

# After Mare Island stint, Farragut damned torpedoes

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Sunday, October 15, 1995

Information for this article came from the Mare Island Naval Ship yard historian's files and the Vacaville Heritage Council.

Last of three parts

Last week: Mare Island, officially declared a shipyard, sends help during a vigilante uprising in San Francisco. Plantings are established on the island as its future shape begins to take form.

Capt. Farragut left Mare Island in 1858. In 1862, during the Civil War, Farragut sailed up the Mississippi River to defeat an enemy flotilla, enabling Union forces to take New Orleans.

In 1864, uttering the famous cry "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead," he forced the defenses at Mobile Bay, Ala., thus defeating a Confederate fleet. Farragut was the first officer in the Navy to receive the ranks of vice admiral (1864) and admiral (1866).

In 1859, the first ship built at Mare Island was completed. This was a wooden sidewheel steamer, 150 feet long, named the USS Saginaw.

Through the years, the yard overhauled and repaired American ships and those under foreign registry. Vessels that were built at the yard included tug boats, training ships and barges.

In 1862, the Navy once again responded to civilian trouble when a group of Navy men were sent from Mare Island to Oregon to search out "copperheads," the term applied to the Northern opposition to the Lincoln administration during the Civil War.

In 1863, President Lincoln signed an act appropriating \$100,000 for the construction of Marine barracks at Mare.

This was the same year that Anna Key Turner, daughter of Francis Scott Key, author of the Star-Spangled Banner, was interred in the Mare Island cemetery. Anna and her husband, Col. Turner, came to Mare Island in 1854 with the Farragut party.

In 1869, a hospital equipped with running water was constructed on the island. That same year, the Farraguts made a return visit to Vallejo.

In 1857, the Farraguts had purchased property in Vallejo, building a two-story brick residence at 33 Maine St. On this trip, Virginia collected the rent.

The family vacationed at the White Sulphur Springs Hotel, and on Aug. 4, the town of Vallejo held a torchlight parade for the admiral and his family. The admiral expressed his resolve to visit California at least once a year from then on, but it was not to be.

On their return home by train, the admiral became ill. He was taken to the hospital in Chicago and then transferred to his home in Portsmouth, N.H. On Aug. 14, 1870, he passed away.

In 1872, construction of the first permanent dry dock began. It was a long, arduous undertaking and was finally completed in 1891.

A second permanent dry dock, which would accommodate the largest ships of the day, was under construction in 1899.

During the Civil War, there were about 300 people employed at the Navy shipyard. But a state of decline began following the national Panic of 1873 and subsequent depression, and Mare Island cut back its force to a great degree.

In 1877, employment was down to 134 people.

In 1878, some work came Mare Island's way with the McArthur, a coast survey ship. This was not a Navy ship, but the work was most welcome.

Royalty from the South Pacific made its way to Mare Island.

In 1874, King Kalakaua of the Sandwich Islands (Hawaiian Islands) made an official visit.

In 1889, Chief Seomanu of Samoa arrived to be honored for his people's efforts in rescuing survivors of warships that were wrecked in a hurricane in the 1880s.

The Samoan chief was presented with a Mare Island gig - a long, light ship's boat usually reserved for use by the ship's captain - to replace his official outrigger.

In March of 1898, the yard was hit by an earthquake. Roofs and chimneys fell and broken pipes spouted water.

The onset of the Spanish-American War in 1898 resulted in increased work at the yard when 1,700 were recorded as employed.

Mare Island was noted as being the home port of Admiral Dewey's flagship USS Olympia, which led the Navy in the annihilation of the Spanish Fleet in Manila Bay on May 1, 1898.

Some events of note came about, bringing Mare Island Navy Ship Yard into the 20th century.

In 1901, St. Peter's Chapel was erected. It was built with \$5,000 of congressional funds. The architect was paid \$50 for the complete plans.

The structure has the distinction of being the oldest Naval chapel in the United States. It is a showcase for 29 Tiffany-designed windows.

The infamous 1906 earthquake caused little damage at Mare Island. But the hardest hit was, of course, San Francisco.

Admiral McCalla sent sailors to San Francisco to dynamite a section of land on the east side of Van Ness Avenue to halt the ensuing fire.

Families climbed to the highest vistas to view the blast that destroyed their homes, many of them mansions that lined Van Ness Avenue and the cross streets.

Elsa Maxwell was among a number of San Franciscans who found temporary shelter at Mare Island following the earthquake.

Elsa was 23 at the time, but her talent as a hostess was clearly evident even then to the great delight of the yard's younger set.

Maxwell went on to become a noted gossip columnist and a hostess famed for her extravagant, high-society parties.

Mare Island was to go on in this century to make its mark and provide employment for vast numbers.

During World War I, employment figures reached 10,000, but by 1923 the numbers were down to 2,700.

The numbers went up again, reaching 5,018 by 1929. But employment dropped again during the Depression years.

Then came World War II, with employment figures reaching a maximum of 42,300 people in 1945.

During World War II, 391 ships were built at Mare Island and 1,560 were repaired. Mare Island was then to gain in status when it became a nuclear shipyard in later years.

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