one and moved in with the Porter family, where he was treated like their son. As a grown man he recalled in his diary: "Thus commenced my acquaintance with the celebrated Commodore David Porter, late of the United States Navy, and I am happy to have it in my power to say, with feelings of warm gratitude, that he ever was to me all that he promised, my 'friend and guardian'."

On June 21, 1810, the family transferred from New Orleans, taking young Glasgow with them. He was never to see his father again.

Through his connection with Capt. Porter, Glasgow became commissioned as one of the youngest midshipman ever, boarding his first ship, the frigate Essex, as a noncommissioned officer at age 10. He also changed his name to David Glasgow Farragut.

Though short and slight for his age, he was able to hold his own and not afraid to enter a fight. One of the older officers reported after one affair that Farragut was "three pounds of uniform and seventy pounds of fight."

Life on the frigate was highly regulated, and, by today's standards, harsh and difficult. The Essex patrolled up and down the East coast to protect American merchant ships from British ships.

War against the British began on June 18, 1812, and the Essex played its part in inflicting as much damage as possible on the British Navy. Eventually, the Essex sailed to the Pacific, around Cape Horn, to the Galapagos Islands and on to Valparaiso.

There, Farragut's luck ran out. On March 28, 1814, two British ships vanquished the Essex. After a bloody battle, 155 men of its crew of 255 were wounded or missing and presumed drowned. Thirteen-year-old David Farragut and the other survivors were

taken prisoner.

He was paroled soon thereafter and spent the next few months in Chester, Pa., with the Porter family, attending to his schooling.

His next commission took him on the Independence, flagship of Commodore Bainbridge, and into the Mediterranean.

Other commands followed, and David Farragut diligently studied to be able to pass the necessary exams for promotion.

In 1820, he met his future wife, Susan Caroline Merchant, in Norfolk. They finally married Sept. 2, 1824. Soon thereafter, he was promoted and commissioned as lieutenant.

For the next 16 years, one of his main concerns would be the health of his wife, who got progressively weaker until finally spending all her time in a wheelchair. David Farragut took her to doctors and spas, all without avail. She finally died Dec. 27, 1840.

Soon after Susan's death, Farragut was promoted to the rank of commodore. He was only 40 years old, but already considered one of the promising naval officers.

Once again, he spent time on shore in Norfolk, where he met and married Virginia Dorcas Loyall on Dec. 26, 1843. Nine months later, on Oct. 12, their only son, Loyall was born.

In 1846, he commanded the Saratoga during the Mexican War. Here he contracted yellow fever, a malady that would plague him for the rest of his life.

And finally he received the command to develop a naval shipyard in the newly formed territory of California.

Most biographies seem to just gloss over this period of his life and it is difficult to judge the extent of his duties at Mare Island.

Only one incident is known where Farragut, as the senior naval officer of the area, got drawn into a dispute involving the Vigilance Committee and the Law and Order Party in San Francisco. He steadfastly proceeded to protect federal interests and was later praised for his conduct by the secretary of the Navy.

Farragut returned to the East Coast with his family in 1858. With the advent of the Civil War, Commodore Farragut decided to join the Union effort. His most famous moment

came at the battle near Mobile, Ala., an important Confederate port on the Gulf of Mexico.

Two great Confederate forts protected the river. On April 24, 1862, Farragut and his ships set out to break the barricade. His leading monitor, the 'Tennessee,' crossed the minefields and was blown to pieces. A second ship followed, and soon confusion reigned. This was the moment for which he became famous, allegedly shouting: "Damn the torpedoes. Full speed ahead."

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