



The Legacy of Commodore David Porter: David Farragut—The Civil War Years *Part Two of a three-part series*

Vice Admiral Jim Sagerholm, USN (Ret.), October 19, 2020
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David Farragut | National Portrait Gallery

When Virginia seceded from the Union in April 1861, David Farragut proclaimed his continuing allegiance to the Stars and Stripes and moved his family to the North.

His birth in Tennessee and the residence of his sisters and brother in New Orleans caused some to question his loyalty. But the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, liked what he saw in Farragut: "He was attached to no clique, . . . was as modest and truthful as he was self-reliant and brave . . . and resorted to none of the petty contrivances common to some . . ."

Thus, when looking for an officer to command the capture of New Orleans, Welles chose Farragut, even though Farragut had no experience commanding more than one vessel.

The principal defense for New Orleans from threats via the Gulf were Forts Jackson and St. Philip, located some 40 miles south of the city. It was generally believed that wooden-hulled ships would at best be severely damaged if not sunk in trying to run past the formidable artillery of a fort. Farragut was one of the few who thought otherwise. In addition, his foster brother, Commander David Dixon Porter, proposed assembling a squadron of gunboats, each armed with a 13-inch mortar that could hurl a 200-pound shell 3 miles, claiming that they could reduce the forts sufficiently to permit Farragut's ships to run past them with minimal damage. Porter's proposal was approved and work commenced on assembling the ships and gunboats, a task confronted with numerous obstacles such as lack of coal for the steamers, hulls, and steam plants in need of major repairs, and convincing his ships' captains that they could indeed run the artillery gauntlet posed by the forts. In addition, General McClellan had to be persuaded to provide a force to occupy and hold New Orleans.

Undaunted, Farragut took up his duties with his usual energy and perseverance and, after several delays caused by poor support in various quarters, the force was ready. On April 18, 1862, Porter moved his mortar boats into position and commenced firing one round per mortar every ten minutes. During the night, the rate of firing was reduced to one round per mortar every half hour.



"The Splendid Naval Triumph on the Mississippi, April 24th, 1862," published by Currier & Ives, 1862 | U.S. Navy Art Collection

For the next six days and nights, the bombardment continued, hurling a total of 16,800 rounds. The shelling drove Confederates from their guns whenever grape and canister was used, but the damage to the forts was minimal.

On the night of April 20, under cover from the mortar barrage, Farragut sent two gunboats upriver where they managed to break the heavy chain that spanned the river several hundred yards below the forts. On the 23rd, Farragut informed Porter of his intention to make the run past the forts that night. Porter requested one more 24-hour period of shelling, granted by an increasingly impatient Farragut who could see no significant damage to the forts.

Shortly after midnight on April 24, the crews were awakened and at 0155. Farragut's flagship, USS *Hartford*, hoisted two red lanterns, the signal for the 17-ship force to get underway. Led by *Cayuga*, one by one the ships weighed anchor and slipped into line as they moved upstream. *Cayuga* passed the forts undetected, but seeing that *Pensacola*, for some reason, had stopped at the forts, *Cayuga* also stopped. About this time, a sentry on Fort Jackson spotted *Cayuga* and sounded the alarm. Within a few minutes, the guns of both forts were engaged in firing at *Cayuga* and *Pensacola*.

Farragut's orders directed the ships to pass by the forts one at a time, keeping the forts engaged with their guns as they passed. Once all were above the forts, the troops were to be landed from the transports and move on land in parallel with the ships on the way to New Orleans. *Pensacola's* skipper misunderstood Farragut's orders, thinking that he was to fully engage in shelling the forts, which required the ship to stop in order to engage as many guns as possible. By doing so, he lost the advantage of being a moving target. Porter brought up five of his mortar boats that commenced firing grape, canister, and shrapnel shells. At the same time, Farragut kept the ships of his force moving while they also were firing grape and canister. All this, together with the ensuing smoke from burning powder, considerably reduced the effectiveness of the Confederate gunners, and, except for *Cayuga* and *Pensacola*, the ships suffered very little damage as they passed the forts.

The last line of defense for New Orleans was 14 small gunboats that were quickly scattered by Farragut's ships, and Farragut took New Orleans without any further opposition on April 25.

Farragut's success at New Orleans made him a national hero. His subsequent victory at Mobile Bay proved that New Orleans was no fluke, and sealed the way for Farragut to be the first permanent admiral in the United States Navy.



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