

More than 500 ships were launched

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Mare Island Navy Yard, as it was called in its early years, was established in the fall of 1854 by Admiral David G. Farragut, then a commander in the U.S. Navy.

Farragut remained as commandant of the yard until 1858 when he was ordered to the East Coast and back on sea duty. It was under his intelligent supervision that workshops, officer's quarters, a sectional dock, and other structures necessary to operate a shipyard were established. One of the main undertakings was establishment of a dock to build and service ships.

The first of more than 500 ships built and launched at Mare Island was the USS Saginaw, a 153-ton wooden-hulled steam-powered side-paddle-wheeler with four guns, classified as a "fourth-rate steamer." The Saginaw was launched on March 3, 1859, and commissioned on Jan. 5, 1860.

For the next 11 years, the Saginaw patrolled the West Coast from Alaska to Mexico. With Alaska belonging to Russia (until the United States purchased it in 1867), the Mexican uprising against French Emperor Maximilian, and the Confederate threats of the Civil War, a strong homeland protection was deemed necessary, and Mare Island and the USS Saginaw were integral parts of this strategy.

The United States also was interested in expanding trade routes in the Pacific. In 1854, Commodore Matthew C. Perry had negotiated the treaty of Kanagawa with the Japanese Shogun. The annexation of Midway Island in 1867 ensured a strategic position for United States shipping halfway between the West Coast and Japan.

The Saginaw received orders to proceed to Midway to open a channel through the reefs surrounding the atoll. Instead, the ship ran aground and was destroyed on Dec. 19, 1870. Its crew was rescued from Midway two months later.

Back at Mare Island, the number of workers employed at the shipyard varied greatly. With the end of the Civil War, activities dropped significantly, reaching an all-time low in the 1870s.

Vallejo had grown steadily, incorporating as a city in February 1868, more than doubling its population 8,000. The arrival of the California Pacific Railroad greatly contributed to this economic boom. The connection between deep-water seaport and

railroad opened new opportunities.

The Weekly Solano Herald correspondent wrote in a letter from Vallejo on Dec. 15, 1869: "The railroad has worked wonders with Vallejo and transformed it from a small dependency on Mare Island and government works, to one of the most thriving towns on the coast, although, with all deference to the Honorable Trustees, I hardly think it can be dignified with the name of city. It has more than doubled in population in the last year, and the increase of buildings has not kept pace with the wants of the population. Since the town was incorporated, great improvements have been made in the streets and sidewalks - the principal thoroughfares, Georgia and Virginia streets - having been cut down to uniform grade, and substantial sidewalks and crossings constructed, an example the City Fathers of Suisun will do well to imitate.

"Mare Island has a large force of men employed on it, some 800 I believe, engaged in cutting down and renovating the old sail vessels, as the government intends to do away with the steam service and employ sail vessels as being more economical and meeting all the requirements while we are at peace.

"Great complaint exists among the Union men of Vallejo of the political cast of the Yard, it being almost impossible for Republicans - no matter how skilled in their different branches they may be - to procure employment, while those of Johnsonian or democratic antecedent have no difficulty."

Unfortunately, the California Pacific Railroad expansion failed, due to insufficient capital and the operation was sold to Central Pacific in 1871. Eventually, the railroad lines were relocated, bypassing Vallejo altogether.

While the numbers of workers employed declined during the early 1870s, the government's ambitious plans for Mare Island's future were evident in the building of a new, large stone dock, built with granite blocks.

Ground was broken for the dock on August 13, 1872. The first stone was laid on Dec. 1, 1874, while the last, finishing stone was laid Feb. 18, 1891. The total cost for this dock came to \$2,764,321.13.

"There are two docks at Mare Island," wrote the Vallejo Chronicle on Dec. 24, 1891, "a sectional dock and the stone dock just completed. The sectional dock was the first erection of the kind ever attempted on the Pacific Coast and was commenced soon after the establishment of the Yard. It was originally composed of 11 sections.

"The extreme length of the construction was 325 feet, and was capable of accommodating a ship of 3,000 tons burthen

"The stone dock is considered the finest piece of workmanship of its kind in the United States. Its great dimensions make it available for repairing the largest man-of-war that floats. It was designed by Civil Engineer Calvin Brown, who visited Europe for the purpose of examining the public docks of the great naval powers and adopting the one which he might deem the best for the Mare Island structure. The dock is built on the principle of an inverted arch, the pressure being entirely from the outside towards the center, this design serving the purpose of keeping the floor intact should the contingency arise of waters sapping underneath." Known as dry dock No. 1, it was the first permanently constructed dock on the West Coast.

Over the years, Mare Island would add other firsts. In 1910, workers constructed a wooden landing platform on the cruiser Pennsylvania, thus effectively creating the first modern aircraft landing deck.

Two years later, they launched the first electrically driven ship, the collier Jupiter, which later was converted into the aircraft carrier USS Langley.

Not all launchings were successful. One of the most spectacular mishaps occurred on Nov. 20, 1919, when the USS California, the only battleship constructed at Mare Island and the largest ship ever built on the West Coast, snapped the heavy cables of its special brake devices during its initial launch.

Congressional assignment of the construction of the USS California in 1915 had been hailed as a major breakthrough for the shipyard. Nov. 20, 1919, saw thousands of visitors lined up at the waterfront to witness this historic moment. Instead of a graceful slide down the building ways into the waters, the ship picked up more and more speed and continued "halfway up Georgia Street." While the ship itself was mostly undamaged, the ferry dock was completely demolished and several boats destroyed.

Despite its spectacular beginnings, the USS California served for 20 years, until its final day at Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941.

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