

Earlier Days In August

By Ernest D. Wichels

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Vallejo and Mare Island share many August anniversaries. Not the least of these concern Admiral Farragut and his family. More about them later. Let's quickly review some of the other highlights—a few of these the present generation will remember; others were familiar to our great-grandfathers.

The first European to see Mare Island was Don Juan Perez Ayala, skipper of the Spanish sloop San Carlos, who came to these waters on Aug. 5, 1775, claimed this land (your property and mine) for his sovereign King Charles of Spain, and named our shipyard site "Isla de la Plana," or Flat Island. On Aug. 13, 1872, ground was broken for Mare Island's first dry-dock. Vice President Colfax came here on Aug. 16, 1869. Many Vallejoans remember the night of horror—Aug. 25, 1950, when radio flashed the word that the hospitalship BENEVOLENCE had been rammed and sunk outside the Golden Gate; several Mare Island employees perished in that catastrophe.

It was on Aug. 10, 1921, that Mare Island's largest ship, the dreadnaught CALIFORNIA, was commissioned. At midnight of Aug. 20, 1859, the Vallejo State Capitol, near York and Sacramento streets, burned to the ground—the final episode of General Vallejo's dream to make this city the state capital. One of our proudest ships, the Collier JUPITER, was launched on Aug. 24, 1912. JUPITER later became the Navy's first aircraft carrier, the LANGLEY CV-1. It was lost in January 1942, in the Java Sea. It was on Aug. 31, 1852, that the United States Congress passed a bill for \$100,000 to establish a shipyard on San Francisco Bay—the birth of Mare Island. Other notable ships launched in August at Mare Island include the submarines TANG and SILVER-SIDES, which rank in the first 10 of U.S. submarines in tonnage of enemy shipping destroyed.

FARRAGUT MONTH

Although it was on Sept. 16, 1854, that David G. Farragut and family arrived in Mare Island, August was an important month in his life. Just a few days ago, Aug. 5, the nation observed the 100th anniversary of Farragut's entry into Mobile Bay—the day he uttered the immortal words: "Damn the Torpedoes! Full Speed Ahead."

An interesting fact came to light this week—and your editor admits his inability to give you an explanation. One hundred years ago—Aug. 4, 1854, the local shipyard and all federal establishments in the bay were closed, with holiday pay, pursuant to a

proclamation by President Lincoln asking it be observed as a day of thanksgiving. Several hours of research have failed to produce an answer to the obvious question.

It was on Aug. 4, 1869, that Admiral and Mrs. Farragut returned to Vallejo for an official reception. Actually, they had arrived a few days earlier and had gone quietly to White Sulphur Springs (now Blue Rock Springs) for a rest. Let us read from the Vallejo Chronicle of Aug. 5, 1869:

“Adrn. D. W. Farragut came into Vallejo Wednesday evening from the Springs where he had been retired for a day or so to recruit his health. The City Council and a committee of citizens welcomed him at the City Hall, with the principal address given by Paul K. Hubbs. In his reply, the admiral included these words: `Of the national matters of which you speak I have, I know, done my duty. Thrown upon a whirlwind of startling events, it has been so that I have been sometimes railroad-like,. sometimes meteor-like, flashed from one extraordinary scene of excitement to another, so intense of purpose, so welcoming any success or failure, that language fails me to present to you any description of what the mind endures under such pressure. The Fiat of the Almighty is seen in the result. The lull now produces an inexplicable sensation of the past. I shall be happy—very much so—to spend with my family some short time among you and get a good rest.”

Then followed a torchlight parade through the streets of the city, headed by W. C. Greeves, John Brownlie, G. Bergwall, P. Lynch, J. Harris and others as marshals.

Several weeks later he was feted at the Union Club in San Francisco. Responding to a toast, he said in part: “Like all persons who have ever visited the West Coast I have become attached to it. My heart is here and I have made up my mind since that glorious achievement, the Pacific Railroad is completed, I shall hereafter visit my old home in California once every year.”

THE DISAPPOINTMENT

But it was not to be. On his return by rail to the East Coast, Farragut was stricken with a heart ailment and taken from the train in Chicago. Later, when able, he continued to his New York home and thence to Portsmouth, N.H. The next year, 1870, he passed away on Aug. 14—another August date!

While spending several weeks in Vallejo the Admiral of the Navy was invited by Rear Adm. T. T. Craven, USN, commandant of Mare Island, to return to the shipyard he had founded. On the morning of Aug. 11 he did so, received a salute of 17 guns from the yard battery, and toured the base in a carriage. There is no record in the Chronicle or shipyard log to tell us what Farragut said on this occasion. Oddly enough, there is a

story that on the same launch bearing the admiral to the shipyard there was a Wells Fargo & Co. Express chest containing \$145,000 in coin to pay off the 1,400 workmen for the month of July.

Our Vallejo community reveres this great naval officer who spent four years in our midst. Born in a farm cabin near Knoxville, Tenn., on July 5, 1801, he rose rapidly as a naval cadet and officer. He served as a commanding officer of a prize vessel at the age of 12; had mastered French, Italian, and Arabic by the age 18; was a most accomplished officer by 20; and became the Navy's first full admiral.

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