

Admiral Farragut: a stellar military career

By Nancy Dinger

Saturday, August 18, 2001

The name Farragut can certainly ring a bell; he was the oft-quoted person in history class who said, "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead." But, what connection does this larger-than-life figure from history have to do with Solano County? Admiral Farragut is the founder and was the commandant of the Mare Island Navy Yard.

David G. Farragut was born James Farragut in 1801 near Knoxville, Tenn. His father, Jorge, was a Spanish-born Navy sailing master. David's mother, Elizabeth Shine, was an Irish-American from North Carolina. His father fought throughout the American Revolution, both at sea and ashore in the Army artillery, being wounded in battle.

Elizabeth died in 1808 from yellow fever. David's father sent him to live with a family friend, Commodore David Porter, who adopted the boy. Young James changed his name to David and became a midshipman at age 9.

When war with England broke out again in 1812, Farragut was assigned to the Essex, which soon captured several British "prizes." On one occasion, young David discovered a mutiny brewing among the prisoners, thereby thwarting their plans.

In October the Essex was assigned to the West Indies under the command of David's stepfather, Captain Porter. Porter was directed to meet up with Bainbridge's squadron, which he failed to find.

Porter continued his voyage southward, doubled Cape Horn and made a memorable cruise in the Pacific. David was promoted to prize master of a ship in the Pacific by the time he was 12 years old. He remained in the U.S. Navy after the war, advancing in grade to become master of the sloop Saratoga during the Mexican War.

Assigned to Norfolk, Virginia, he fell in love with Susan C. Marchant, marrying her in 1823. She was a frail woman who suffered from neuralgia. He spent quite a bit of time ashore in Washington and Virginia, while attending to his invalid wife.

By 1840, Susan died. Farragut in his grief, accepted many commissions to sail to South America, visiting ports and exploring the interior, becoming familiar with each country that he visited.

He returned to Norfolk in February 1843. He met and married Virginia Loyall in

December of that year. Virginia, a sturdy woman, survived her husband by 14 years.

In 1854, the Navy department sent Farragut to establish a Navy yard on the Pacific Coast. David, Virginia and their son, Loyall enjoyed the social life that swirled around them in Vallejo for their four-year stay.

They returned to Norfolk, where the next assignment from the Navy department was waiting. David went, without his family, to Vera Cruz, accompanying Robert M. McLane, the new ambassador to Mexico. The intimate acquaintance with the Gulf of Mexico and the lower Mississippi became of inestimable importance two years later.

The winds of war began to blow again, this time between the North and South. The Confederacy would hope that Farragut, a Southerner, would fight for them. David felt that his duty lay in fighting for the country that his father had fought to establish and one that he had spent 50 years serving.

He fled with his family to New York in May of 1861, leaving behind angered relatives. Farragut was assigned to a motor boat flotilla commanded by his stepbrother, David Dixon Porter. Farragut was determined to take possession of New Orleans for the Union.

Against his brother's objections, David made the decision to run past Forts Jackson and St. Philip. To prepare the ships, the crews crisscrossed the hulls with great chains until they were almost as well protected as the ironclads.

Since he planned to pass the forts at night, Flag Officer Farragut had the hulls covered with Mississippi mud to make them less visible from the shore and had the decks painted white so that needed objects would stand out clearly. Next, he ordered that trees be lashed to the masts so that the enemy could think they were trees on the opposite bank of the river. The strategy worked. The fleet safely reached New Orleans on April 28, 1862. In May, Farragut attempted to subdue the city of Vicksburg.

This time, the attempt failed. Farragut returned to New Orleans to organize a second, stronger fleet. With the assistance of the Western Flotilla, commanded by Charles H. Davis, the subjugation, in June, of Vicksburg was a success. David's last battle was for Mobile Bay. Farragut's fleet of wooden ships, along with four small ironclad monitors, began the attack on Mobile Bay early in the morning of Aug. 5, 1864. When smoke from the battle became too thick, Farragut climbed the rigging of the Hartford to get a better view.

The Tecumseh, one of the monitors, struck a mine and sank. Realizing that the fleet was reluctant to go forward because of the mines, Rear Admiral Farragut shouted, "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" The battle for Mobile Bay made Farragut's

name a household word and a national hero. Farragut was the first officer to become Rear Admiral. He was later promoted to Vice Admiral and then to Admiral, both ranks created for him by Congress, the orders signed by President Lincoln who was a great admirer.

In the summer of 1869, Admiral Farragut and Virginia returned to California. He wanted to see the completed Mare Island Naval Yard that he had commenced 11 years before. A large crowd of Vallejoans greeted him and provided escort to the town.

The City Council gave him a reception. Farragut was greatly moved. That evening the Farraguts were entertained with fireworks and a torch light procession. A year later, on Aug. 14, 1870 Farragut died in Portsmouth from a series of heart attacks that led to a paralytic stroke. The city was crowded to overflowing for the funeral.

A procession a mile long composed of marines, sailors, Army and Navy officers, civil officials, patriotic and fraternal societies and citizens from all ranks of society followed the flag draped hearse drawn by four horses. Bells tolled, minute guns sounded from the Navy Yard and ships in the harbor.

A statue was erected in 1881 in Washington D.C., near the White House, to honor an extraordinary man. Special note: An exhibit at the Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum about Farragut runs through October. On Sept. 15 there will be a costume ball. Members of a Civil War enactment group will be in costume. The public is invited to attend in costume as well. For more information, contact James Kern at 643-0077.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/433>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/433/>