

Naval Illustrators



Thomas F. Laycock: Sailor-‘Artist’ for Leslie’s

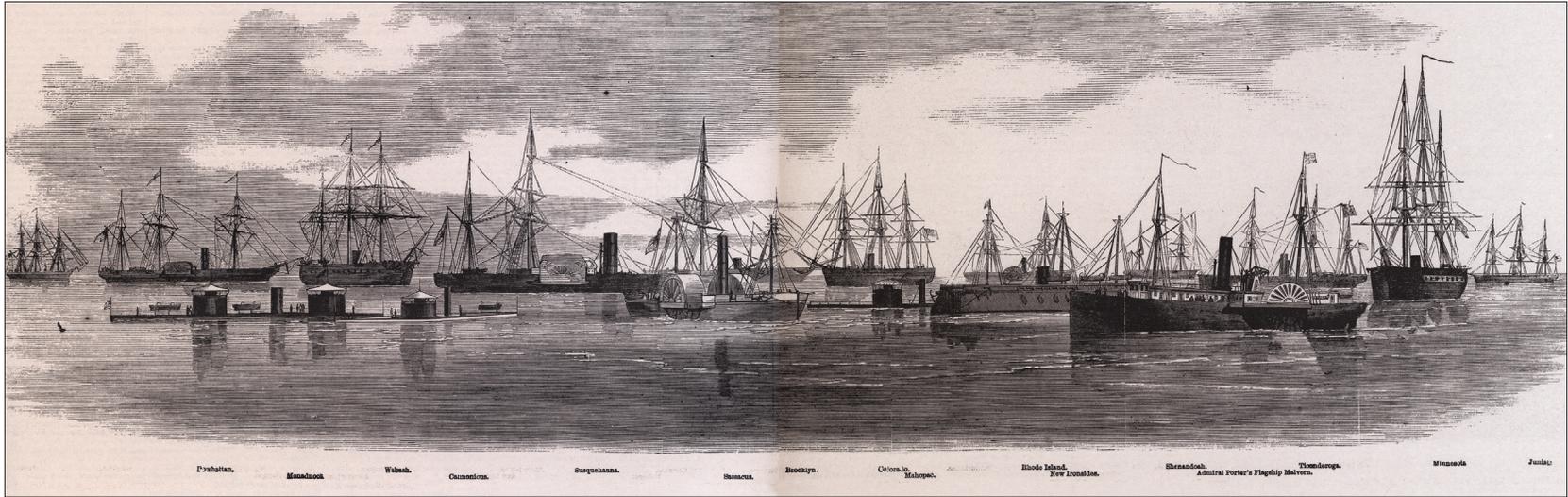
By Gary McQuarrie

THOMAS FRANKLIN LAYCOCK (1840-1898), born in England in 1840, reportedly emigrated to the United States at the age of 11.¹ Details of his youth are not known. In September 1860, when Laycock married Frances E. Rollins in Jersey City, New Jersey, he was residing in New York.² He was appointed an acting master’s mate in the U.S. Navy on January 26, 1863, and was ordered to the New York Navy Yard for instruction in gunnery.³ Laycock was assigned to the bark USS *Pursuit* in the East Gulf Blockading Squadron, off the coast of Florida, serving on that vessel until April 1864, when he was promoted to acting ensign on April 7 and transferred to the side-wheel steamer USS *De Soto*, in the same blockading squadron.⁴ On June 20, 1864, Laycock was detached from *De Soto* awaiting orders and returned to New York; on July 2, he was ordered to serve on the side-wheel frigate USS *Susquehanna*, with the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron.⁵

On October 2, 1864, *Susquehanna* was ordered to proceed to Hampton Roads, in anticipation of the formation of an expedition to attack Fort Fisher,

North Carolina.⁶ While at Hampton Roads just before departing for the first attack on Fort Fisher, Laycock submitted two sketches of the fleet vessels and troop transports to *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, a practice encouraged by the editors of the illustrated newspapers seeking drawings for potential illustrations to be published. These sketches were published as two-page spread illustrations in the December 31, 1864 issue of *Leslie’s* (shown nearby), approximately a week after the failed first attack on the fort. Laycock was praised by the commanding officer in his official report for his management of the third division of the ship’s batteries during the initial attack.⁷

For the order of the second attack bombarding Fort Fisher in January 1865, *Susquehanna* was assigned to the Second Line of vessels to bombard the fort.⁸ Between bombardments of the fort on January 13 and 15, *Susquehanna* fired approximately 900 shot and shells, with one 150-pounder Parrott rifle bursting after firing 88 times during the action.⁹ The vessel also provided 75 sailors and Marines who participated in the ground



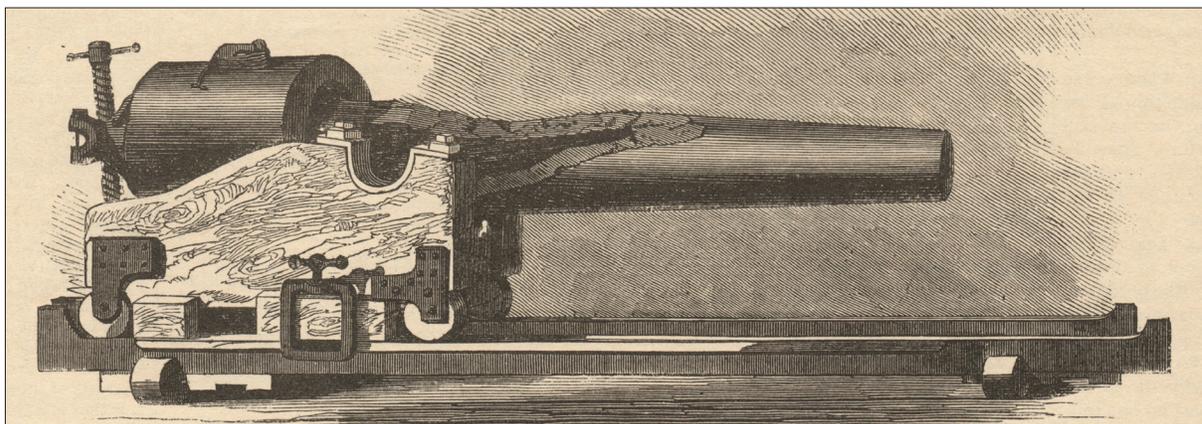
The Principal Ships of the Great Naval Expedition under Admiral Porter, Lying at Anchor in Hampton Roads, Dec. 12.—From a Sketch by [Acting Ensign] T.F. Laycock [USS *Susquehanna*]. Illustration published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, Volume XIX, No. 483, p 232-233, December 31, 1864.



GREAT NAVAL EXPEDITION UNDER ADMIRAL PORTER—SCENE IN HAMPTON ROADS, VA.—EMBARKATION OF UNION TROOPS ON BOARD U. S. ARMY TRANSPORTS, DEC. 13th.—FROM A SKETCH BY T. F. LAYCOCK.

Great Naval Expedition under Admiral Porter, Scene in Hampton Roads, Va.—Embarkation of Union Troops on Board U.S. Army Transports, Dec. 13th.—From a Sketch by [Acting Ensign] T.F. Laycock [USS *Susquehanna*]. Illustration published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, Volume XIX, No. 483, p 232-233, December 31, 1864.

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Parrott Gun on the U.S.S. *Susquehanna*, Burst During the Bombardment of Fort Fisher.—From a Sketch by [Acting] Ensign [Thomas F.] Laycock [USS *Susquehanna*]. Illustration published in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, Volume XIX, No. 489, p 321 (front page), February 11, 1865. Laycock described the event: “As soon as our Commodore saw what the Mound battery was about, he ordered the 150-pound Parrott rifle trained upon it...Bang! went the rifle, and every eye was strained for the result. The shell burst over the gun on the mound, killing some of the men at the gun, and cutting away the flagstag. ‘Well done!’ cried the Commodore. ‘Now let her have it again.’ Again the gun was loaded and trained, and the lockstring pulled, then came a terrific explosion, and each one looked to see what was the matter. I saw the splinters fly, and thought one of enemy’s shot had struck at the moment of firing the gun. But as soon as the smoke cleared away we found the gun was burst, the piece that was blown out of the top of it having struck the fore yardarm, cutting it clean off. Not a man was hurt, however, except a fireman, who got a slight scratch on the head by a splinter.” (p 331)

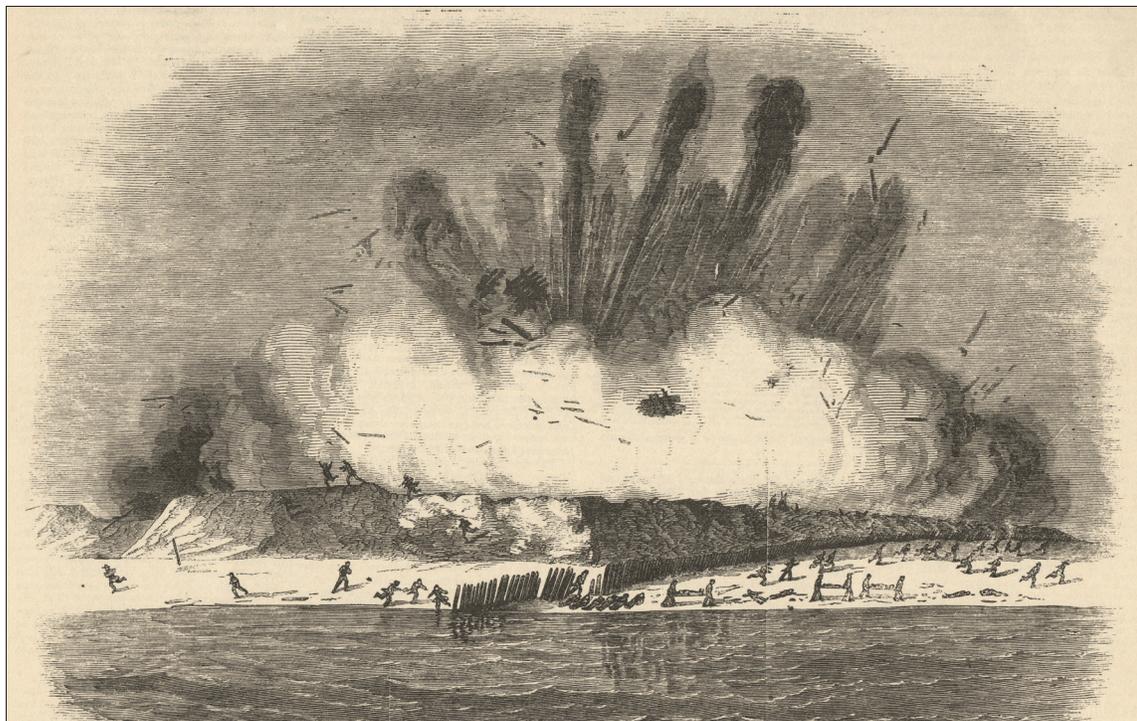
assault.¹⁰ As with the first attack, *Susquehanna’s* commander praised Laycock in his official report for the acting ensign’s actions in managing his division of batteries.¹¹ After the attack and capture of the fort, on January 19, Laycock submitted four sketches with a letter to *Leslie’s*, including a sketch of the Second Line of vessels firing during the bombardment on January 15 that was published as a two-page spread illustration in the February 11, 1865 issue of *Leslie’s* (shown nearby).¹² The same issue contained two front-page illustrations of the burst Parrott gun and the January 16 explosion of the powder magazine in the fort after its capture based on the sketches provided by Laycock (shown nearby). The subject of the fourth sketch, which was not published, is not known.

Laycock’s illustration of the Second Line of vessels firing in the bombardment of the fort was the basis for the well-known Endicott & Company’s (New York, New York) chromolithograph of the bombardment published the same year (1865) (see p 6 of this issue). On January 17, *Susquehanna* was ordered to proceed, in company of USS *New Ironsides*, back to Hampton Roads to await further orders.¹³

On March 20, Laycock was promoted to acting master.¹⁴ On April 5, 1865, Laycock was detached from *Susquehanna* and returned to New York while awaiting orders; on April 17, he was ordered to the receiving ship *North Carolina*.¹⁵ On June 28, Laycock was detached and granted three months’ leave of absence.¹⁶ On October 3, he was assigned to the double-turreted monitor USS *Tonawanda*, but the order was revoked on December 2.¹⁷ Laycock was honorably discharged from the navy just weeks later on December 27, 1865.¹⁸

Laycock returned to New York, living in Brooklyn with his wife and their young son, William (born in 1861), listing his occupation as engineer in the 1865 New York Census.¹⁹ Laycock was divorced in July 1869 and awarded custody of his son.²⁰ Postwar, Laycock was subsequently employed as a sign painter and described his occupation in the city directories as painter. On February 28, 1874, while painting a sign at 764 Broadway, he fell from the roof of a four-story building to the sidewalk, fracturing his pelvis and severely injuring his right knee and ankle.²¹ He was transported to Bellevue Hospital where he remained for three months recovering on a water bed. After being discharged, Laycock was taken by his brother Joseph to

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Explosion of Powder Magazine in Fort Fisher, Near Wilmington, N.C., After Its Capture by the Federal Forces, Jan. 15.—From a Sketch by [Acting] Ensign [Thomas F.] Laycock [USS *Susquehanna*]. Illustration published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, Volume XIX, No. 489, p 321 (front page), February 11, 1865. Laycock described the explosion: "...At half-past seven next morning [January 16] the magazine of the fort [the main magazine in the rear of the northeast bastion] blew up, killing and wounding 200 of our men. It is not known what caused the explosion, but it is supposed it was caused by a torpedo placed there for that purpose by the rebels, for there are several of them lying about. Gen. Terry is going to make the prisoners remove them, so that if one explodes it will kill them and not our own men." (p 331)

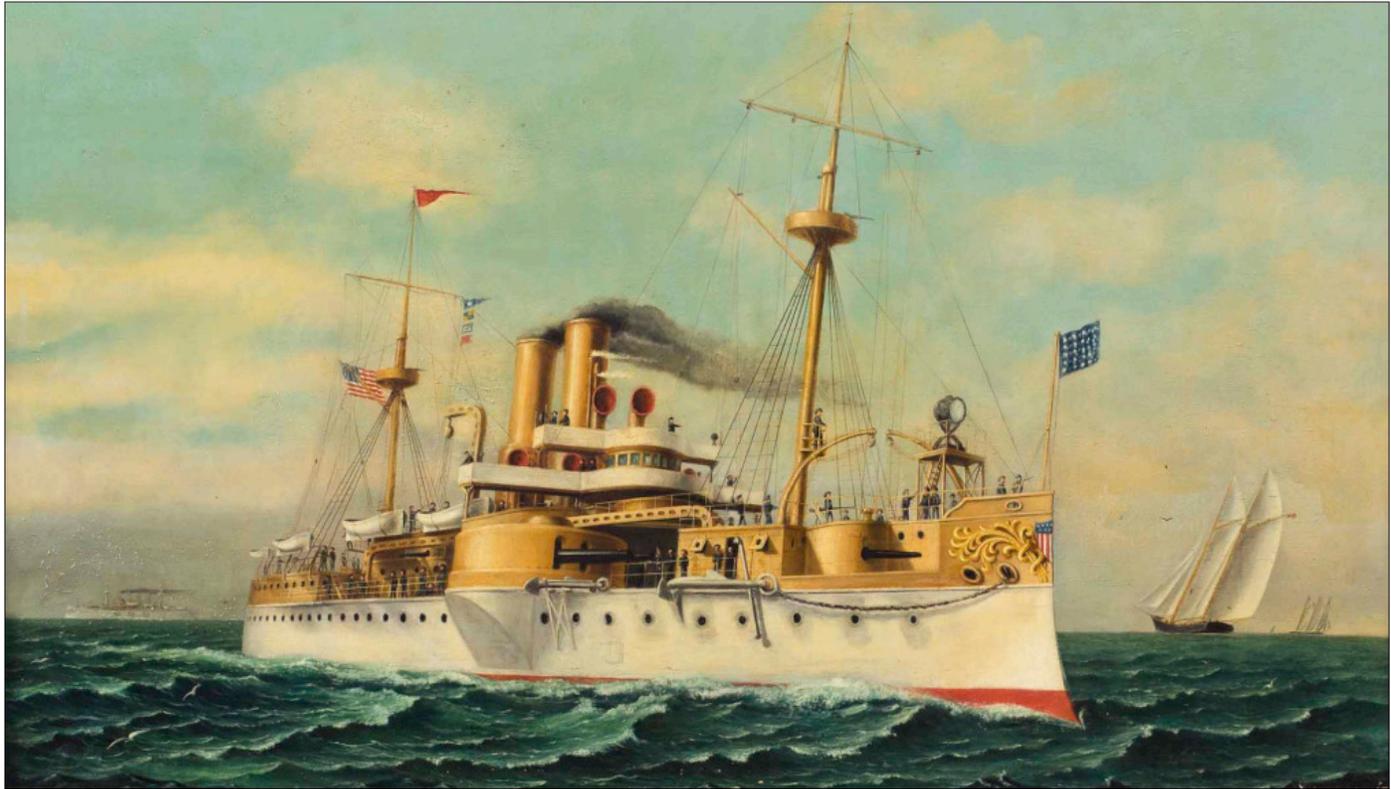
his home at Marinette, Wisconsin, to be cared for while recovering.²² Laycock required the use of crutches for about two to three years to walk and a cane thereafter to assist his mobility, and suffered the remainder of his life from pain related to the injuries.

After recovering at his brother's home, Laycock relocated to Reno, Nevada, in 1876.²³ There, he supported himself as an artist, establishing a studio and sign painting business, displaying paintings (including portraits), and decorating churches, theaters, and opera houses throughout the state, and became well-recognized statewide as an artist of considerable talent.²⁴ Around 1880, Laycock painted his only apparent extant landscape of Yosemite Falls (shown nearby), now part of the Yosemite National Landscape Art collection. The Yosemite Museum also holds an oil painting by Laycock entitled *Indian Family in White Man's Clothing on Banks of River*. Laycock unsuccessfully ran for public office

several times for Washoe County's recorder and auditor, but successfully as an assemblyman for the state legislature in 1884.²⁵ While living in Nevada, Laycock married Effie R. Loomis on June 21, 1882.²⁶ In 1883, Laycock became a draftsman for the U.S. Surveyor-General for Nevada,²⁷ and in 1884, its chief clerk (serving until 1886).²⁸ To memorialize the 1885 death of Ulysses S. Grant, in 1886 he painted *Crossing the River* (oil on canvas, 36 x 60 inches, signed and dated lower right, sold from a private collection by Heritage Auctions, 2024), an unusual depiction of Grant being ferried across the river by an ancient boatman and being greeted by Abraham Lincoln and other former presidents to the kingdom of heaven (not shown).²⁹ Though very detailed and complex in composition and symbolism, the painting received relatively little attention. In 1887, the Laycocks apparently had a son, Eddy, and relocated to Los Angeles, California.³⁰

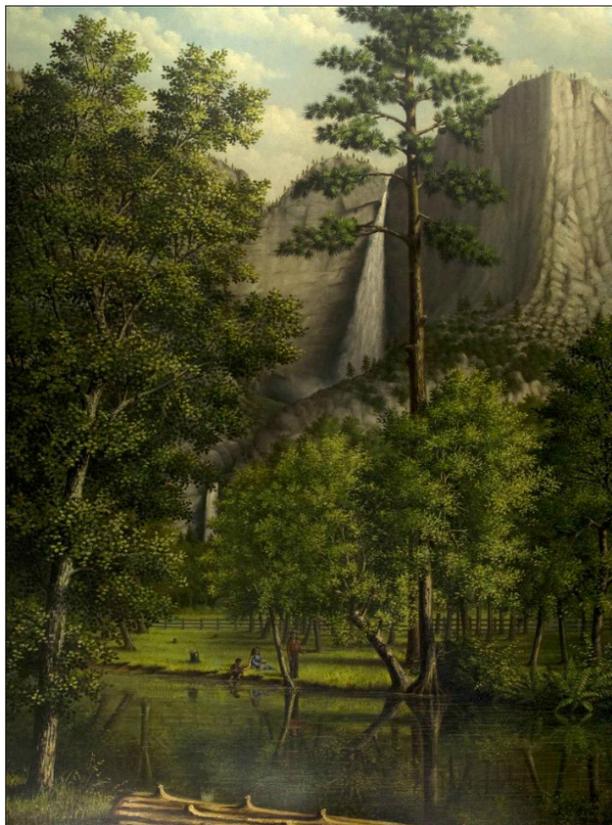


Bombardment of Fort Fisher, 1888. Oil-on-canvas painting by Thomas F. Laycock, 36.25 x 72 inches, signed by the artist and dated in lower left. The painting was sold at auction in 2017 and may be in a private collection. Laycock painted at least one other version of this battle scene in 1877 ("At the Pavilion," *Weekly Nevada State Journal* (Reno, NV), October 20, 1877, p 1, col 4). Image from christies.com.



The Maine, 1898. Oil-on-canvas painting by Thomas F. Laycock, 54 x 78.5 inches (including frame, not shown), signed by the artist and dated in lower right. Laycock completed the painting just months before he died. The painting was sold at auction in 2017 and may be in a private collection. Image from christies.com.

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Yosemite Falls, circa 1880. Oil-on-canvas painting by Thomas F. Laycock, 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Yosemite National Park (YOSE 23998), National Park Service. This may have been Laycock’s only extant landscape painting.

While living in Los Angeles, Laycock continued painting and spent considerable time involved with veterans’ association activities. During 1888, he revisited his original wartime drawing of the Battle of Fort Fisher, January 1865, to create a now well-recognized painting of the battle (shown nearby). The Laycocks were divorced the following year on October 26, 1889.³¹ On March 30, 1892, Laycock married Eliza (Rome) Murray, his final marriage.³² In 1896, Laycock became a deputy county treasurer.³³ In 1898, he painted one of his best-known works, *The Maine*, depicting the second-class battleship that had been sunk in the harbor at Havana, Cuba, in February, contributing to the outbreak of the Spanish-American War.³⁴ Her commander at the time of her sinking, Captain

Charles D. Sigsbee, USN, became acquainted with Laycock from the second attack on Fort Fisher, having served on USS *Brooklyn* as an ensign during the battle; while there, the two young officers became aware of their shared interest in drawing and became friends.³⁵ Laycock had originally intended to raffle *The Maine*, but one of the friends he entrusted to sell the raffle tickets pocketed and spent the monies collected on personal needs. When Laycock died unexpectedly, his wife cancelled the raffle and an assistant district attorney tried to help the widow collect the lost monies.³⁶

Laycock died after a rapid decline in health from acute diffuse hepatitis on August 8, 1898, at the age of 58.³⁷ He was buried in Evergreen Cemetery, Los Angeles.³⁸ Laycock was considered a very genial fellow, widely popular in fraternal circles, and was a longtime and very active member of the G.A.R., the Independent Order of Foresters, and the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, as well as other social clubs during the course of his life. Laycock was also a longstanding First-Class Companion of the MOLLUS California Commandery.³⁹

Whether Laycock received any formal art training is not known, but his artistic abilities were clearly evident by his early 20s. Though a minor contributor of drawings for illustrations in *Leslie’s*, his illustrations related to the Battle of Fort Fisher in January 1865 were given prominence in that illustrated newspaper. Indeed, his illustration of the Second Line of vessels bombarding the fort on January 15, 1865, was used as the basis for a widely circulated chromolithograph of the battle by a well-recognized New York publisher of lithographs, ensuring him a historic recognition of his artistic abilities and eyewitness wartime documentation. Laycock ultimately became successful as an artist and painter during his postwar life and was a very active supporter of veteran associations until his untimely death.

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Gary McQuarrie is Managing Editor of *Civil War Navy—The Magazine* and resides in Indialantic, FL.