

“The White Squadron”

San Diego of the early 1890s was a city in transition. The previous decades’ “Boom of the 80s” had briefly boosted the population to over 30,000, and while the economic bust that followed dropped the numbers to barely 16,000, the foundations of a major city had been laid. A civic charter in 1889 established an efficient government, and a growing infrastructure included modern brick buildings, paved streets and sewers, streetlights, and even a few telephones.

To ensure prosperity the city looked hopefully to the military. The U.S. Navy had often considered San Diego as base for ships. But the shallow harbor was difficult to navigate for the large warships, which usually bypassed the port in favor of San Francisco. Ironically, it was a ship named *San Francisco* that would begin to change the Navy’s thinking.

The flagship of the Pacific Squadron arrived unexpectedly in San Diego in late December 1891. “Our presence is probably a surprise to you,” said the ship’s captain, Rear Admiral George Brown. “We were ordered to San Diego and here we are. We shall take on about 250 tons of coal and will then be on ‘waiting orders.’”

Within days, Brown’s ship was joined by another cruiser, the USS *Charleston*. The ships would spend the next six weeks in San Diego.

The *San Francisco* and *Charleston* were among the first ships of the steel-hulled “New Navy,” built to finally modernize the fleet after the Civil War. Each was over 300 feet long, steamed at speeds of up to 19 knots, and carried over 300 officers and men. Painted a dramatic white above the waterline and bristling with guns, the warships were a powerful contrast to the wooden sailing ships usually seen in San Diego.



USS *Charleston* in Manila, 1898.

San Diegans immediately recognized the significance of the Navy visit. “The presence in our harbor of two of the finest war ships in our modern navy is a matter of great interest,” noted the *San Diego Union*. “The coming of the *Charleston* and *San Francisco* means that the government will make San Diego a rendezvous point, and a base of supplies.”

The city was determined to put on its best face. The ship’s officers were given rooms at the Hotel del Coronado, which hosted elaborate banquets and dances in honor of the men, two or three times a week. The “grand balls” were accompanied by music from the string orchestra from the *Charleston* or the brass band from the *San Francisco*. As many as four hundred couples attended each entertainment, claimed the *Union*.

The ship crews entertained San Diegans with gun drills and boat races on the bay. There was a football game between junior officers and a San Diego team. But the most popular diversion was the nighttime search-light drills. With the *San Francisco* operating four lights and the

Charleston two, “white fingers clawed the sky and criss-crossed there with shifty moonbeams.” Viewed from the hills above the town, a newsman from the *San Diego Sun* found the lights “weird and picturesque.”

Long, slender shafts of light would shoot out into the city, throwing some building into such bright relief that every board—almost every nail—could be seen two miles away. A quick turn and the old lighthouse would become a ghostly presence above the tide. Another and the towers and Queen Ann gables of the big hotel would come out in a yellow blaze . . . Whatever was sought within a radius of three or four miles was illuminated.

The *Charleston* departed for San Francisco on January 20. The *San Francisco* would stay another month in San Diego.

In mid-February the ship offered target practice as a fund raiser for Company A, the city’s naval reserve battalion. Buying \$1 tickets, 250 passengers boarded the steamship *Tillamook* for a trip to the *San Francisco*, waiting three miles off Coronado. The city guard band entertained the passengers and reservists as the boat crossed the bay in “one continual round of jollity.” Unfortunately, when the *Tillamook* met the ocean at the port’s entrance a “good many” of the merry-makers promptly became seasick.

After boarding the *San Francisco*, the excursionists watched as the cruiser steamed slowly and fired its twelve, six-inch guns at a canvas target, moored 2,000 yards seaward. “The firing was excellent” and Admiral Brown remarked that “every shot would have struck the ship of an enemy had it been the target.”

As the *San Francisco*’s time in San Diego drew to a close its coal bunkers were topped off and the ship filled its water tanks with 35,000 gallons of “flume water” transported by a tug boat. It was another opportunity for San Diego to extol its virtues. The cruiser normally used only distilled water, explained the *Union*. Instead, the Navy had chosen “the best and cheapest water in California.”

The *San Francisco* departed for Honolulu on February 18. The city judged the Navy visits an enormous success. “The stay of the [cruisers] will result in incalculable good to San Diego, judged the *Union*. Admiral Brown’s parting words seemed hopeful: “The harbor of San Diego has no equal on the Pacific Coast.”



USS *San Francisco* (C-5). *Wikipedia Commons*

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