

# Portsmouth Closure Would End 300 Years of Shipbuilding

by Marsha Freeman

Without a decisive naval force we can do nothing definitive, and with it, everything honorable and glorious.—President George Washington to the Marquis de Lafayette, Nov. 15, 1781

The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, now threatened with closure by the Administration's Base Realignment and Closing program, is the oldest, still-operational naval shipyard in the United States, and the reservoir of some of the most skilled engineering and manufacturing manpower in New England. Known as the "Cradle of American Shipbuilding," it is located on an island in the Piscataqua River, which is the natural boundary between Kittery, Maine, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Closing the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard not only will have a devastating economic impact on the region, but will diminish the military's engineering and nuclear capabilities, and bring to an end a 300-year history of innovative shipbuilding.

At the end of the American Revolutionary War, the new republic was determined to prepare itself for a possible future war with Great Britain. In 1798, the Navy Department was established as separate from the War Department for that purpose. As President, George Washington visited the future site of the Portsmouth Federal shipyard, and the Portsmouth Navy Yard was one of the first of six Federal yards founded by Congress.

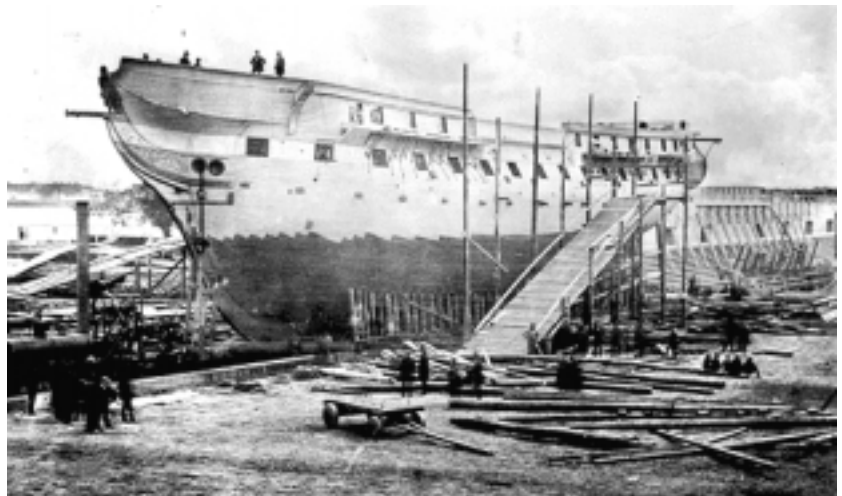
To create the facility, the government purchased an island in the Piscataqua River, which could be heavily fortified and defended from the nearby New Hampshire and Maine coasts. The government bought Fernald's Island from William and Sarah Dennett for \$5,000, and the yard was completed on June 12, 1800. There was already an abundance of skilled craftsmen living in the New Hampshire-Maine area, because shipbuilders had been making warships for the British Royal Navy over the previous century; the *HMS Falkland* was commis-

sioned at the yard in 1690. Because of its location near the sea and the nearby plentiful wooded areas for building ships, Captain John Smith had suggested settling the region, 60 miles north of Boston, during his visit there in 1615.

The British built Fort William and Mary on Great Island (today, New Castle), in order to protect the harbor and shipbuilding facilities on the Piscataqua River. On Dec. 14 and 15, 1774, the colonists seized the forts and took down the British flag. The military supplies at the fort were later used in the battles of Concord, Lexington, and Bunker Hill.

In preparation for the Revolutionary War, in 1775, the Continental Congress authorized the construction of 13 frigates, to be ready in three months. The Portsmouth area played a crucial role. One of the ships, the *Raleigh*, was built in just 60 days, on the Piscataqua River on nearby Badger's Island, the property of John Langdon, who tendered its use to the Continental Congress.

The 32-gun frigate *Raleigh* was delivered in May 1776. Langdon then built the 18-gun sloop of war, the *Ranger*, commissioned in 1777, which was the first man-of-war which bore the American flag. It was captained by John Paul Jones,



Courtesy of U.S. Navy

This May 1858 photograph, of the first visit of the USS Constitution to the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard for extensive refitting, is one of the oldest in the U.S. Navy archives.



Bureau of Ships Collection, U.S. National Archives

*The USS Squalus fitting out at the Portsmouth Navy Yard, Oct. 5, 1938. A few months later, the submarine sank off the coast, and was raised and towed to Portsmouth, to be rebuilt and recommissioned as the USS Sailfish.*

who was present while the ship was under construction, insisting that it be built to all of his specifications.

In November 1776, under a Congressional Order, the keel of the 74-gun warship *America* was laid at Portsmouth, and John Paul Jones returned to Portsmouth to engineer its launch in 1782. *America* was the largest and heaviest ship built in this country at that time, and was given to France as a present, in appreciation of that nation's assistance during the Revolutionary War. Piscataqua builders built four more warships for the Continental Navy, including the *Congress*, sister ship to the *Constellation*, *Philadelphia*, and *Constitution*, which were built at other shipyards.

After the government purchased Fernald's Island in 1800 to create the Portsmouth Navy Yard, the island was cleared, wooden barracks for the Marines were built, and small shops were erected. In 1806, the first group of Marines arrived on the island, consisting of one first lieutenant, one sergeant, two corporals, fifteen privates, and two musicians!

At the beginning of the War of 1812, all of the government Navy came under military control, and the Portsmouth Navy Yard started to repair small vessels. The first ship built at the Navy Yard, after the Federal government took over, was for the War of 1812, the 74-gun warship *USS Washington*, launched in 1815. After that war, Adm. Isaac Hull, who had commanded the *Constitution* ("Old Ironsides"), was placed in command of the Portsmouth Navy Yard. During the expansion of the yard in 1828, the Franklin Building was constructed, and was the largest shipbuilding structure in the United States.

## War Preparations

With the Civil War on the horizon, the Portsmouth Shipyard began preparations. In April 1861, orders were received to fortify nearby islands, and recruitment to the Navy and Marine Corps began in Portsmouth, N.H.

Although the Portsmouth area saw little fighting during the Civil War, the yard was responsible for the critical repair and resupply of arriving ships. In 1861, the keels of the 9-gun steam sloops *Ossipee* and *Kearsarge* were laid. The *Kearsarge*, a half-steamboat, half-sailing ship, best known for defeating the Confederate ship *Alabama* off the coast of Cherbourg, France, was indicative of the transition from sail to steam technology.

During the Civil War, more than 2,000 workmen were employed, facilities were expanded, five steamships were begun, and a total of 26 ships were built. Of these, 18 were steam sloops and two were ironclads.

When the war was over, interest in and funding for naval facilities waned, and in 1876, Congress considered closing the Portsmouth yard. A board appointed to make recommendations

pointed out that "on account of its value to the government as a building and equipping station," and because "there is a large population in and around Portsmouth, N.H., and Kittery, Maine, who have passed their lives in shipbuilding, and the naval mechanics in that vicinity are esteemed among the best in the Country," the board opposed the abandonment of the yard.

Just after the turn of the 20th Century, J.P. Holland, an inventor of the modern submarine, was photographed during a test of such a vessel in the Piscataqua River. When World War I broke out, the U.S. government found itself dependent upon two private companies for any vessels using this new, revolutionary technology.

The decision was made to build a Navy submarine facility, where vessels could be built and tested, experiments could be carried out under Navy supervision, and expertise could be incorporated under the direction of its own engineers. The keel of the L-8 sub was laid in late 1914, and in April 1917, the first submarine built at a naval shipyard was launched at Portsmouth Harbor. It was the only sub to serve in World War I.

The Portsmouth yard not only laid keels for six more subs during the War, but also overhauled and repaired 122 surface ships. The workforce grew to a peak of 5,722, and 1,000 more people could have been employed, had they been available. A Trade School was established in 1918 to quickly train new recruits, and its apprentice school has trained skilled workers since that time.

On May 23, 1939, the shipyard faced a new challenge,

when the Portsmouth-built submarine *Squalus* sank in 240 feet of water, 5 miles off the Isles of Shoals, about 12 miles from the shipyard. Although 26 men perished in the accident, the lives of 33 men were saved by using an experimental diving bell, or rescue chamber. Eventually, the *Squalus* was raised and towed to the yard, where it was rebuilt and recommissioned as *USS Sailfish* a year after it had sunk.

Geared up for production during World War II, Portsmouth set a record in 1943, launching four new submarines in a single day; a second record was set for building 31 subs in 1944. Between 1941 and 1942, construction time for submarines was reduced by more than half, to 222 days, an average of one every 12 days. Civilian employment rose to 20,466 men and women, as more than 70 submarines were built. About half of the submarines that took part in World War II were designed at Portsmouth. After the war, the shipyard was the Navy's center for submarine design and development.

The Portsmouth-designed *Albacore*, an experimental submarine was built in 1953, and became the prototype design for today's modern fleet. It was fully submersible, compared to the earlier subs, which were simply long-range, high-speed surface ships that were capable of submerging. *Albacore* set new underwater speed records, using a revolutionary teardrop-shaped hull and round cross section—a breakthrough in hydrodynamic design.

## Entering the Atomic Age

The post-war period saw the arrival of the age of atomic power. Although the leadership at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard turned down Admiral Rickover's offer to build the first U.S. nuclear-powered submarine there in 1950, Portsmouth became one of the Navy's new nuclear-qualified shipyards, and built two of the ships in Admiral Rickover's Submarine Fleet Reactor program.

In order to join the atomic age, an extensive training program was established there, conducted by a new Nuclear Power Division. Facilities were constructed to enable compliance with the exacting specifications demanded for nuclear-propulsion work.

The first, the *Swordfish*, was commissioned in 1958, and was the first nuclear-powered submarine built in a government shipyard. Portsmouth's nuclear facilities were put to use in 1959, when Rickover's first nuclear sub, *Nautilus*, entered the Shipyard for a complete overhaul, the first of any nuclear-powered ship. In the same year, the Portsmouth-built *Sea Dragon* became the first ship to go under an iceberg, and the first to cross under the North Pole from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, traversing the Northwest Passage.

In 1962, Portsmouth became the first Naval shipyard to acquire the full capability for the construction, overhaul, repair, and refueling of nuclear-powered *Polaris* submarines. Six years later, the *Dolphin* was designed as the prototype for deep-sea-diving submarines.

In 1971, the fast-attack submarine *Sand Lance* was com-



U.S. Navy, courtesy St. Mary's Submarine Museum

*The Dolphin, a prototype for deep-sea-diving nuclear submarines, on the launching skids and about to slide into the water on Aug. 6, 1968.*

missioned, and became the last of 134 submarines to be built at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard between 1917 and 1971. Threatened with closure, then as now, the shipyard became a leader in the repair and overhaul of nuclear-powered submarines. In 1992, a new nuclear-reactor-refueling complex was completed. As the Navy base was downsized to half of what had been an 8,000-member workforce, Portsmouth rallied to extend its expertise into various aspects of submarine research, including deep sea exploration, sonics, and hydrodynamics.

Today, the shipyard directly employs more than 4,000 civilians, and is home to about 100 active-duty military personnel. Portsmouth Naval Shipyard employs more than 400 engineers and more than 350 engineering technicians, in disciplines such as chemical, electrical, industrial, and nuclear engineering. The yard is still the leader in submerged rescue platforms, and is one of only four remaining government shipyards in the nation.

The payroll for the civilian and military workforce at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard is more than \$280 million. There are 179 buildings, including 49 dedicated to ship repair and overhaul. The three birthing drydocks are capable of docking all active classes of submarines in the U.S. Navy, for overhaul

and nuclear-reactor refueling. Ironically, on May 12, just one day before it was revealed that Portsmouth was on the list of recommended closures, the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard received the Meritorious Unit Commendation from Secretary of the Navy Gordon England for its leadership and “invaluable contribution to our national security.”

Although the Department of Defense estimates that the Portsmouth closure would cost about 9,000 jobs, including businesses that service the shipyard, the states of Maine and New Hampshire estimate that 17,000 jobs could be lost in total. The Pentagon would also lose one of the four military facilities that have the required licenses to handle nuclear materials—and 300 years of shipbuilding history and expertise.

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## Documentation

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# Maine Passes Resolution Rejecting Base Closings

*The following resolution was passed on June 13 by the Maine State Legislature.*

### **Joint Resolution Memorializing the Congress of the United States To Mandate that the Base Realignment and Closure Commission Reject the Department of Defense’s Recommendation To Realign Naval Air Station Brunswick and To Close Portsmouth Naval Shipyard and the Defense Finance and Accounting Service in Limestone**

We, your Memorialists, the Members of the One Hundred and Twenty-Second Legislature of the State of Maine now assembled in the First Special Session, most respectfully present and petition the Congress of the United States as follows:

Whereas, the military value of Naval Air Station Brunswick, Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, and the Defense Finance and Accounting Service in Limestone is highly significant; and

Whereas, the security of the North Atlantic seaways and the borders of the United States and of the State of Maine are jeopardized by the Department of Defense’s recommendation to close Naval Air Station Brunswick, which would put the safety and welfare of United States citizens at risk; and

Whereas, the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, Maine, was recently cited by the United States Navy as the most efficient submarine repair

facility, public or private, in the Nation; and

Whereas, the economic and job loss impact of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission’s recommendations is significant in terms of the potential elimination of an estimated 12,000 military and civilian jobs in both Maine and New Hampshire; and

Whereas, the Base Realignment and Closure Commission will tour Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery on June 1, 2005 and Naval Air Station Brunswick on June 2, 2005, and the commission’s regional hearing on recommendations affecting Maine will occur July 6, 2005, with final recommendations to be made to President Bush by September 8, 2005; now, therefore, be it

Resolved: That We, your Memorialists, on behalf of the people we represent, respectfully urge and request that the Base Realignment and Closure Commission and the United States Congress actively work with the Honorable John E. Baldacci, Governor of Maine, the Maine State Legislature, local task forces and Maine citizens in reviewing the accuracy of the methodology used in developing current recommendations in order to reverse or minimize the recommendations to realign Naval Air Station Brunswick and to close Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery and the Defense Finance and Accounting Service in Limestone; and be it further:

Resolved: That suitable copies of this resolution, duly authenticated by the Secretary of State, be transmitted to the Honorable George W. Bush, President of the United States, the President of the United States Senate, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives and each Member of the Maine Congressional Delegation.



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*Will the Bush Administration dump 300 years of shipbuilding down the drain? Here, an aerial view of the historic Portsmouth Naval Base.*