

# Cmdr. Farragut, Navy call Mare Island home

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Last week: The discovery of Mare Island, how it got its name and finally being selected as the site of a West Coast Navy yard. Information for this article came from the Vacaville Heritage Council and Shipyard Historian's files.

The day the Farragut party arrived at Mare Island - Sept. 16, 1854 - stands as the official date that the Navy took possession of the island with Commander David Glasgow Farragut in command to commence building the Navy Yard.

The Farraguts were invited to share a small residence that had been built as a dwelling and office building for Secor and Hanscom. This house remained on the grounds until 1928, in later years becoming the chaplain's home.

By now, the workers who had been constructing the dry dock during the past year had erected that dwelling along with a small number of shanties.

As documented, Farragut's first proclamation was to warn all squatters off the land, as there were at least three or five living in makeshift shacks.

On Sept. 21, at a cost of \$500, the USS Warren was towed from Sausalito where it had been berthed. It is noted as the first ship to dock at Mare Island Navy Yard. Workmen were hired from Vallejo to outfit the boat with living quarters. This was to be home to the Farraguts and Col. Daniel Turner and his family, who had also made the trip from back East.

One squatter had been hired to build a flagpole, and on Oct. 3, 1854, the first hoisting of the American flag took place with the proper 13-gun salute. Construction of a blacksmith's shop was started and Mr. King, a master blacksmith, reported for duty in October.

In 1855, the commandant's house, a huge brick building, was erected as living quarters for the Farragut family.

Since no closets were included in the plans, Farragut requested permission to have wardrobes of pine made by the Navy. Besides finally moving into more comfortable quarters, this is the year Farragut was promoted to captain.

During this first year, Farragut himself conducted church services aboard the Warren,

or a group rowed to Vallejo to join in a service in the town.

In 1855, Virginia Farragut tried to establish an Episcopalian congregation in Vallejo, but the numbers were too few. The count of Methodists was better. The Farraguts were influential in the city's first Methodist Church being built as a church and schoolhouse.

Tidbit items of the day shed some light on conditions on the island. Transportation was provided by one yoke of oxen. Stripped bass were plentiful in the surrounding waters.

Fresh water was brought in by a steam launch. Wells were dug, but the water was only tolerable, so cisterns were built to catch the rain water.

Though coal was shipped from New York at the cost of \$12.50 a ton, stove wood was still needed.

One steam tug was employed, journeying up the Napa River, San Pablo Bay and Petaluma Creek searching out the needed supply of wood. Weekly shopping trips to San Francisco, 26 miles away, were required. A steam tug left at 5 in the morning and returned the passengers home well after dark.

In 1856, there was an uprising in San Francisco. A group of San Francisco businessmen, who called themselves the Vigilantes, were fed up with the lawlessness that raged in the Barbary Coast and hanged several murderers.

Then they took to exiling Democrats, charging them with ballot-box stuffing. When the Democrats reacted by forming the Law and Order Party, a pair of their sympathizers, a Navy agent and a judge, were taken into custody by the Vigilantes. The commander aboard the John Adams, which was anchored in the bay, sent the Vigilantes a sharp message and the Navy agent was released.

Another message was sent warning that the judge must be treated as a prisoner of war and placed on board the ship. Thinking this meant the John Adams would fire upon the city, the Vigilantes wrote Farragut.

Farragut advised the commander of the John Adams to calm down and told the Vigilantes they were denying the judge his constitutional rights. The Vigilantes ignored this response, and so Farragut sent the sloop Massachusetts over to join the John Adams. Both ships aimed all their guns at the city. The Vigilantes released the judge and disbanded.

The year 1857 was a particularly eventual one. A wharf was built for the magazine, a series of buildings erected as an ordinance depot for the storage of ammunition.

In October, the frigate USS Independence, built in 1812 in New England, arrived to be the station ship. The full crew of officers and enlisted personnel required to run the ship transferred over from the Warren to the Independence.

The Independence remained until the year 1914.

A newspaper appeared out of Mare Island in 1857, but publication was short-lived, as the owner returned back East and no one kept the paper going.

This same year a telegraph line was built between Benicia, Vallejo and Mare Island. This was done to ensure continuous communication between the Navy yard and the outside world.

Also in 1857, surgeon John S. Messersmith became the medical officer of the Navy yard, replacing John Mills Browne, a surgeon on the Warren.

The need for shade trees and landscaping on the island was obvious.

In 1858, the yard was gifted with some walnut trees from Alameda County.

Arrangements were made the same year to transport from Monterey a large number of plants by wagon.

Extensive landscaping resulted with the creation of several parks.

Included in the landscape were Monterey cypress, Monterey pine and California sycamore from Big Sur. Only one or two of the cypress remain.

In the late 1860s, there was more landscaping activity, resulting in many species arriving from the East Coast such as locust, catalpa, poplar and American elm.

In the late 1870s and throughout the 1880s, more specimens arrived. Silk oaks were brought in from the Channel Islands off Santa Barbara. These bloom to this day.

Two huge Bunya Bunya trees arrived from Norfolk Island in the South Pacific. These trees are now more than 40 feet tall. These bear fruit in the shape of huge green cones, with a few that weighing up to 20 pounds.

Eucalyptus were brought in regularly and many specimens remain. They are still the most numerous plantings on the yard.

Sometime in the 1880s, a minister from Vallejo brought in a slip of wisteria from the San

Gabriel Mission. The plant is now said to be one of the largest in the world.

However, many of those early-day plantings died in years of drought. Many more were uprooted to make way for new buildings and roads. Next week: Mare Island loses Commander Farragut, builds a hospital and chapel, and greets royalty.

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