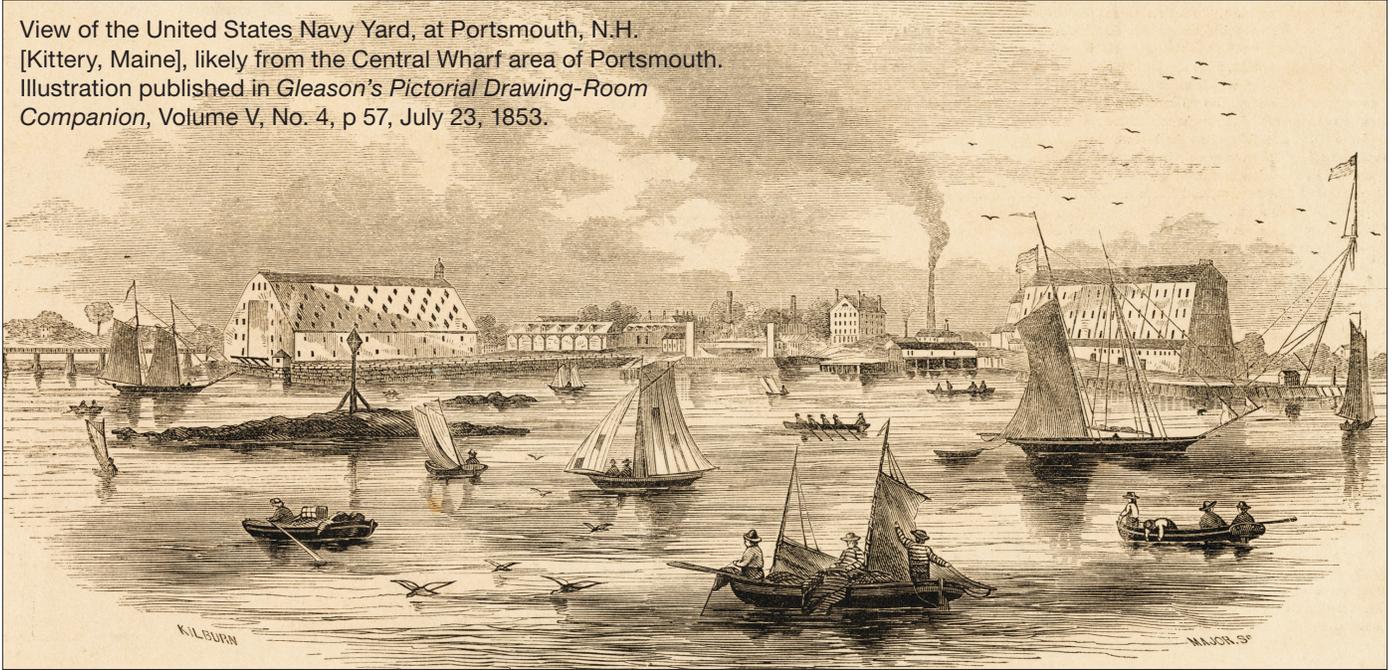View of the United States Navy Yard, at Portsmouth, N.H. [Kittery, Maine], likely from the Central Wharf area of Portsmouth. Illustration published in *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, Volume V, No. 4, p 57, July 23, 1853.

# Portsmouth (Kittery) Navy Yard

## By Gary McQuarrie

PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE, has a long history of shipbuilding from the mid-1600s based on its location and harbor and available sites on several islands and timber resources in close proximity.[1] The British Government selected the port as a location for the construction of ships for the Royal Navy. The establishment of a U.S. Navy yard on Dennett's Island (also known as the smaller of the two Fernald's or Puddington's Islands, or the Lay Claim Island) in the Piscataqua River just across from and northeast of the city of Portsmouth, took place in the first two decades of the 1800s. The island offered a significant quantity of stone for the erection of buildings, as well as some advantages in quick access to the sea, security, and the ability to accommodate more vessels than other sites around the harbor and its nearby islands.[2] The yard was usually referred to in official reports of the U.S. Navy Department and in naval correspondence during the Civil War as the Portsmouth Navy Yard located in New Hampshire—however, the yard was widely recognized in Maine and the New England region as the Kittery Navy Yard, given its actual location in Kittery, Maine, across the Piscataqua from Portsmouth.[3] The common reference to "Portsmouth Navy Yard" was contentious among the residents of Maine.

Dennett's Island was purchased by the U.S. government in June 1800 for the purpose of developing a navy yard on the island.[4] The yard's development began shortly thereafter. In 1812, the yard was formally placed under the command of a naval officer, who acted as the superintendent and was subject to the orders of the commandant of the Boston naval station.[5] The next year,

Commodore Isaac Hull became the first commandant of the yard, transferring from Boston. In 1825, the first bridge from Kittery to the yard was constructed, providing easier access for the numerous carpenters who resided in Kittery.[6] Construction of a Marine barracks at the northeast point of the island was initiated in 1826.[7] The following year, four brick buildings were constructed for officers' quarters.[8] In the two decades that followed, further development of the yard and construction of naval vessels were undertaken. In 1848, Congress authorized the secretary of the navy to contract for the construction of a floating (balance) dock and railway, which was built between the timber dock

and storehouse No. 1 on the west side of the island and was the most expensive and significant engineering work attempted to date on the site.[9] The dock was completed in November 1851 and cost well over $600,000. Additional works of improvement continued during the 1850s.

## Prewar Assessment of the Yard

Captain John Pope, USN, assumed the position of commandant on August 11, 1857.[10] During 1859, the sloops *Portsmouth* and *Mohican* were fitted out and sailed from the yard.[11] A board was convened by the Secretary of the Navy Isaac Toucey to examine several navy yards on the Atlantic coast and report on their condition, defects, and deficiencies. This assessment of the Portsmouth yard thus reflected its condition and needs close to the beginning of the Civil War. The report provided significant detail on all aspects of the yard and noted "The general appearance of the yard is good, and the buildings well adapted for the purposes for which they are intended." The board recommended the purchase by the government of the waterfront of Seavey's Island (the larger of the two Fernald's or Puddington's Islands, also known as Jenkin's Island or Trefethen's Island), next to the navy yard, in part for the future construction of a stone dry dock at the mouth of its narrow separating channel of water (known as "Jenkin's Gut").[12]

In 1860, prospects for the yard were somewhat uncertain.[13] In August, the frigate *Constitution* was ordered to Annapolis to be used as a school ship, under the command of Lieutenant David D. Porter. The sloops *Macedonian* and *Marion* arrived and were put out of commission and placed in ordinary. The saluting battery on the wall near the timber dock was built and the guns mounted. On October 1, 1860, Pope was relieved as commandant by Captain George F. Pearson, USN.[14] In December, *Cumberland* was fitted for sea and sailed for New York. Based on the review board's report, the potential purchase of the whole or part of Seavey's Island gained momentum and steps were undertaken during the year to assess the feasibility of its acquisition.[15]



Commodore John Pope, USN, retired, circa 1864. Photograph by Black & Case, Boston, Massachusetts. Pope served as commandant of the Portsmouth Navy Yard from August 1857 to October 1860. NH 47378 courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command.
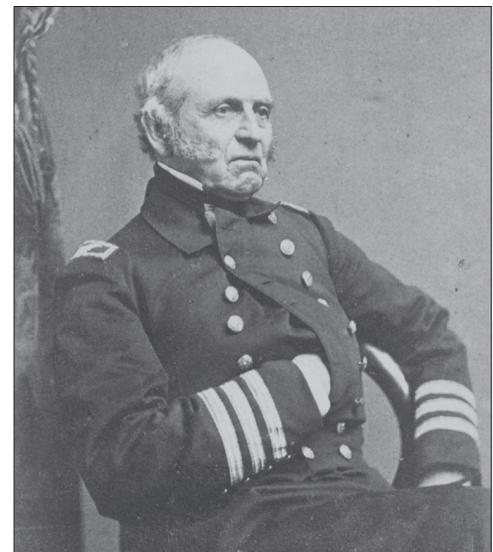


Captain George F. Pearson, USN, circa late 1850s or early 1860s. Pearson served as commandant of the Portsmouth Navy Yard from October 1860 to September 1864. NH 47444 courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command.

Map of the city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1850, created from original surveys by Henry Francis Walling, Civil Engineer and published by C.W. Brewster. Collections of Maine Historical Society, MaineMemory.net Item 35631. Map shows location of the navy yard, on what was known as Dennett's Island, in relation to the city and Kittery. Seavey's Island is labeled as Jenkin's (or Trefethen's) Island on the right edge of the map, and is actually larger than the island on which the yard was established.

## Wartime Yard Operations

By January 1861, appropriations for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1861, were nearly exhausted, and by April fewer than 100 men were employed.[16] But on April 27, Pearson and other navy yard commandants received orders that put their yards on a war footing.[17] The earthworks on the southern end of Seavey's Island (Fort Sullivan) were armed with two 8-inch smoothbore Rodman guns, and a rendezvous to recruit men for the Navy and Marine Corps was opened at the yard. In October and November, the officers and workmen of the yard donated $3,441 to the aid of newly organized New Hampshire and Maine volunteers.[19] Work at the yard surged. By December, over 1,800 workmen were employed.[20] The frigates *Santee* and *Sabine* and sloops *Dale* and *Marion* were rapidly fitted for sea and sailed, and keels for the screw steam sloops *Kearsarge* and *Ossipee* and the side-wheel double-ender *Sebago* were laid. *Kearsarge* was launched in early October, and *Ossipee* and *Sebago* during November. Keels for the double-enders *Mahaska*, *Sonoma*, and *Conemaugh* and the screw steam sloop *Sacramento* were also laid.[21] *Mahaska* was launched in December, while the other vessels were all launched in the first half of 1862, as was the side-wheel double-ender *Sassacus*. In addition, the steam frigates *Colorado* and *Minnesota* and the sailing sloop of war *Constellation* were repaired during the year.[22] *Kearsarge* would become perhaps the most famous of the vessels constructed at the yard for her sinking of the Confederate raider CSS *Alabama* in 1864. Funds were requested for the next fiscal year to build a hospital on the grounds to adequately care for the sick.[23] Most of the significant increase in expenditures at the



Detail of Map of the city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1850, created by Henry Francis Walling. Collections of Maine Historical Society, MaineMemory.net Item 35631. The detail area shows the state of infrastructure at Portsmouth Navy Yard in 1850. Most of the existing infrastructure at that date had been constructed from the 1820s to the 1840s. The floating (balance) dock and railway shown were contracted for in November 1848 and completed in November 1851.

yard in 1861 were for works of improvement on many facilities and were financed by balances of previous appropriations that had been unspent.[24] The land on Seavey's Island was not purchased, but temporary hospital buildings were erected.[25]

During the calendar year 1862, minimal authorized works of improvements were completed.[26] Unfortunately, for the fiscal year from mid-1862 to mid-1863, political and legal circumstances hindered the purchase of land on Seavey's Island and so prevented progress on the erection of the much-needed permanent hospital.[27] Chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs, U.S. Senator John P. Hale of New Hampshire, was extremely displeased that the Chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks had not followed an act of Congress

# Portsmouth (Kittery) Navy Yard



Paymaster's Building, Navy Yard, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, September 1860. Courtesy of Naval Historical Foundation Raymond Stone Collection. The foundation for this building was laid in 1827 and its construction was completed in late 1833. NH 46552 courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command

authorizing the purchase of the land for the hospital and thereby delayed its construction, and wrote to the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, to request the law's enforcement.[28] For the 1862-1863 fiscal year, similar amounts were appropriated for improvements and repairs as in the prior fiscal year, plus funds for the purchase of land for the planned hospital on Seavey's Island.[29] Slightly less than half of the appropriated funds were expended in the period for improvements and repairs, though total expenditures exceeded $100,000, five times greater than the prior fiscal year.[30] Approximately 1,200 to 1,800 men were employed plus contractors to install the machinery in vessels during the fiscal year.[31]

During the calendar year 1863, the steamers *Pawtuxet*, *Shawmut*, and *Nipsic* were built and launched, and the frigate *St. Lawrence*, bark *Fernandina*, and screw sloops *Alabama*, *Dacotah*, and *Agawam* were repaired and fitted for sea and the keel of the ironclad *Massachusetts* was laid (though the vessel was never launched).[32] In addition, Fort Sullivan was rebuilt by the Navy and Marines based at the yard, with a battery of eleven 8-inch smoothbore Rodman guns installed to protect the yard from potential Confederate naval attacks that might get past Forts Constitution and McClary (on the Maine side), which guarded the

approaches to Portsmouth at the mouth of the Piscataqua River.[33] Just over 100 contrabands from Hampton Roads, Virginia, under the command of white officers, were ordered to garrison the renovated fort, and temporary barracks were erected on Seavey's Island to house them.[34] They served until approximately May 1864, when they were transferred to serve aboard the recently launched *New Hampshire* (the former ship of the line *Alabama*, refitted out as a storeship), and were replaced by Company C from the Maine Coast Guard Infantry who manned the fort until the war ended.

During the calendar year 1864, the yard was filled with 1,400 to 2,500 workmen and the wharves crowded with vessels.[35] The sloop of war *Vandalia* was ordered to the yard as a receiving ship for recruits. During the fiscal year ending June 30, 1864, a number of works of improvement were completed, including construction of a much-needed water reservoir to provide water for the constant use of steam engines, the large number of workmen, and to fill the tanks of steam vessels (though an additional reservoir was proposed for the next fiscal year to meet continued growing needs).[36] Another fiscal year had passed and there was still no resolution regarding the site and construction of a permanent hospital.[37] Though a supporter of the Navy and the Portsmouth Navy Yard, Hale was a severe critic of Welles and of potential corruption and the rapidly rising budget of the Navy Department. In early January 1864, Hale called for a wide-

ranging Select Committee investigation into the condition of the navy, the manner of its procuring supplies, and the conduct of the department generally.[38] In late May, he gave a lengthy speech to the U.S. Senate regarding "Frauds in Naval Contracts."[39] During the year, work was performed on 24 vessels, including a ship of the line, screw frigates and sloops, side-wheel steamers, ordnance tugs, and a double-turreted ironclad (*Augmenticus*).[40] The largest ship ever built at the yard, the screw frigate *Franklin*, was launched in September.[41] That same month, Acting Rear Admiral Theodorus Bailey, flag officer for the East Gulf Blockading Squadron, relieved Pearson as commandant of the yard, and he remained in that position until October 1867.[42] The screw sloop *Contoocook* was launched in December.[43]

From mid-1864 to mid-1865, expenditures at the yard reached just over $202,000 for repairs and improvements, the highest of any fiscal year during the war, and the number of workmen exceeded 2,000 for a 7-month period.[44] During the first half of 1865, the number of workmen at the yard reached its wartime zenith.[45] In April, a salute of 100 guns was fired from the yard by order of the secretary of the navy in honor of the fall of Richmond and the surrender of General Robert E. Lee's armies. With the war having ended, a large number of vessels arrived at the yard and were put out of commission and sold, though construction of ships on the stocks was continued.[46] Despite the end of the war, expenditures for repairs and improvements for the fiscal year mid-1865 to mid-1866 reached just over $250,000 at the yard, which included $105,000 for the purchase of Seavey's Island, a longstanding objective which was finally consumated in early November 1866.[47]

## Legacy

The Portsmouth Navy Yard underwent considerable development under the challenging wartime conditions of the Civil War and contributed significantly to U.S. naval shipbuilding and repairs. Many of the ships built at the yard participated in significant naval engagements and campaigns during the war. Of historic note, Admiral David G. Farragut died at the residence of the yard's recently appointed commandant, Commodore Alexander M. Pennock, in late summer 1870 while vacationing.[48]

The present-day yard, identified by the U.S. Navy as Portsmouth Navy Yard at Kittery, Maine, is located on what is *now known* as Seavey's Island, which was originally five separate islands



Captain Theodorus Bailey, USN, circa 1860s. Bailey served as commandant of the Portsmouth Navy Yard from September 1864 to October 1867. NH 56068 courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command.

(Dennett's, Seavey's [the largest of the five], Pumpkin, Jamaica, and Clark's [presently attached to Seavey's by a causeway]) that became conjoined to provide adequate space for the growing yard. Beginning in World War I, the yard took on the new role of constructing submarines in addition to the overhaul and repair of surface vessels. After World War II, the yard became the Navy's center for submarine design and development. The yard continued constructing submarines until 1969. Today, it is one of four active public navy shipyards in the U.S. and is focused on the overhaul, repair, and modernization of the Navy's nuclear-powered submarine fleet.[49]

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