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## Research in the Mahan Library

John B. Hattendorf

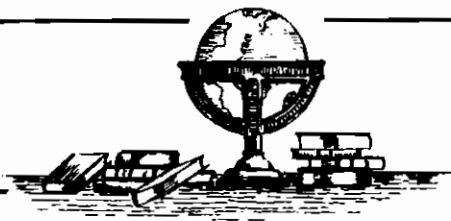
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## RESEARCH IN THE MAHAN LIBRARY

### A LONG LOST FARRAGUT LETTER IS REDISCOVERED

Lieutenant John B. Hattendorf, USN

In his biography of Admiral Farragut published in 1892, Alfred Thayer Mahan noted: "Farragut was essentially and unaffectedly a religious man. The thoughtfulness and care with which he prepared for his greater undertakings, the courage and fixed determination to succeed with which he went into battle, were tempered with grace by a profound submission to the almighty will." This insight into the character of America's first admiral is clearly revealed in a letter which he wrote to his wife just a few days before the Battle of Mobile Bay. Used by Mahan as a source for his biography, the letter was lost to later Farragut scholars and only recently was rediscovered among a collection of Mahan papers which were presented to the Naval War College by Alfred Thayer Mahan II, the historian's grandson. The Mahan documents will appear in the U.S. Naval Institute's forthcoming *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan*, edited by Dr. Robert Seager II.

By the summer of 1863, the first great strategic objectives of the North in the Civil War had been achieved. The fall of Port Hudson, Vicksburg, and New Orleans brought the Mississippi River almost entirely under control. The Confederacy had been severed; the seceded States to the west isolated. Federal forces now concentrated their chief efforts to the east. Rosecrans, Grant, and Sherman began a drive aimed at creating another division, this time

from Nashville to the sea. Leaving command of the Mississippi to Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter, Farragut undertook to tighten the grip on the South by closing the remaining gulf ports.

With the evacuation of Pensacola and the fall of New Orleans, Mobile became the last important Confederate gulf port. It was connected to the major cotton producing areas by rail lines and by numerous tributaries of the two large rivers which emptied into its bay. The town was also an industrial center. It was there that the ironclads *Tennessee*, *Tuscaloosa*, and *Huntsville* were fitted out and the submarine *H.L. Hunley* was built. With the closing of other ports, Mobile took on a special significance to the Southern cause and, also, to the Union Navy which viewed it as an attractive objective.

Farragut made his first reconnaissance of the coastal defenses and naval forces in January 1864. At that time he reported to the Secretary of the Navy that ironclads would be essential for a successful attack. In addition to the guns of Fort Morgan, Fort Gaines, and Fort Powell, the shallow waters at the entrance to the bay were guarded by a squadron of ships which included the powerful, ironclad *Tennessee*, Buchanan's flagship. The main channel, meanwhile, was sown with mines (at that time known as torpedoes). Mobile's defenses were commanded by Admiral Franklin Buchanan, former captain,

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U.S. Navy, who had "gone South" when it appeared as though his native Maryland would secede. He was promoted to admiral in recognition of his outstanding service while in command of the James River naval defenses in 1862. It was his flagship, the ironclad U.S.S. *Virginia* [*Merrimac*] which sank the U.S.S. *Cumberland* and the U.S.S. *Congress* at Hampton Roads on 8 March 1862 and which fought the U.S.S. *Monitor* the following day.

The main attack did not occur until 6 months later. On 12 July 1864 Farragut issued General Order No. 10 in which he told his squadron commanders: "Strip your vessels and prepare for the conflict." After outlining the specific tactics to be used, he awaited the arrival of the Army transports which carried troops for the landing and the ironclad monitors to be the principal weapons in the engagement. These began to arrive toward the end of the month. Sensing the nearness of battle, he wrote to his son on 31 July:

The monitors have all arrived, except Tecumseh, and she is at Pensacola and I hope will be here in two days. The Confederates at

Fort Morgan are making great preparations to receive us. That concerns me but little. I know Buchanan, and Page, who commands the fort, will do all in their power to destroy us, and we will reciprocate the compliment. I hope to give them a fair fight, if I once get inside. I expect nothing from them but that they will try to blow up if they can. . . .

With such a mother, you could not fail to have proper sentiments of religion and virtue. I feel that I have done my duty by you both, as far as the weakness of my nature would allow. I have been devoted to you both, and when it pleases God to take me hence, I shall feel that I have done my duty. I am not conscious of ever having wronged anyone, and have tried to do as much good as I could. . . .

In the recently acquired letter of the same date to his wife, Farragut does not go into the details of the forthcoming conflict, but he does express the same faith. The letter is reproduced here in its entirety.

U.S. Flag Ship Hartford  
West Gulf Squadron  
Off Mobile, July 31st 1864

My dearest Wife,

My monitors are all here now, so that I begin to feel that I am the one to attack, and no longer expect to be attacked by Buchanan, although I really wish he had made the effort to test the question—When I shall attack I know not, as I am waiting on the Army as they say—I hope for the best results as I am always hopeful [sic] put my shoulder to the wheel with my best judgement and trust to God for the rest, he has thus far been gracious beyond my deserts, but should he think proper to withdraw that protection and decide that I have done enough mischief in the world and cut me off in the midst of my sins—I know nothing to say, but that I am ready to submit to his wish—My dear sister sent me a holy Virgin like the one I told you of. She said it was blessed by the Archbishop—that he said I was good to all the Priest-[sic] I only tell you this to show you that they did not succeed in impressing the Bishop that I had robbed the church at Point Coupée—Give my love to your dear mother and sister and Robert and Newton and Ashe  
May God bless and protect you all, ever prays your devoted husband

D.G. Farragut

To, Mrs. D.G. Farragut  
Hastings on the Hudson,  
N.Y.

Though obviously a deeply religious person, Farragut did not belong to any established church until late in life. He was raised as a Roman Catholic, and his immediate family were still of that persuasion. Mrs. Farragut, however, was an Episcopalian, and he regularly attended church with her. When he died in 1870, he was buried with Episcopalian rites. The letter tells of the gift of a representation of the Holy Virgin from a sister, Mrs. Nancy Farragut Gurlic, who was then at Biloxi, Miss., and had tried to see him but was unable to do so because of the impending battle. It was, he noted, similar to that given to him by Rose Hughes, a devoted maid of the Farragut family and an ardent Catholic. Farragut was especially pleased when informed that the representation had been blessed by an archbishop who had remarked that the Admiral had been kind to Catholic priests. During the operation on the Mississippi the previous year, he and his men had been falsely accused of stealing private property and robbing the church at Point Coupée near Port Hudson.

The Battle of Mobile Bay fought on 5 August was a brilliant Union naval victory and the crowning achievement of Farragut's career. His determination and daring overcame the formidable obstacles which would have caused a lesser mind to hesitate and turn aside. A concise but accurate assessment of this feat was made by Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles when he remarked in a letter of congratulations: "In the success which has attended your operations you have illustrated the efficiency and irresistible power of a naval force led by a bold and vigorous mind." Never the one to slight his strong conviction that God controls the destiny of men and affairs, Farragut published on 7 August a brief general order which declared: "The Admiral desires the fleet to return thanks to Almighty God for the signal victory over the enemy on the morning of the 5th instant."

### Gifts and Acquisitions

Two original journals of the successful American privateer *Yankee* of the War of 1812 have come from Mr. William Veazie Pratt, Jr. The *Yankee* sailed from Bristol, R.I., and was commanded by Capt. Oliver Wilson. The journals are for the first and second cruises and cover the period July 1812-February 1813. Mr. Pratt presented the volumes through the Naval War College Foundation. Papers of Lt. Cyrus W. Breed, USN, were also deposited in the college by the foundation. Breed, a native of Toledo, Ohio, graduated from the Naval Academy in 1865, while it was at Newport, R.I. He subsequently served aboard the U.S.S. *Swatara*, 1867-1869, on the European station and the U.S.S. *Nantasket*, 1869-1872, in the Caribbean Sea. Included in the papers are letters concerning experiences and observations while in European waters, a diary of a cruise to Santo Domingo in 1872 in connection with a revolutionary outbreak, navigational calculations, and sailing schedules. Professor Dirk Ballendorf presented copies of documents relating to the life and career of Col. Earl Hancock Ellis, USMC, Naval War College student and staff member, 1911-1913. Ellis foresaw the rapid rise of Japanese strength in the Pacific while at the Naval War College and later pressed for the strong defense of America's island possessions. An enigmatic character in the annals of Marine Corps

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### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Lt. John B. Hattendorf, U.S. Navy, holds a B.A. from Kenyon College, an M.A. from Brown University, and a certificate from the Munson Institute of American Maritime History. He served on the staffs of the Office of Naval History and the Naval Historical Collection of the Naval War College.

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history, he died under mysterious conditions in 1921 in the Japanese mandate islands.

Glass negatives of views of American naval ships, circa 1910, were presented by Dr. John B. Ellis, O.B.E., through

Captain Jacobs of the Center for War Gaming. Two old U.S. naval uniforms (circa 1910), were presented for the college museum collection by Professor Tuleja, former King Chair occupant, and Mr. Robert Hanna.



I think Carlyle's saying that the true university is a collection of books is of greater force today than when the Sage of Chelsea uttered it. I have an unshaken conviction that democracy can never be undermined if we maintain our library resources and a national intelligence capable of utilizing them.

*Franklin D. Roosevelt: To Herbert Putnam,  
1953; Bookburners*