Mare Island had vital role in Navy history

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In 1775, Don Perez Ayala, a Spanish explorer, was the first white man to set foot on Mare Island, which he dubbed Isla de la Plana. His men killed some of the local elk and departed.

In 1835, a crude ferry transported men and stock between land on either side of the Carquinez Straits. During one of these trips a squall caused the animals to panic, kicking the ferry apart. Some of the animals swam to shore. Others drowned. One prized white mare belonging to Gen. Mariano Vallejo was found days later on Isla de la Plana. Vallejo immediately named the island Isla de la Yegua, which translates to Island of the Mare.

In 1850, the island was granted to Victor Castro, who soon sold it for $7,000 to Vallejo's son-in-law, John. B. Frisbee, and his partner, a B. Simmons. In 1851, the partners sold it to A.W. Aspinwall and G.W.P. Bissell for $17,500.

It was that year, 1851, that President Fillmore, noting the growing commerce and whaling in the Pacific, determined that the Navy required a Navy yard on the West Coast. Construction of the dry dock began in New York; it being built in sections so that it could be dismantled and the sections shipped around Cape Horn.

In 1852, Commodore John Drake Sloat was charged with selecting a viable location. He surveyed the coast and determined the best place was Mare Island: It being "free from ocean gales and from floods and freshets." The anchorage was as good as any and it was also located next to the site selected as the state capital, Vallejo.

Sloat drew up the plans for the shipyard, which was to be the site for the construction and servicing of ships. A foundry, machine shop, blacksmith shop, boiler shop, engine house, pattern house, carpenters shop and storehouses were to be built for $100,000.

The island, just over 800 acres, was purchased by the United States for $83,491, and in 1852 the dry dock sections began. Some mechanics were shipped around with the sections. Some hired locally. Wages were $5 to $6 a day.

By the fall of 1853, a basin to hold the dry dock was completed and the dock was in place. Until the Navy could take over, the crews were allowed to work on private contracts. The first vessel to enter the dry dock was the commercial steamer Pacific.

In 1854, Commander David Glasgow Farragut was ordered to assume command of the Navy yard at Mare Island. His arrival on Sept. 16, 1854, stands as the official date that the Navy took possession of the island.

The first order of the day was to evict all non-naval personnel from the island. Most had been working at the shipyard, and they simply moved to Vallejo and continued to work at Mare Island.

Within days, the USS Warren was towed from Sausalito to Mare Island and was the first Navy ship to dock at Mare Island Navy Yard. The boat was outfitted with living quarters and became home to the Farraguts, Col. Daniel Turner and his family, and a few others. A flagpole was erected and on Oct. 3, 1854, the first hoisting of the American flag took place with a 13-gun salute.

In 1855, the commandant's house, a large brick building, was completed as living quarters for the Farragut family. Transportation on the island was a wagon pulled by a yoke of oxen. Once a week, a steam tug took passengers to San Francisco for shopping trips.

A newspaper appeared for a short time in 1857. That same year, a telegraph line was built between Benicia, Vallejo and Mare Island. Also in 1857, surgeon John S. Messersmith, USN, became the medical officer of the Navy yard. Captain Farragut left Mare Island in 1858.

In 1858, extensive landscaping and the creation of a number of parks began with the arrival of some walnut trees from Alameda County. Monterey cypress, pine and California sycamore were brought in from Monterey. In the late 1860s many plants arrived from back East.

In the late 1870s and throughout the 1880s, more specimens arrived. However, many of those early-day plantings died in years of drought and many were eventually uprooted to make way for new buildings and roads.

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

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

In 1869, a hospital equipped with running water was constructed on the island. In 1872, construction of the first permanent dry dock began. It 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, from 1861 to 1865, about 300 people were employed at the Navy shipyard. Because of the national Panic of 1873 and subsequent depression in 1877, employment was down to 134 people.

The onset of the Spanish-American War in 1898 resulted in increased work, and 1,700 were employed. Mare Island became 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 during that war.

In 1901, St. Peter's Chapel was erected. It has the distinction of being the oldest Naval chapel in the United States and is a showcase for 29 Tiffany-designed windows.

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. These numbers went down again during the Depression years.

Then came the crisis of World War II, when employment figures reached a maximum of 42,300 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 its status when it became a nuclear shipyard in later years.

The submarine USS Bergall, SSN-667, quietly slipped her moorings late February or early March 1988. Little did the citizens of nearby Vallejo know that a landmark event was being added to the long and proud history of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard: Diane Nelson, a weapons electronics mechanic, was about to become the first woman to participate in a sea trial on this small, cramped attack-class submarine. A few days later, Communications Electronic Mechanic Lita Pangelinan, would be the second woman to test the submarine at sea. Once again, Mare Island made her mark in the history books.