

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 55
Number 1 *Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol 55,*
Number 1

Article 5

1976

The United States Navy Comes to Pensacola

George F. Pearce



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Pearce, George F. (1976) "The United States Navy Comes to Pensacola," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 55: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol55/iss1/5>

THE UNITED STATES NAVY COMES TO PENSACOLA

by GEORGE F. PEARCE*

THE PRESENCE OF the navy has been a factor in the history of Pensacola almost since the moment that Florida became an American possession in 1821. The action by Congress in 1825 of selecting Pensacola as the location for a navy yard put Secretary of the Navy Samuel L. Southard, and ultimately the commissioners whom he appointed to determine the site for that establishment, in an unenviable position. Acting under pressure from Congress, the secretary ordered the commissioners to Pensacola before a study by the government to ascertain the most suitable location for a navy yard on the Gulf of Mexico had been completed. Thus, they, like Congress earlier when it chose the location, had little professional advice to guide them in their selection of the site. For that matter, it was subsequently learned, there was no suitable place in Pensacola Bay for a navy yard; the primary function of which was to build and repair ships. Indeed, its lack of natural advantages even precluded the fulfillment of the limited criteria Secretary Southard established to guide the commissioners in making their selection.¹ Even so, in the long

* Mr. Pearce is associate professor of history, University of West Florida, Pensacola.

1. Two subsequent reports accurately described the natural obstacles which would preclude the establishment of a successful navy yard in Pensacola. In a report to Secretary of the Navy John Branch in July 1829, Navy Commissioner John Rodgers suggested that before additional improvements be made at the Pensacola yard both he and President Andrew Jackson should further investigate the yard's capacity to protect American commerce and suppress piracy in the Gulf of Mexico and the West Indies. Among other things, Rodgers pointed out "the difficulty of ingress and egress at all times; the sterility of the soil in the vicinity of the yard and for forty miles in every direction [it could never support a large population]; the impossibility of preserving salted provisions and bread for any great length of time; and more particularly the high prices of labor and provisions, and the uncertainty and difficulty of obtaining mechanics and laborers from time to time, as the exigencies and nature of the service to be performed may render expedient." If the President and secretary considered these circumstances, Rodgers concluded, they would "perceive that Pensacola, as a naval station, neither possesses by nature nor can be made by artificial means to supply, in an

run, the site selected under conditions laying stress on haste, proved to be propitious for the navy's future needs, and consequently established a long, friendly, and profitable relationship between the Pensacola community and the navy.

On February 3, 1823, the Florida Legislative Council petitioned President James Monroe and the United States Senate for improvements in the territory, among which were improved fortifications at Pensacola and the establishment of a naval station at that place. Its commodious harbor, the petition contended, was superior to all others on the Gulf of Mexico. The depth of the channel into Pensacola Bay was sufficient to let all but the largest vessels enter, and its location was easily defended by forts San Carlos de Barrancas and Santa Rosa. Furthermore, "a single fortification, strongly and judiciously built" on the highlands in the rear of the town, would protect it in every direction "from the inroads of the enemy by land." These advantages, the petition continued, combined with the "salubrity of its, atmosphere and mildness of climate," and its proximity to the trade routes in the Gulf of Mexico, would make it an invaluable asset

essential degree any of the requisites called for in . . . the operations of a naval force. . . ." Rodgers to Branch, July 3, 1829. *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, 4 vols. (Washington, 1834-1861), III, 358. In 1889 the Navy Department ordered that the present site of the Pensacola Navy Yard "would have to be abandoned or closed for construction purposes (building and repairing ships) as it is no longer safe from the high powered guns of a fleet in the Gulf. . . ." Therefore, a navy commission was appointed to select a new site either farther up the bay above Pensacola or elsewhere along the Gulf coast. Two sites in the bay, Gaberonne and Bohemia, attracted the commission's attention. An examination of them proved disappointing, however. Tests showed that "the character of the ground is unsuitable for . . . heavy buildings and excavated docks and basins, and that the cost of a dry dock and dredged channel to the sites would be excessive." The commissioners also agreed that there was a general "lack of labor, both skilled and unskilled," and that Pensacola's geographical isolation made it extremely difficult to procure "supplies of materials of all kinds." As a result of these findings, the commission concluded, it could "not recommend a site for a naval dock-yard at Pensacola Bay." *House Executive Documents*, 51st Cong., 1st sess., no. 2721, pp. 185-88. Many of these same defects, in addition to its exposed position, applied to the present navy yard and largely explained why from the beginning it had been a navy yard in name only. With the exception of two sloops-of-war built—but not outfitted—in 1859, the yard's inadequacies restricted its function largely to minor repair work and supply activities. Nonetheless, as if destined, indecision in Washington over its fate permitted it to survive, though somewhat precariously at times, under the misnomer of navy yard until 1914. On January 20, 1914, the name was changed to Pensacola Naval Aeronautic Station. This change ushered in a new, exciting, and perhaps more meaningful age for the facility.

in war and peace. "Although engineers have been appointed to make a survey of the harbor," the petition stated in concluding, "it is to be hoped that the suggestions of your memorialists may not be considered obtrusive, but . . . as the offspring of a lively interest in the welfare of this Territory and of the United States."²

This appeal found the President and Congress in a receptive mood. Addressing Congress on March 30, 1824, Monroe emphasized the importance of a strong navy to defend the country and to preserve peace.³ The Secretary of the Navy concurred with this view and called for more naval establishments along the East Coast and the Gulf.⁴ With such recommendations coming from high officials, rumors soon circulated that Pensacola would become the major naval depot of the South. These rumors were strengthened when, on April 15, 1824, the Navy Commissioners' Office informed Secretary Southard that the commissioners "are decidedly of [the] opinion that it would be advisable to establish a naval depot on some part of the coast of Florida, as near the mouth of the Mississippi as a suitable site for such an establishment can be found."⁵ Two weeks later, on April 28, Southard informed Senator James Lloyd, chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs, that the commissioners believed it inexpedient to establish a navy yard at Charleston, South Carolina, until further information had been procured. The secretary also told the senator that "The station at New Orleans has ceased to be useful . . . ; it is impossible to use it at all as a place for building or repairing vessels; and its distance from the Gulf, and the difficulty of the navigation of the river, render it useless for supplies." Southard then reiterated the commissioners' belief that a naval depot on the coast of Florida was "indispensable for the economical and efficient management of that portion of our navy which is employed in the West Indies and Gulf of Mexico."⁶

2. Memorial of Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida to President James Monroe, submitted to the Senate, February 3, 1823, *American State Papers: Miscellaneous*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1834-1861), II, 1025-27. East and West Florida became a territory of the United States upon the ratification of the Adams-Onís Treaty in 1821.

3. U. S. Congress, *Register of Debates in Congress*, 14 vols. (Washington, 1825-1837), I, 11-16.

4. *Ibid.*, 738.

5. Rodgers to Southard, April 15, 1824, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, I, 951-52.

6. Southard to Lloyd, April 28, 1824, *ibid.*, 951.

On February 2, 1825, in the waning days of Monroe's administration, a bill authorizing a navy yard and depot at Pensacola was introduced in Congress.⁷ Later that month, on the twenty-fifth, the naval bill passed the Senate.⁸ The House gave its approval on March 3, 1825.⁹ This action was taken by the government despite the fact that it had not yet received the results of a study begun in 1822 by the navy commissioners and Army Board of Engineers to determine the most suitable site for a navy yard on the Gulf Coast. Furthermore, recommendations from the Navy Commissioners' Office in April 1824, were largely ignored. The commissioners agreed that Pensacola possessed "more of the advantages necessary" for a naval establishment "than any other place . . . on the whole coast of Florida," even if she did not afford, "at all times, a sufficient depth of water for larger vessels than frigates of the first class." The commissioners recommended "that the harbor of Pensacola be regularly surveyed, by competent officers of the navy, and of the engineer corps of the army, to determine its advantages, before any permanent establishment shall be commenced."¹⁰

Apparently, Tampa Bay was the only other site in contention with Pensacola for the navy yard. Army topographical engineers had been directed to make surveys of the bays, of the surrounding ground, and a chart of the soundings at both sites. The death of the officer assigned this duty for Tampa Bay, however, suspended their execution there, evidently permanently. A member of the Army Board of Engineers wrote on September 19, 1825, that this work was about to be completed at Pensacola. In closing, however, he remarked that "Pensacola does not seem to be possessed of the same local advantages which led the naval commissioners and the [army] board of engineers to recommend . . . naval depots

7. *Pensacola Gazette and West Florida Advertiser*, February 26, 1825.

8. *Register of Debates*. I. 686.

9. *Ibid.*, 738.

10. Rodgers to Southard, April 15, 1824, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, I, 951-52. The Board of Navy Commissioners was created by an act of Congress in 1815. Three captains (then the highest rank in the navy) comprised the board. They were appointed by the President with the consent of the Senate. Under the "superintendence" of the Secretary of the Navy, the commissioners were to "discharge all ministerial duties" of the secretary's office. In addition, they were to provide "other information and statements" as the secretary "may deem necessary." Quoted in Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776-1918* (Princeton, 1939), 92.

of the first class upon our Atlantic maritime frontiers.” Those yards needed no artificial defenses in their vicinity, he explained. “But the state of things is different at Pensacola. There a navy yard will find itself in the same predicament as most European navy yards; that is to say, near to the sea shore and easy of access by land.” Therefore, it would require an expensive system of fortifications for its protection.¹¹ Five months earlier, on March 3, and obviously without professional advice, Congress had given its approval to locating the yard at Pensacola.

Prior to Pensacola’s selection as the location for a yard, the recently-established West India Squadron operated from Thompson’s Island in the Florida Keys. The squadron cruised the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean in search of pirates who preyed on the lucrative traffic radiating from New Orleans, the commercial outlet of the Mississippi Valley. On May 24, 1825, Secretary Southard informed Commodore Lewis Warrington, commander, that for reasons of health and efficiency all stores and forces “now at Thompson’s Island” were to be removed to Pensacola. The site selection for the naval facility at Pensacola had not yet been made when Warrington received the secretary’s order. Nevertheless, until such time as the new establishment was ready, Warrington was directed to use nearby Fort Barrancas and the adjoining barracks and houses which the army, at the request of the War Department, had agreed to relinquish to the navy. The transfer of the squadron to Pensacola did not, cautioned the secretary, alter its duties “protecting our commerce,” and “watching attentively the movements of the pirates” in the West Indies and Gulf of Mexico.¹²

In September, Secretary Southard informed Commodore Warrington and Captains William Bainbridge and James Biddle that they were commissioned to proceed to Pensacola and “select a site for a naval establishment.” Southard stated that he would rely on their “judgement and discretion,” but reminded the commissioners to keep in mind “the disadvantages which have resulted from the injudicious location of other yards.” He listed

-
11. Brigadier General Bernard to Major General A. Macomb, September 19, 1825, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 7 vols. (Washington, 1834-1861), III, 158-59.
 12. Southard to Warrington, May 24, 1825, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, II, 109-10.

expense, accessibility, and practicability of defense as the most important criteria governing site selection. So that their report could be completed by the Navy Department prior to the meeting of Congress in December, the commissioners were ordered to carry out their duties with dispatch.¹³

On Wednesday, October 5, 1825, Captain Bainbridge departed Washington on the steamboat *Potomac* for Norfolk, Virginia, to board the sloop of war *Hornet*, which would carry him, Warrington, and Biddle to Pensacola. Bainbridge arrived in Norfolk after what he described as an "unpleasant passage from excessive hot weather and unsociable company."¹⁴

When the officers visited the *Hornet* the following morning, they "were much disappointed in finding the *Hornet* not ready."¹⁵ After a week's delay, the ship departed Norfolk on October 14. The weather over the next two days was pleasant, but on October 17 squally weather was encountered, and, at times, winds of gale force. "The *Hornet* is a great sea boat," Bainbridge remarked, "but does not sail fast."¹⁶

On the sixth day out of Norfolk, the *Hornet* reached the Florida Straits, the northern passage into the Gulf of Mexico. For three days she plowed her way through high seas on a south-westerly course. In his journal Bainbridge wrote: "Having cruised in the Havana (Florida) Straits during the inclement winter of 1799 and 1800, I can say the sea experienced . . . was uncommonly high for this latitude."¹⁷ At 1:00 p.m. on October 23, the island of Cuba was sighted, and Bainbridge noted "But the weather . . . is so very hasey [sic], [we] can not distinguish the land sufficiently to identify with certainty [sic] the particular part

13. Southard to Bainbridge, Warrington, and Biddle, September 15, 1825, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, II, 110-11. The three officers had brilliant naval records, and had served effectively in the War of 1812. See numerous references in Leonard F. Guttridge and Jay D. Smith, *The Commodores* (New York, 1969).

14. "Manuscript Notes of a Journal of Commodore Bainbridge, U.S.N., of voyage enroute to Pensacola, Fla., as Commissioner appointed to select a site for a Navy Yard at that place (1825) together with brief minutes while there and during return voyage from Pensacola to Washington," p. 1, in Box 533 (PS- Navy Yard and Naval Hospital, Pensacola, Fla., 1825-1877), Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, Record Group 45, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Hereinafter cited as "Journal of Commodore Bainbridge."

15. *Ibid.*, 2. Bainbridge had commanded the *Hornet* during the War of 1812.

16. *Ibid.*, 5.

17. *Ibid.*, 10.

of the island. But presume it is about . . . Havana.¹⁸ On that assumption the *Hornet's* course for Pensacola was set. At 9:00 a.m., Tuesday, October 25, Santa Rosa Island came in view, "a high broken sand hill." Soon "high land with trees was seen over Santa Rosa Island," and the "Light House of Pensacola" was visible.¹⁹ As the *Hornet* sailed in toward land, "a gun was fired, the colours hoisted, and a signal was made for a pilot."²⁰ The *Hornet* successively maneuvered the shallow channel over the sand bar to the entrance into Pensacola Bay. Captain Woodhouse had intended to anchor just inside the bay, Bainbridge noted, but being confronted by a head wind, "we had to beat up the Bay and about 2:06 p.m. came to anchor . . . abreast of the town of Pensacola."²¹

The weather being stormy the following day, the commissioners were unable to commence the examination of the bay. The time was spent "receiving the visits and congratulations of many of the most respectable citizens, and of Colonel Duncan L. Clinch and the officers of the U. S. Army stationed at Cantonment Clinch."²²

When it cleared the next morning, Bainbridge was able to examine the bay above Pensacola, and he found shallow water "at a long distance from the shore." The sailboat which the officers were making the survey in very nearly capsized. "As I cannot swim," Bainbridge stated, "I consider it a fortunate escape as we certainly were for a moment in most eminent [*sic*] danger."²³ When next they went out, the commissioners "hired a schooner." They examined the west shore of Pensacola Bay to Fort San Carlos de Barrancas, and on the opposite side, Deer Point, Fair Point, Town Point, and English and Spanish Coves. "The deepest water was found on that side of the Bay, close to, and to the North of Deer Point." But this site, the commissioners agreed, was "not comparable to a site on the west side of the Bay at

18. *Ibid.*, 11.

19. *Ibid.*, 14.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 15. The records do not reveal Woodhouse's first name. For years, the shallow channel seriously restricted the size of the ships that could enter the bay, and constituted a navigation hazard.

22. *Ibid.*, 16. Military camps were called cantonments and were often named after their commanding officer; thus, Cantonment Clinch.

23. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

Tartar Point."²⁴ They gave the necessary orders for determining the actual depth of the water at specified distances from the shoreline around the Point. Lieutenant Adams of the *Hornet* was assigned this duty.²⁵ Inspecting the terrain surrounding Tartar Point and nearby Fort San Carlos de Barrancas, the commissioners found that Tartar Point and the area lying to the north and east of it was the most suitable for a naval establishment. They called for sounding to determine the depth of the water on the bar at the bay entrance. Lieutenant Pinkham received this duty, while Lieutenant Adams continued with offshore soundings at Tartar Point and adjacent areas.²⁶

Pensacola's leading citizens decided to hold a public dinner honoring the commissioners, and a committee on arrangements was appointed.²⁷ The affair was held November 2, at the Commercial Hotel. According to a newspaper account,

The room was handsomely decorated with several flags of the different Republics [states] and with a number of splendid copies of the Declaration of our Independence, a good band, furnished by the politeness of Capt. Woodhouse, entertained the company with appropriate music; the company were [*sic*] enlivened & amused by a number of National, Patriotic and convivial songs kindly volunteered by several of the company, and the evening passed with the utmost harmony and regularity, and with great satisfaction to all who partook.²⁸

Bainbridge described it as "an excellent dinner and conducted with the utmost propriety."²⁹ After the opening toast, Bainbridge

24. *Ibid.*, 17. The sites mentioned on the opposite side of the bay were located around the peninsula which juts into Pensacola Bay, or what is the present-day community of Gulf Breeze, Florida. Tartar Point is located on the west side of the bay between Pensacola and the entrance into the bay.

25. *Ibid.*, 18.

26. *Ibid.* The evidence does not reveal the first names of Lieutenants Adams and Pinkham.

27. The committee was composed of Mayor John Jerrison, F. H. Nisbet, Major Thomas Wright, David C. Pinkham, Colonel John de la Rua, Major Samuel R. Overton, and Peter Alba. *Pensacola Gazette and West Florida Advertiser*, November 5, 1825.

28. *Ibid.*

29. "Journal of Commodore Bainbridge," 19.

thanked the assemblage on behalf of himself and his fellow officers.³⁰ This was followed by thirty-six other toasts.³¹

The commissioners began preparing their report for the secretary of the navy. Lieutenant Pinkham had found that twenty-one feet was the minimum depth of water on the bar at low tide, and that the tide rose about three feet. Adams had also submitted his findings which were incorporated.³² According to the commissioners report,

The Bay of Pensacola is extensive and capacious, easy of access from the sea, and affording secure anchorage for any number of vessels of the largest class. The depth of water on the bar... is twenty-one feet. From the report to us . . . at least this depth of water, we believe, will always be found on the bar. . . . The ordinary tides do not rise more than three feet; but these tides run with considerable rapidity; thus affording facilities to vessels working in or out of the harbor against an unfavorable wind.

The position we have selected as in our judgment combining the greatest advantages for a navy yard, is in the vicinity of the Barancas [*sic*], and to the northward and eastward of Tartar's Point.

Here we found the necessary depth of water nearest the shore; an important consideration in respect to the expense to be incurred in carrying out the wharves required for naval purposes. Here too the works erected for the defense of the navy yard, would give additional security to the harbor, while its vicinity to the Barancas [*sic*] would admit of assistance to it in case of need, from the troops stationed there. Here, we are . . . susceptible of complete defence, at a less expense than elsewhere within the bay. The position is wholly protected, by Tartar's Point, against the swell of the sea, which strong southerly winds set over the bar.

. . . Its healthiness is not surpassed by any other part of the bay, and fresh water is there abundant, and of a wholesome quality.

Other positions, in other parts of the bay, have engaged our attention; but, upon mature consideration, we are unanimously of the opinion that the position which we have designated, is the most eligible under all circumstances, and combines the greatest advantages.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Pensacola Gazette and West Florida Advertiser*, November 5, 1825.

32. "Journal of Commodore Bainbridge," 19.

That part of your instructions which directs us to purchase the land, we are not necessitated to act upon, as the site we have selected already belongs to the government.³³

On Sunday, November 6, Bainbridge wrote: "We, the Commissioners, are ready for a departure and only waiting for the *John Adams* to carry us to the Chesapeake. Expect to sail tomorrow."³⁴ Two days earlier Commodore Warrington had appointed Navy Lieutenant Archibald S. Campbell naval storekeeper and directed that he "take charge of the store[s] belonging to the Navy at Pensacola."³⁵ He also had seven marines from the frigate *John Adams* transferred ashore as a guard for the navy yard.³⁶

On the day before their departure, however, Bainbridge described his impressions of Pensacola:

The Town . . . has a population of about 1400 souls. It has evidently been [much the same] since the [yellow] fever [epidemic] of 1822 which caused many to remove from it and prevented others from coming to it from apprehension of the return of the fever. But . . . [the] panic has in great measure subsided, and the place is now reviving. It has a mix[ed] population of Americans and Spanish who altho[ugh] not . . . [opulent] are hospita[ble] to strangers and harmonial [*sic*] among themselves. From natural causes, it can not be otherwise than healthy. [Being] . . . situated in sandy soil that retains no moisture, [it] has no marsh or stagnant water to generate a miasma or noxious affluvia. Very pure and wholesome water [is] in abundance, and the prevalent winds blowing from the sea . . . [produce] a fine atmosphere.

The land for 60 miles to the north and east of Pensacola, I understand, is similar to that near the town which is sandy and barren— producing nothing but pine and live-oak. . . . As Alabama becomes more populous, and that population . . . extends itself to the head of the fine waters of Pensacola Bay, this place will be abundantly supplied from that quarter.

It has at present, a most excellent fish and beef market, and the inhabitants cultivate in their small gardens a tolerable supply of vegetables. Fruits are scarce, owing to the want of

33. Bainbridge, Warrington, and Biddle to Southard, November 4, 1825, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, II, 111.

34. "Journal of Commodore Bainbridge," 20.

35. "On the claim of Lieutenant Archibald S. Campbell, of the Navy, for extra pay while acting as naval storekeeper at Pensacola, in 1825-'26," *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, IV, 216. Warrington returned to Pensacola in April 1826 as the first commandant of the navy yard.

36. Pensacola Naval Air Station *The Gosport*, November 10, 1939.

cultivating them. [The] . . . grapes, I understand, flourish well here. And so should the fruit orange, [if] raised in well selected situations.³⁷

At 10:00 a.m. on Monday, November 7, the *John Adams* weighed anchor and sailed in company with the *Hornet*. At first there was a favorable wind for crossing the bar, but as the vessels neared the western end of Santa Rosa Island, the wind changed directions and became light. The ships anchored until noon the next day. When they were able to get underway again, the *Hornet* sailed over the bar without incident, but the *John Adams* in the same manuever “knocked off her rudder, and [did] some injury to her keel and stern.”³⁸ Bainbridge remarked:

There were several most violent thumps. Three of which were extremely hard and one amidship appeared to have broken her in two. I have never know a ship to strike as violently as the *John Adams* did this day and escape from destruction and the loss of all the lives on board— it appears almost a miracle.³⁹

The *John Adams* continued the voyage in the tow of the *Hornet* until the damage was repaired.⁴⁰

Secretary of the Navy Samuel L. Southard submitted the commissioners’ report to the President on December 2, 1825, stating that “Should it meet your approbation, immediate measures will be taken to erect the necessary buildings, and make the improvements.” President John Quincy Adams approved the measure on the following day.⁴¹

37. “Journal of Commodore Bainbridge,” 20-22.

38. *Ibid.*, 23.

39. *Ibid.*, 25-26.

40. “Journal of Commodore Bainbridge,” 28-29.

41. Southard to Adams, December 2, 1825, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, II, 111.