



Artist rendering of President Grant delivering diplomas, 1869

A Look Back

The Founding of the United States Naval Academy

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Since 3 September 1845, Commander Franklin Buchanan had been the “first president,” or first Superintendent, of a new Naval School in Annapolis, when he assumed command of what had been known as Fort Severn. A little over a month later, at precisely 1100, on Friday, 10 October 1845, Buchanan “impressively and feelingly” began a speech to the officers, professors and midshipmen assembled before him in a recitation room at the new Naval School. This moment is considered the official birth of the United States Naval Academy.

Who was present in the recitation room on this historic occasion? It is almost certain that the original faculty and staff attended, including Lieutenant

James H. Ward, executive officer and instructor in gunnery and steam; Professor William Chauvenet, instructor in mathematics and navigation; Professor Henry H. Lockwood, instructor in natural philosophy or science; Chaplain George Jones, instructor in English studies, which included geography, history and ethics; Professor Arsene N. Girault, instructor in French; Surgeon John A. Lockwood, instructor in chemistry; and Passed Midshipman Samuel Marcy, assistant instructor in mathematics. Surgeon Lockwood also administered the health of those at the school. After 1850, Ward’s position was known as Commandant of Midshipmen and Chaplain Jones officially became the Academy’s first chaplain.

Unfortunately, it appears that no one took attendance of the students and no record exists in the Naval Academy archives of when each of the 85 midshipmen first ordered to the school actually arrived. Those who have written in the past about the occasion say that there were between 40 to 50 midshipmen who had reported by 10 October. On examining the previous assignments of each of the 85 prospective students in the 1845 annual register of naval officers, 41 were serving in ships that were assigned to home ports or at state-side stations or were home on leave or waiting orders. Ten were new midshipmen who came to Annapolis directly from their hometowns. But 24 of those ordered to the new Naval School at Annapolis were serving aboard ships in distant seas—off Brazil, in the Mediterranean, off Africa or as far as the Pacific. At the time, there were, of course, no airplanes, so instead of days or weeks, it would take months before some of these midshipmen could report to Commander Buchanan at Annapolis. Buchanan wrote as late as 1 January 1846, that there were yet only 56 of the 85 midshipmen assigned who had arrived at the school.

Of the first midshipmen, the majority came from 21 different ships in the fleet. For example, nine were fresh from a cruise in the East Indies Squadron on BRANDYWINE. They had become such good buddies that upon arrival at the school they all were able to room together in the old bakery of Fort Severn, which they appropriately dubbed Brandywine Cottage. The next largest contingency off the same vessel were eight midshipmen off CUMBERLAND. They did not arrive state-side from the

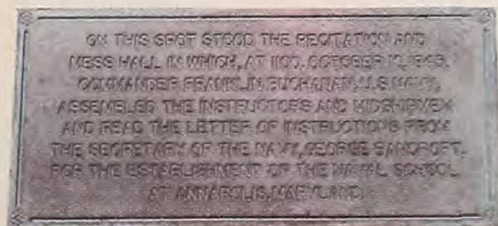
Mediterranean Squadron until November 1845, so they were among those not present at the convocation on 10 October.

There were 27 states in the union when the Naval Academy opened on 10 October. The original 85 students came from 21 of those states, two from the District of Columbia and one from the Iowa territory. Pennsylvania, with 16 midshipmen, and Virginia, with 11, led the states in the geographical origins. There was no one from Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New Hampshire, Rhode Island or from what would become the 28th state in December of that year, Texas.

As mentioned earlier only 10 of the first midshipmen assigned to the school were brand new to the Navy. They became known as the “youngsters.” Of course today they would be called “Plebes.” All the other 75 “oldsters” had been midshipmen in the fleet for three to six years. Those with the longest service record were five midshipmen who came to Annapolis from the former school at the Naval Asylum in Philadelphia. One had entered the Navy in 1838 and four in 1839. These five were most likely having academic problems in preparing for and passing their midshipmen examinations or medical problems. Only two of the five eventually graduated from the Naval Academy.

The largest number of the first students, some 50, had entered the Navy as acting midshipmen in 1840. Of these, 47 passed muster with the Board of

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Plaque on Tecumseh Court

Commander Franklin Buchanan began the occasion by reading a letter from Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft containing the department’s purpose in establishing the school, read the 18 articles of rules and regulations, and then he said:

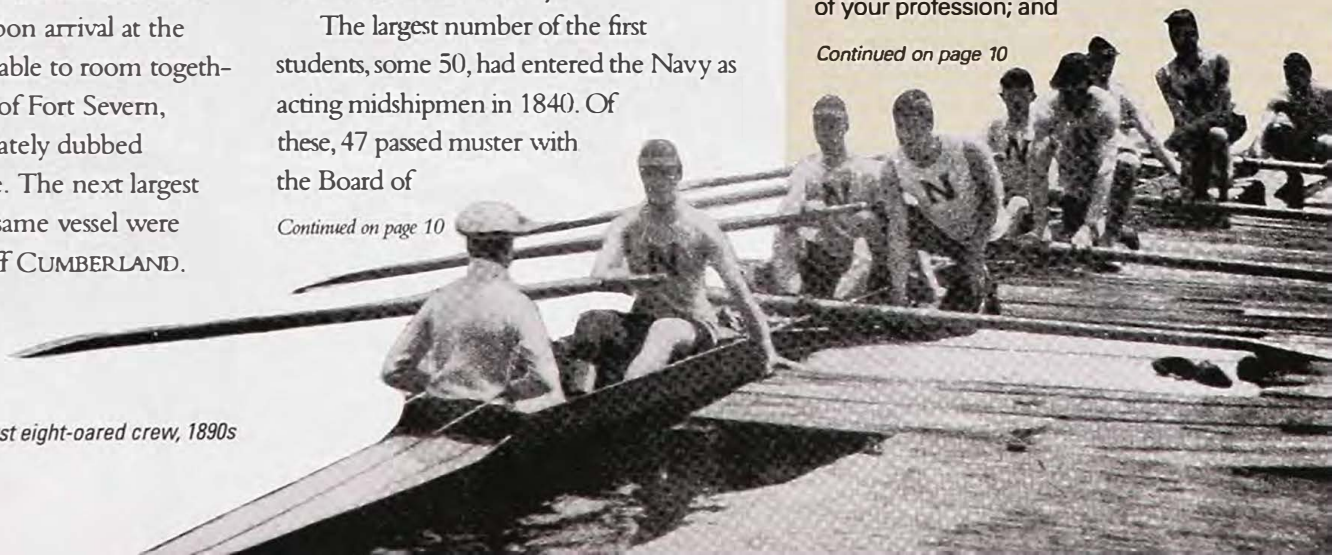
“Gentlemen, in preparing the rules and regulations for the internal government of the Naval School, I have endeavored to confine myself to those points so absolutely necessary to the preservation of good discipline and harmony at an institution yet in its infancy, which we all, I am well assured feel a pride should rank high in the estimation of our countrymen. Those among you who have served several years in the Navy know the value of wholesome law and regulation; and to you I look with confidence for assistance in impressing upon the minds of those youths who have lately entered the service the absolute necessity of obedience.

The Government in affording you an opportunity of acquiring an education, so important to the accomplishment of a naval officer, has bestowed upon you all an incalculable benefit. But few, if any, now in the service have had the advantage that you are about to receive.

The regulations of the Navy require you to pass through a severe ordeal before you can be promoted; you must undergo an examination on all the branches taught at the Naval School before you are eligible to a lieutenancy; your morals and general character are strictly inquired into. It is therefore expected that you will improve every leisure moment in the acquirement of a knowledge of your profession; and

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First eight-oared crew, 1890s



profession; and you will recollect that a good moral character is essential to your promotion and high standing in the Navy.

By carefully avoiding the first step toward intemperance, shunning the society of the dissolute and idle, and by cherishing a wish to deserve and the hope of receiving the approbation of your country, you alone can render yourselves able to occupy with honor the high standing in the Navy to which many of you are destined.

I feel confident that all of you attached to this institution will endeavor to hold a high rank in the service by your application, zeal, intelligence, and correct deportment; and I shall deeply regret to hear that any individual among you has brought disgrace upon himself or upon his associates.

Every indulgence, consistent with the rules and regulations of the institution, will be granted to those who merit it. The laws of the Navy point out the punishment of those who violate orders; and no commander is justified in overlooking offences against those laws, however painful it may be to him to enforce them. There is no discretionary power granted to him, although that power is sometimes exercised from necessity; the responsibility resting with the commander, from which he can only be relieved by the Secretary of the Navy or the President of the United States.

It is at all times an unpleasant duty to a commander to be compelled to punish the misconduct of his juniors; but as an omission on his part to do his duty makes him as culpable as the offender himself, no officer who feels a proper respect for the service or himself will subject himself to so unpleasant a situation. We have no right as individuals to do that which may involve others in our misfortunes; and when we, as naval men, intentionally violate the laws that govern us, we cannot without dishonor to ourselves expect to escape punishment by making others responsible for our crimes.

Having thus briefly given you my views on the subject of discipline, and the importance I attach to a strict compliance with all laws, orders, and regulations, I submit them to you all with the hope that you may be benefitted by them."



Instruction in Electricity, 1890s

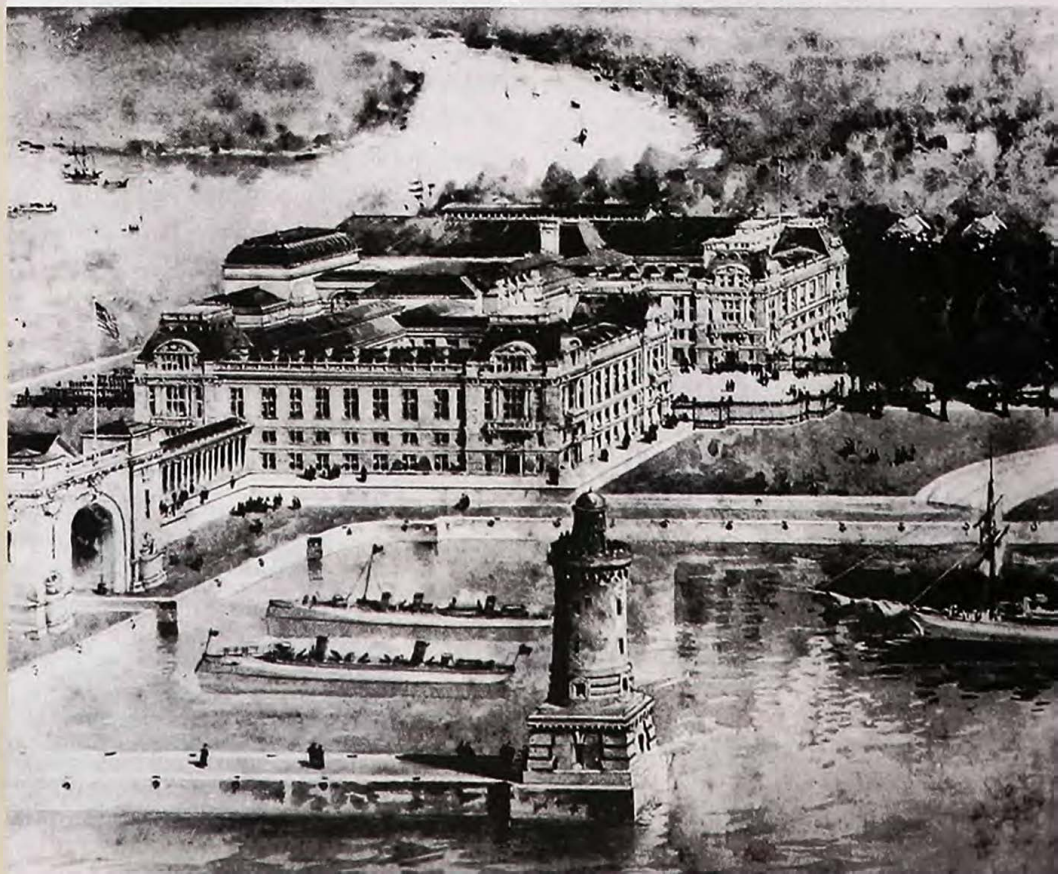
Examiners in June 1846, and were promoted to passed midshipmen on 11 July 1846, becoming the U.S. Naval Academy Class of 1846. The next largest group, some 20, had entered the service in 1841, and 17 of them became passed midshipmen as of 10 August 1847. The diligence of the students and the retention

lieutenants. Of the six non-graduates in this first "Plebe" class three resigned, one was dismissed, one dropped and one just disappeared from the records. It must be remembered that these "youngster" gentlemen were only between the ages of 13 and 16 when they arrived to take their entrance exams.

rate of the school were very good in its beginning.

However, the 10 "youngsters" fared as poorly as the five senior "oldsters." Only four of the 10 graduated in 1851, eventually producing officers who achieved the ranks of one rear admiral, one lieutenant commander and two

Artist's conception of New York architect Ernest Flagg's master plan for a new Academy, 1898



Overall, the first 85 midshipmen ordered to the new Naval School at Annapolis in 1845 produced 66 graduates of whom 14 made flag rank, two became captains, three commanders, two lieutenant commanders, 23 lieutenants, six masters (later the rank of lieutenant, junior grade) and 12 who remained passed midshipmen. Six of them, who were still in uniform in 1861, resigned from the U.S. Navy and went south to serve in the Confederate States Navy. It is surprising today, but supportive of the fact that life expectancy was much less in those days, because of the first 66 graduates 32 percent of them were dead by 1860. Only six of these early graduates made it to celebrate their 50th reunion from the Academy.

Among the midshipmen who were more than likely sitting in the recitation room when Commander Franklin Buchanan opened the school on the morning of 10 October 1845, were five of the first six presidents of the U.S. Naval

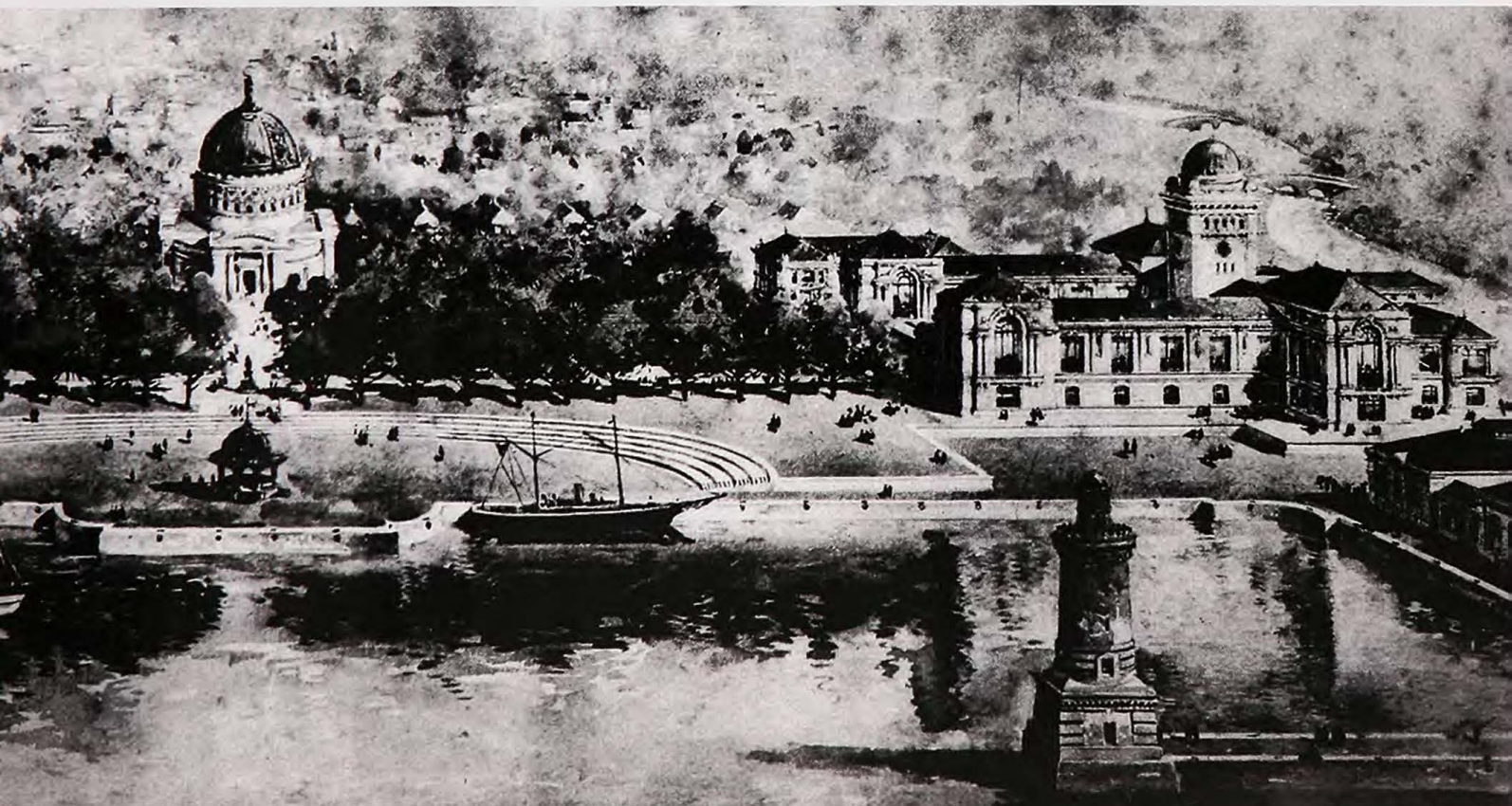
Academy Graduates Association, which was renamed the U.S. Naval Academy Alumni Association, Inc. in 1931. They were Rear Admiral Edward Simpson, Rear Admiral Samuel P. Carter, Captain George A. Stevens, Rear Admiral Earl English and Lieutenant John W. Bennett, all members of the Class of 1846. Their class will probably always hold the record of producing the most leaders of the Alumni Association.

Of these, the most fascinating of the "plank owners" of the school was Samuel Powhatan Carter from Tennessee who came to Annapolis in the early fall of 1845 off MICHIGAN, among the first steam-powered ships in the Navy. Carter would become the only American military officer to be both a major general in the U.S. Army and a rear admiral in the U.S. Navy. Because of his state of origin, he was asked to command loyal Army forces in the bitterly divided state of Tennessee during the Civil War. After the war, he

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In 1886, then-Lieutenant Commander Charles Belknap 1867, formed the U.S. Naval Academy Association of Graduates



returned to the Navy. His service included a tour as Commandant of Midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy, and he retired as a rear admiral. †

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All photos courtesy of Special Collections & Archives Division, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy.

What was happening in our world in 1845?

President John Tyler signed the resolution calling for the annexation of the Republic of Texas.

- Florida became the 27th state in the union.
- Edgar Allan Poe published *The Raven*.
- James K. Polk of Tennessee became the 11th president. (According to George Bancroft, the historian who served as Polk's Navy secretary, the new president set four goals, and if he accomplished them in four years he would only serve one term. Of his four "great measures," Polk lowered the tariff, created an independent treasury, acquired the Oregon territory and acquired California, and then retired at the end of four years of labor. Along with Texas, Oregon and the Mexican cessation, Polk added more land area to the United States than any president in history.)
- Congress for the first time overrode a presidential veto.
- The rubber band was invented in England.
- Sir John Franklin's ill-fated Arctic expedition got under way.
- Henry David Thoreau moved to Walden Pond on 4 July.
- Texas was admitted as the 28th state in the union.
- Famine continued to worsen in Ireland.