

## Retro Ramblings

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There are times when I have been asked, “Where do you get the ideas for your articles?” Sometimes I write about things that I learn about as I travel around our beloved Golden State. Sometimes I write about things that capture my interest. Sometimes there are Brothers who suggest things to me. This time is the fault of the Grand Secretary, who posted on social media that he had cocktails aboard the *Matthew Turner*, a tall ship built by Call of the Sea in Sausalito and modeled after the *Galilee*, built by the actual Matthew Turner in 1891 at his shipyard in Benicia. So, who was Matthew Turner? Why is there a tall ship named after him? What else did he do? What impact did he have on California’s history? Well Brothers, sit right back and let me tell you a tale, not of a fateful trip, but of a boy, born in Ohio, who heard the call of the sea and eventually became a ship captain, the most prolific ship builder of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and the “Granddaddy” of Pacific Coast shipbuilding.

Matthew Turner was born on June 17, 1825 in Geneva, Ohio into a family that owned a sawmill and built lumber schooners to sail on Lake Erie. Matthew designed his first boat, the schooner *G. R. Roberts* which his father built and was launched in 1848. Matthew then took command of the vessel. Matthew’s first wife died in childbirth later that same year. In 1850, while on a voyage down the Mississippi, he heard about the discovery of gold in California and, having nothing to keep himself in the Midwest, decided to join the rush. Turner spent three and a half years mining in Calaveras County and amassed a small fortune.

Turner saw a need for shipping in the Pacific Coast and travelled to New York where he purchased the schooner *Toronto* and brought her out to California. This was the beginning of his career as a Pacific trader and sea captain. Turner purchase other vessels and expanded his trade in cod and other goods to Tahiti and China. In 1868 he had the schooner *Nautilus* constructed in Eureka. Seeking more control over the building of his vessels, he established his first shipyard in 1872, in partnership with his brother, at Mission Bay in San Francisco. There began the long and storied career that led to the building of 228 ships, the most built by any single shipbuilder in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

By 1882, Mission Bay was being filled in so Turner relocated his shipyard to the foot of 12<sup>th</sup> Street in Benicia, where it remained in operation until 1918. While in Benicia, Turner constructed 154 of the 228 vessels that he is responsible for. The Turner shipyard in Benicia was, for some time, the largest private shipyard on the West Coast. The Turner Company also continued to conduct trade throughout the South Pacific. Among the notable ships built by Turner, besides the aforementioned *Galilee* are:

- the *Lurline*, the first ship of Matson Lines,
- the *Benicia*, engaged in the Hawai’i and Australia trade,
- the *J. D. Spreckels*, build for the sugar trade between California and Hawai’i,
- the *Equator*, which was chartered by Robert Louis Stevenson and inspired his book, *The Wrecker*,
- and finally, the *HMCS Karluk*, which served as the flagship for the Canadian Arctic Expedition.

Matthew Turner passed away in his home in Oakland on February 10, 1909. Today he is the namesake of not only the *Matthew Turner* but also Matthew Turner Elementary School and Matthew Turner Shipyard Park located at the site of his former shipyard, both in Benicia. You can visit the site of the

former shipyard at the foot of West 12<sup>th</sup> Street in Benicia. There are remains of the building ways, a California Historic Landmark plaque, a concrete pad that once supported a capstan for hauling and launching ships, a picnic area, and some benches to sit along the shore of Carquinez Strait. The park opens at sunrise and closes at sunset. There is ample parking.

**GETTING THERE:** To visit Matthew Turner Shipyard Park from 414 Mason Street, take Interstate 80 East to exit 30B I-780 toward Benicia. From I-780 take exit 3b onto Military West. Take a right onto West K Street and follow West K to West 12<sup>th</sup> Street. Turn right onto West 12<sup>th</sup> Street.