

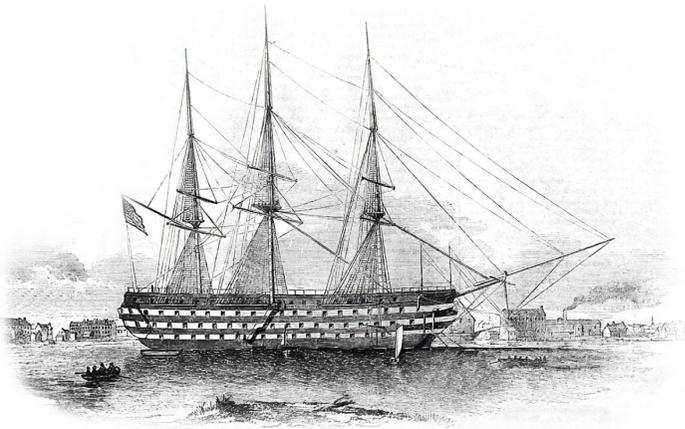
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# ***A CRISIS OF LOYALTIES***

## ***The Destruction and Abandonment of the Gosport Navy Yard***

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**Stephen Chapin Kinnaman**



Series in American History



VERNON PRESS

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Cover design by Vernon Press.

Images on the front cover: Destruction of the United States Navy-Yard at Norfolk, Virginia.

Image on the back cover: Plan of the Harbor of Norfolk and Portsmouth, 1861.

To my maternal grandmother,  
Massie Moore Chapin,  
an ardent Virginian.



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# INTRODUCTION

A good number of accounts have been written about the dramatic events surrounding the destruction and abandonment of the Gosport Navy Yard in the opening days of the American Civil War. Often employing its modern name, the Norfolk Navy Yard, these treatments have usually formed chapters of books on related subjects or have appeared as articles in periodical publications. One can also find books about the history of the Norfolk Navy Yard, the town of Portsmouth, Virginia, in which it was located, and plenty of titles on the duel of the ironclads, *Monitor* and *Merrimack*. But try and find a focused, book length treatment of this traumatic moment in U.S. Navy history and it will soon be discovered that the shelves are bare.

The lack of a definitive treatment leaves a gap in our understanding of the compelling stories behind the yard's loss, each full of colorful characters reacting to complex events, all so easily left out of shorter versions. The brevity of narrative has enforced a homogeneity of accountability for an outcome forged by many clashing, individual decisions. And it also avoids a full assessment of the lingering questions about just what happened at Gosport. For example, the largest and most valuable man-of-war in the yard, the steam frigate *Merrimack*, was stranded and ultimately burned to her waterline in the chaos that overwhelmed Gosport. Why was she not timely removed to a place of safety? The navy yard's commandant, Charles Stewart McCauley, made a last-minute decision to scuttle his most vulnerable ships. What motivated this drastic act and was it justified? Two senior U.S. Navy officers, Commodores Paulding and Pendergrast, were present at Gosport during the days leading up to the navy yard's abandonment and destruction. What roles did they play in its fate? Newly minted Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles was sworn into office less than seven weeks before Gosport was put to the torch. What responsibility should he bear for the loss of the Navy's premier dockyard? And would any of these questions matter if *Merrimack's* hull had been truly destroyed, and her reincarnation into the ironclad that battled *Monitor* had never happened?

The story of the loss of the Gosport Navy Yard has deep roots, embedded in the impending crisis that swept the United States and triggered South Carolina's secession and the creation of the Confederacy. When the fledgling Lincoln administration entered the scene in March 1861, the cracks in the Union were too large to paper over. New to their jobs, the president and his cabinet struggled to cope with rapidly unfolding events. Symptomatic of their internal turmoil was a pair of uncoordinated naval expeditions to relieve the besieged Forts Sumter and Pickens. The first failed miserably and when the action was over, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles had learned the lesson that the Navy's priorities took a second place to those of the Lincoln administration. Topping the list of losers was the Gosport Navy Yard.

Greatly complicating President Lincoln and Navy Secretary Welles' jobs was Virginia, the state that was home to the Gosport Navy Yard. It was also a slave state wracked by indecision over whether it should remain loyal to the Union or embrace its southern brethren and join the Confederacy. Each measure the federal government took to suppress the rebellion exerted its equal and opposite reaction on the State Convention delegates convened in Richmond to determine the Old Dominion's future. Stirring up the delegates' ire over Lincoln's every move was ex-Governor Henry Wise, a vocal advocate of his distinctive doctrine of "fighting in the Union." Wise's exhortations soon morphed into a personal insurrection aimed by his conspirators at federal installations in Virginia. The Gosport Navy Yard was one of their prime targets.

Meanwhile, at Gosport, Commodore McCauley presided over the nation's most valuable navy yard, a facility staffed overwhelmingly by officers hailing from Virginia. Such a preponderance of Southerners in a dockyard located within a large Virginian seaport was not considered unusual, but with sectional fissures tearing at the nation's fabric, these were not normal times. This Southern clique possessed a hierarchal power to sway every decision their commandant made, and in the days leading up to Virginia's secession, they invisibly played their hand to its fullest. Some called their behavior treasonous and there is merit to that argument. But before rendering judgment, put yourself in their shoes and consider the existential decision they faced as their states formally declared their severance from the old Union. The searing question for each of them was: *treason to whom?* To their flag? Or disloyalty to their families, neighbors and home state? Whatever choice they made carried with it some degree of betrayal.

Now back to the navy yard. With the principal background elements in place, the well-known version of events leading up to the fall of the Gosport Navy Yard can be traced. It begins with the old and feeble Commodore

McCauley and his indecision that resulted in the steam frigate *Merrimack's* departure from Gosport being denied despite Engineer Isherwood's heroic efforts to repair her machinery. Then came news of Virginia's secession which sparked the mass exodus of nearly all of his officers. Meanwhile, Commodore Pendergrast, flag officer of the Navy's Home Squadron, sat idly by, avoiding active participation in the downwardly spiraling events. And soon enough McCauley's exaggerated fear of secessionist militia seizing the yard exerted its grip, triggering his ultimate act of desperation, the scuttling of his ships. Only hours later the arrival of Commodore Paulding and his Massachusetts Volunteers on the steamer *Pawnee* heralded relief. But they were too late and, regrettably, Paulding had no option other than to finish off the job McCauley had begun. The Navy's finest dockyard and over a thousand valuable naval guns were abandoned that night to the rebels, eleven of its warships put to the torch and the yard burned as Paulding's force escaped. And Commodore McCauley was judged by the court of public opinion to be responsible for the yard's loss.

But every one of these actions, many baffling and others confounding, flowed from a decision made by someone in charge based on what they knew at the time. A closer scrutiny of the motivations behind each of these decisions and actions has produced a clearer understanding of the events that culminated in the yard's destruction. Careful examination of the principal officers' backgrounds gave a deeper insight into what was in their minds during the hours leading up to the navy yard's burning. This combined focus has yielded a more nuanced explanation of McCauley's decision to hold back *Merrimack*, of Paulding's rush to burn the yard and run, and of opportunities for success missed by all three commodores present.

With any national disaster—and the loss of the Gosport Navy Yard in April 1861 was nothing less—it is mandatory to examine the roles of the responsible persons in charge. At the apex of leadership stood the Lincoln administration and more specifically, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. The secretary has been awarded high marks for his efficient management of the Navy Department during the stressful years of the Civil War, and rightfully so. But in his first days on the job under a new administration struggling to find its way, he made mistakes. In the wake of the disaster at Norfolk, there is the appearance if not evidence that he discouraged any further inquiries into the loss of the Gosport Navy Yard, an event judged by a renowned naval historian as “one of the greatest blunders of the war.”

Responsibilities and causes aside, the actions that clung to each day of the drama leading up to the burning of Gosport make a splendid introduction to the sectional conflict that followed. The participants'

personalities, their life-wrenching decisions and the sheer historical imprint of what they did makes this story truly one to be savored by those who cherish Civil War history. Allow yourself to live in the world of Commodores McCauley, Pendergrast and Paulding and to experience their weight of command and be gripped by the emotional crossroads that entangled them all—a crisis of loyalties.

Many people encouraged me to write the story of the destruction and abandonment of the Gosport Navy Yard, none more so than my dear wife, Maureen Carroll. A welcome resource deserving praise are the *Norfolk Navy Yard* websites and *History Matters* blog managed by Marcus W. Robbins, historian and archivist. They helped immeasurably. And warm thanks to all of you who remain unnamed, especially those who generously gave their time to review the first draft of my manuscript. Your assistance and understanding made this book possible. Any errors of concept, fact or interpretation, however, are mine alone for which I accept full responsibility.

Stephen Chapin Kinnaman  
Chappell Hill, Texas  
September 2023

\* \* \*

# MAPS

NB: One regrettable feature of these historically interesting maps of Norfolk, Portsmouth, Gosport Navy Yard and the surrounding area is that nearly all of them disregard the standard convention of orienting their view with the north at the top of the image. This makes comparing one map with another more difficult than it should be, and for that, I can only caution the reader to be aware of the true north's bearing.

No. 1 *A Plan of Portsmouth Harbor, 1781*

The subtitle to this map is "Showing the works erected by the British forces for its defense," placing it in the context of the American Revolution. This plan illustrates the relation between Norfolk, Portsmouth and Gosport, the latter two separated by Crab Creek (salt meadow), echoing their English counterparts' similar geography. Mill Point is now Hospital Point; the modern naval hospital stands behind the battery. Only a pair of piers and a lone building hint at the location of the future Gosport Navy Yard. North is toward the bottom of the page (Digital Id <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3884p.ar145700> courtesy of the Library of Congress).

No. 2 *Plan of Operations at Craney Island, 1813*

This map shows the American defensive positions at the Battle of Craney Island, on 22 June 1813. A combination of regular and volunteer army forces bolstered by sailors from the U.S. frigate *Constellation* handily defeated a British attempt to capture Craney Island as a prelude to seizing the frigate. Midshipman Charles Stewart McCauley was among the island's defenders, where he gained a first-hand understanding of how a few determined men could choke movements up or down the Elizabeth River. North is toward the upper right corner (From *Lossing's Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812*, Vol. 2, 679).

No. 3 *Map of the City of Norfolk and the Town of Portsmouth, 1851*

The growth of both Norfolk and Portsmouth seventy years after the Revolution is much in evidence, as is the now substantial footprint of the Gosport Navy Yard. The yard has been enlarged by the acquisition of land to the west but mainly to the south of Andrew Sprowle's original shipyard hard by Crab Creek. Pictures of the yard's main entrance (at Water and Lincoln Streets), the naval hospital's Greek revival façade and the receiving ship *Pennsylvania* are at the top right and center. North is to the left, lower corner (Digital Id <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3884n.ct003082> courtesy of the Library of Congress).

No. 4 Gosport Navy Yard from *Map of the City of Norfolk and the Town of Portsmouth, 1851*

This plan is an enlargement from Map No. 3, focusing on the Gosport Navy Yard. Note particularly the locations of the two enormous ship houses, A and B, at the yard's north end, and the granite-lined graving dock (far left Dry Dock, with entrance jetty walls) at the opposite side. The orderly, grid-like arrangement of the yard's many houses, shops and sheds is very evident. Officers' quarters, including the commandant's, stand along the yard's north Lincoln Street wall. The Elizabeth River's south branch provides ample sheltered water to moor warships in ordinary. Part of the St. Helena annex is visible on the bank opposite the ship houses (Detail from Map No. 3).

No. 5 *Plan of U.S. Navy Yard, Norfolk, Va., 1828 to 1860*

Lull's Plate 2 published in 1874 represents the U.S. Navy's "approved plan" of the Gosport Navy Yard's grounds up to November 1860, three months after Commodore McCauley assumed the yard's stewardship. Little of substance has changed since 1851. Although not indicated in this plan, the massive sheer legs, or "sheers", used to hoist guns and other heavy weights in and out of ships stood on the edge of the wharf between Ship Houses A and B. North is to the left (From Edward P. Lull. *History of the United States Navy-Yard at Gosport, Virginia (near Norfolk)*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1874, Plate 2).

No. 6 *Panorama of the Seat of War, Bird's Eye View of Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and the District of Columbia, 1861*

The map was chosen to emphasize the connections through the Chesapeake Bay and along its tributaries between Norfolk and Washington, Baltimore and Richmond, with Fortress Monroe as their common nexus. The Bay Line's steamers tied all these points together with an integrated network of regular liner service. A fast steamer could cover the 145 miles between Baltimore and Fortress Monroe in under twelve hours. North is to the right (Digital Id <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3791s.cw0002000> courtesy of the Library of Congress).

No. 7 *The Key to East Virginia, 1861*

The focus of this map—the key to East Virginia—is the brooding presence of Fortress Monroe at Old Point Comfort. The fortress dominated the entrance to Hampton Roads and access to all points beyond including Richmond up the James and Norfolk on the Elizabeth. While the waters of Hampton Roads appear wide and inviting, they were fringed with numerous bars, banks and flats that complicated navigation. The Elizabeth River as it passes Craney Island provides a prime example: its narrow channel, marked by a light-boat, is bounded by Craney Island flat and Bush's Bluff shoal. Gosport Navy Yard is shown on the river's left bank just below the map's bottom border (Digital Id <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3880.cw0545000> courtesy of the Library of Congress).

No. 8 *Plan of the Harbor of Norfolk and Portsmouth, 1861*

This visually pleasing plan was published only a month before the destruction and abandonment of the Gosport Navy Yard. The broad expanse of the Elizabeth River's southern branch, punctuated by the "J" of St. Helena, is well displayed on this map. Numerous creeks indent the harbor's shoreline and the interconnection of Norfolk, Portsmouth and Gosport by water—the prime medium of nineteenth-century transportation—is obvious to the eye. Regional dominance of Norfolk's maritime infrastructure, if the numbers of named commercial piers are a reliable guide, is most striking. North is to the right (Digital Id <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/glva01.lva00014> courtesy of the Library of Congress).

No. 9 *Military Reconnaissance, Dept. Va., 1862*

This map shows the results of a military survey of the area around Norfolk and the Gosport Navy Yard while still occupied by Confederate forces. The numerous batteries, virtually all populated by guns taken from the navy yard, are highlighted in red ink. It also illustrates the narrow the Elizabeth River ship channel leading into Norfolk and Portsmouth, running south past Sewell's Point and Craney Island. The three-fathom (18 ft) water depth contour graphically indicates how restrictive this waterway was for any deep-draft vessel (Digital Id <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3882h.cw0559000> courtesy of the Library of Congress).

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