



TRAIL BLAZER

of the Sea

JEAN LEE LATHAM

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Purple House Press
Kentucky

Published by
Purple House Press
PO Box 787, Cynthiana, Kentucky 41031

Classic Books for Kids and Young Adults
purplehousepress.com

ISBN 9781948959438

Written in 1956 by Jean Lee Latham

The text is slightly revised, read more on our website

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Exclusive to the Purple House Press edition of this book,
the Map section on page 4 is courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The entire map, approximately 40" x 20", is at <https://www.loc.gov/item/2003627051/>

It's interesting, take a look! It accompanied Report no. 596, made by T. Butler King,
Chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs, to the House of Representatives, on
Steam Communication with China and the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). May 4, 1848

Publisher's Note:

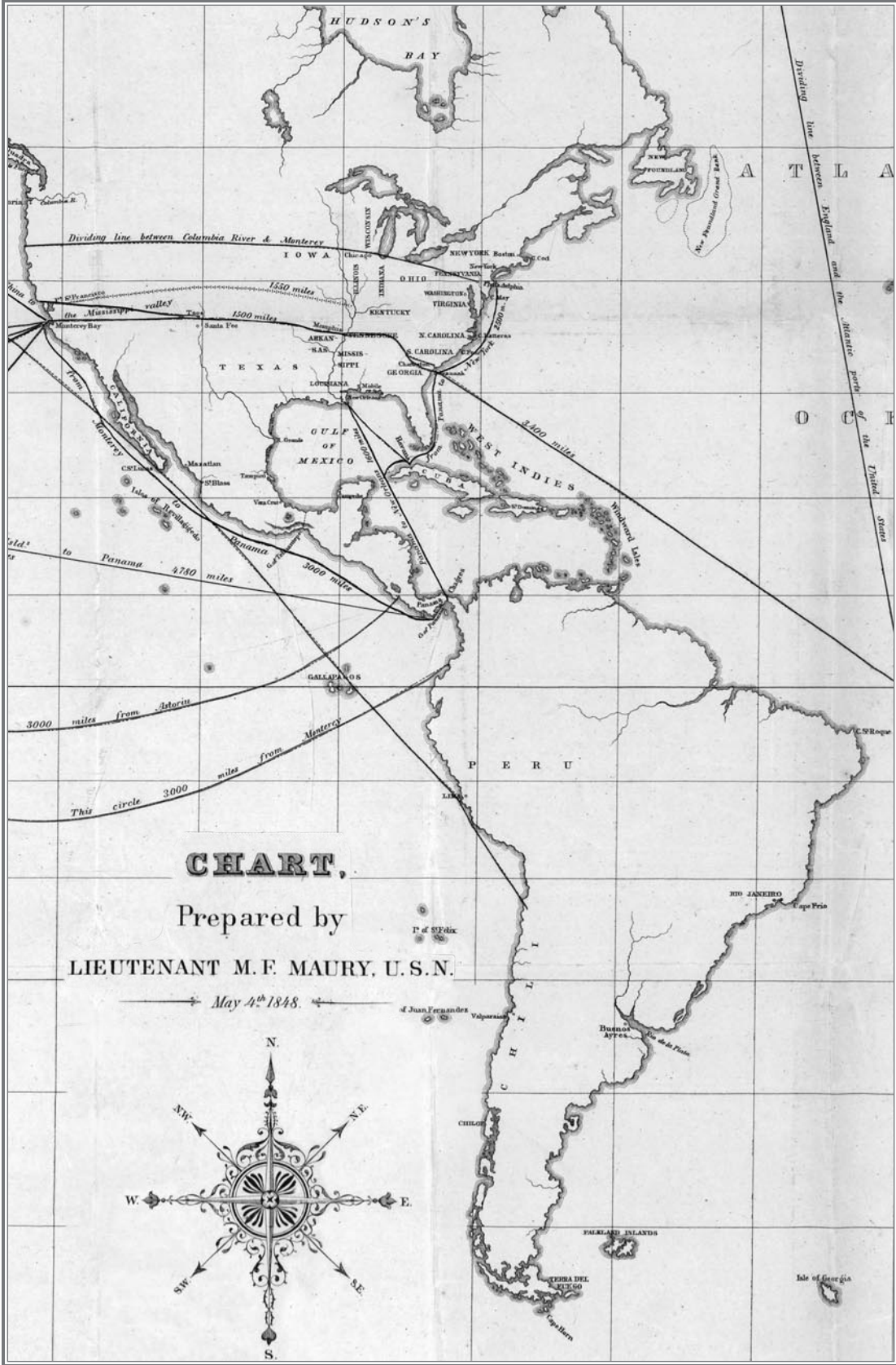
Matthew Fontaine Maury made amazing, trailblazing contributions to several fields of science during his lifetime. This book shares his scientific thoughts in an engaging story of his life.

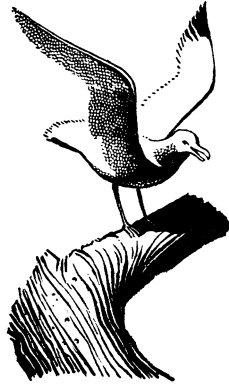
He lived from 1806-1873, in the south, during the time of slavery and through the Civil War. He was not a slave owner but he supported it. Slavery is not mentioned in this biography.

While we, at Purple House Press, do in no way condone his stance on slavery, it is our opinion that his innovations are worth learning about — he was a product of the time he was born in and his life story is complex. To truly understand any historical person of significance, numerous books and resources must be utilized. We hope you find value in Jean Lee Latham's biography of M.F. Maury.



Matthew Fontaine Maury





1

“When a Man Fights for Something...”

The ruckus in the clearing behind the log schoolhouse brought the teacher out on the run. He grabbed the bigger boy by a handful of hair and jerked him to his feet. “Donald! What do you mean — a chap your size jumping on a twelve-year-old?”

Mat rolled over, struggled to his knees, and wiped his hand across his bloody mouth. “I’m not so little! I’m going on thirteen!” He steadied himself on his hands, struggled to his feet, and panted. “Please let Donald go, Mr. Wilson. I can’t hit him when you’re holding him.”

“Yah!” Donald jeered. “You can’t hit me anyhow! You can’t reach me!”

“But I can butt you in the stomach.”

Mr. Wilson had a sudden coughing spell. Then he asked, “Who started this?”

“I did!” Mat spoke quickly.

Donald nodded. “Yes, sir, he started it! I was just teasing him, and all at once he charged me, like a billy goat.”

“Is that right, Mat?”

“Yes, sir. Just exactly like a billy goat.”

Mr. Wilson had another coughing spell. “Donald, go on home. Mat, go inside.”

"Yes, sir." Mat limped into the schoolhouse and sat on a split-log bench.

Mr. Wilson followed and stood staring down at him. "If you aren't the sorriest-looking specimen in the state of Tennessee."

"Yes, sir." Mat wiped his bloody mouth again. His left eye was swelling.

Mr. Wilson sighed and sat down. "Don't you know better than to jump a fellow the size of Donald?"

Mat shoved his mop of brown hair off his forehead. His blue eyes met Mr. Wilson's gaze squarely. "When you're *for* something, you've got to fight. Even if you know you'll be licked. You know how it is, Mr. Wilson?"

"Yes, Mat. The navy again, I suppose?" His eyes began to twinkle.

"Yes, sir." Mat's grin was lopsided. His lip was swelling now.

"How did it start?"

"Donald said our navy wasn't worth the powder and lead to blow it up in the war." Mat stood. "I told him, 'Man for man and ship for ship we outsailed and outfought the British from 1812 right through the war! The only trouble was we didn't have enough ships! And that's true, because my brother John said so. And he was in it. He fought with Porter in the Pacific and with MacDonough on Lake Champlain.'" Mat sat down and grinned at his teacher. "And the next time John comes home, I'm going back with him. I'm going to be a midshipman!"

"But, Mat! You've got the makings of a scholar! You're the brightest lad I've ever taught. Someday you could be a doctor, a lawyer, a minister, or —"

"I'm going to be a navy man."

"You'd throw away a chance at a fine career to —"

"Isn't it a career to be in the navy and help protect your country?"

Mr. Wilson rubbed his chin. "What does your father say about your joining the navy?"

Mat hesitated. "Uh — Mr. Wilson, you believe in the navy, don't you?"

"Why, yes, I suppose I do, but —"

"Then wouldn't you like to kind of talk to Father about it? Say — about the Barbary pirates. Tell him that if it wasn't for the navy, we'd be 'a nation of craven cowards, paying tribute to pirates!'"

"Where'd you hear all that?"

"John said so. And you could talk about how the navy is our strong right arm. You could —"

"So your father doesn't want you to join the navy?"

"Uh — you see it's this way. All during the war, we didn't know where John was. If he was alive or dead. It was a long time. So, even when the war was over, and John was all right, Father — you know how he — kind of — roars? Well, he roared that he'd never have another son in the navy. But the war's been over three years now. So if you'd talk to him, Mr. Wilson —"

"No, Mat. I won't do that, because I don't think the navy is the place for you."

"I see." Mat stood. "Well, thank you just the same, Mr. Wilson. John's coming home soon. He'll talk Father around. Goodnight, Mr. Wilson."

Mat left the schoolhouse and crossed the clearing toward a tall tree he had had his eye on. A midshipman had to be good at climbing. Sometimes he bossed the sailors when they reefed the sails.

He found the tree and studied it. That bare limb up there — how high was it? Forty feet? The masts on ships were taller than that.

He jumped for a bottom limb, swung himself up, and climbed until he reached the bare limb. He edged out on it, stood straight, steadied himself with one hand, waved an imaginary cutlass, and shouted. "Hurrah, men! She's struck her colors!"



A sharp crack. The dead limb snapped. Mat yelled, clutched air, and fell.

The next thing he knew, a foggy, far-off voice was saying, "I don't know whether he'll recover consciousness or not, Mr. Maury. If he does...his back...I'm afraid he'll never walk again."

No! Mat thought he shouted, but he must have made no sound. The foggy voices faded. He would walk! He'd get up now! He tried to move. He gritted his teeth and tried again, but it wasn't any use. Tomorrow, he told himself, he'd get up. Tomorrow, for sure.

It was a month later before he was even sitting up. When John came with Eliza and their baby son, Mat was just beginning to walk.

He faced John miserably. "And I was going to be ready for the navy when you came!"

"Don't worry, Mat. You'll get husky again." John smiled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"How soon?"

John didn't answer. Instead, he said, "I've talked to Father —"

"About the navy?"

"No. No use bringing that up now, Mat. I mean *right* now," John added hastily. "I've talked to him about sending you to Harpeth Academy."

Father came in then and smiled at Mat. "That's right, son. Soon as you're able, you're going to Harpeth. Your muscles aren't going to be much good for farming. Figure we might as well build up your brains. Mr. Wilson says you can be almost anything. Minister, lawyer, doctor. *Matthew Fontaine Maury, M.D.* How do you like the sound of that?"

Matthew Fontaine Maury, U.S.N., Mat thought. That's what I'm going to be! But he didn't say it. No use trying to talk to Father about the navy until he was husky again.

“Yes, sir,” Father said. “Be mighty fine to have a son who was a doctor. Soon as you’re able, you’ll go over and talk to Preacher Blackburn. He’s the president of Harpeth.”

One morning, not long after, Mat knocked on the door of Mr. Blackburn’s office.

“Come!” a voice thundered.

Mat entered and saw a young giant of a man lolling in one chair with his feet on another.

“Good morning, Preacher Blackburn. I’m Maury.”

“A preacher? Me?” The young giant threw back his head and roared with laughter. “No, lad, I’m just a friend of Gideon Blackburn’s. Sam Houston.”

“I’ve heard of you! You fought with Andrew Jackson!”

“By the eternal, I did! So your name’s Maury, eh? You’re from Virginia, too.”

“Were you?”

“Of course!” Sam Houston winked. “All good Tennesseans come from Virginia.”

Gideon Blackburn came in — a tall, pale man with burning black eyes and a quick smile.

Sam Houston stood, towering over Mr. Blackburn. “Gideon, this is Maury. Good stuff in him. He’s from Virginia.” He slapped Mat’s shoulder. “Good luck, lad. Make Virginia proud of you. And if there’s ever anything I can do for you, let me know. We Virginians have to stick together!”

Mr. Blackburn said, “We’re going to be proud of this lad. We think we’ll make a doctor of him.”

A navy man, Mat thought. As soon as I’m strong enough!

Six years later, when he was eighteen, Mat knew the time had come. He was not tall, but he was sturdily built, with brawny

shoulders. More than once in a wrestling match, he had sent a six-footer spinning. John had written from the West Indies that he would soon be home to see them. They would talk Father around, all right.

Father was mighty proud of John. "My son, Captain Maury." That was the way he always spoke of John. He'd listen to what John said — even about the navy. They were waiting for news from Fredericksburg when a letter came in a stranger's handwriting. It was from Dabney Herndon, John's dearest friend. John had died of yellow fever on his way home from the West Indies. Mr. Herndon wrote:

Eliza and the boys are here with me. Our home will always be their home, for as long as they want it. John was like a brother to me. I will never...

Father stopped reading and bowed his head. Silence crawled through the room. After a while Father pulled himself to his feet, like an old man, and shuffled out.

Mother spoke first. "Poor Eliza. We must write to her."

With Mother telling him what to say, Mat wrote the letter. When it was done, and the family had gone to bed, he sat alone by the table, staring into the fire. At last he began to write again:

July 17, 1824

To the Honorable Samuel Houston
Member of Congress

Dear Mr. Houston,

A long time ago you said if ever you could do anything for me to let you know. There is something I want very much. An appointment as a midshipman in our navy...

No need to bother Father about it now, Mat thought. Not until Sam Houston's answer comes.

Sam Houston's answer said he would be glad to post Mat's name. Those things took time, he explained. It might be a few months before the appointment came through.

I'll have to tell Father now, Mat thought. Tomorrow I'll tell him, or the next day...

But the days passed and somehow Mat didn't get around to telling his father. The academy opened again, and Mat went back for his last year. He was glad when they asked him to help with teaching the younger boys. The money he received would pay his tuition. He told his father, "I am paying my own way this year."

Father's hand gripped Mat's shoulder. "You'll be worth every cent you'll cost, Mat. Every cent it will take to make a doctor of you."

Why couldn't he make his father understand? He would have to tell him about it before the appointment came!

The months passed, and the school year ended. Mat went back to the farm to help his father. Time and again, as they worked together, he tried to bring up the subject of the appointment, but the words stuck in his throat. He still had not told his father when the letter came from Washington. Mat's fingers shook as he opened it and saw his name standing out boldly from the fine engraved script on the parchment:

Know ye, that, reposing special trust and confidence in the patriotism, valour, fidelity and abilities of MATTHEW FONTAINE MAURY, I do appoint him a midshipman in the navy of the United States...

Taking a deep breath, Mat let it out slowly, and went to find his father.

When Father saw him coming, he grinned. "Howdy, son!" In these last weeks Father had begun to smile again.

Mat's throat ached. If only he didn't have to hurt him! "Father,

I've done something you're not going to like..." When he had finished, he waited for his father's bellow.

But for once Father didn't roar. His tanned face whitened. "No, Mat! No!"

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

The color came back to Father's face. "And just how will you get to Washington? You'll not ride one of my horses! And you'll not get a cent from me! You'll go as you are, with nothing but the clothes on your back! I wash my hands of you!"

Mat did not answer; he strode out to the road and down to the next farm. When he returned, he was riding Mr. Baker's mare, Fanny.

His father glared and bellowed. "What are you doing with Baker's mare?"

"I've borrowed her," Mat said. "When I get to Washington, I'm to sell her and send back the money. I have thirty dollars from the last teaching I did. If that runs out, I'll work my way. Good-bye, Father."

Father stood silent, his jaw working. At last he growled, "No use starting tonight. You'll need to get your clothes furbished up and packed."

The knot in Mat's chest seemed to loosen. Maybe after Father had slept on it...

But the next morning at breakfast Father ate a few bites, excused himself, and left the table.

"Dear," Mother said gently, "Mat is leaving right after breakfast."

Father put on his hat and left without a word. After Mat had saddled Fanny, he stood in the road saying good-bye. He looked across the east field and saw his father standing on a little rise — a lonely figure, silhouetted against the sun. Mat waved, but his father turned his back and plodded away.

Mother's face seemed to shrink until it was all eyes, but she only said, "Try to stop in Fredericksburg at the Herndons', Mat. To see Eliza."

In Fredericksburg, Eliza said, "Mat! How good to see you!"

A girl of twelve or thirteen came running to greet him, too. Her blue eyes sparkled; her red curls danced.

"You're John's brother, aren't you? I've heard lots about you! I'm Nannie Herndon."

"Nannie's my little sister now." Eliza smiled. "What brings you east, Mat?"

"The navy."

"Oh..." The troubled look on Eliza's face reminded him of his mother. He found it easier to look at Nannie.

Nannie's eyes glowed. "That's wonderful! Someday you'll be a captain, too. Maybe even an admiral!"

"Such ignorance!" Mat teased her. "We don't have admirals in our navy! Maybe if you'd write to your congressman about it..."

"Maybe I will!" Nannie raced away to find the boys.

Mat looked after her, laughing. "Admirals in our navy! I wouldn't put it past her to write to her congressman!"

"Bless Nannie," Eliza said. "I don't know what I'd have done without her."

The morning Mat left for Washington, Nannie thrust a note into his hand. "It's for you. Don't read it till noon."

Mat grinned and promised. At noon, he smiled as he opened the note. Then he stopped smiling.

Dear Mat,

John always used to write a note to Eliza, just before his ship sailed, and send it back by the pilot. Have a good journey.

Love, Nannie

Mat said what Eliza had said: "Bless Nannie."

He ate part of the lunch Eliza had packed for him, and saved the rest for later. When that was gone, he wouldn't have anything else, unless he stopped to work for his supper. His thirty dollars had dwindled to fifty cents. When he got his assignment to his ship, he'd have to work his way there. He hoped his ship would be in Norfolk. It would be a long way to New York or Boston.

In Washington, Mat read his orders:

You will repair at once to New York, New York, to join the U.S.S. *Brandywine*, which is at present fitting for sea in that port...

New York! His brain whirled with questions. How long would it take him to work his way there? Could he —

The clerk said, "You'll be allowed fifteen cents a mile for your travel, for the distance from your home to your ship. Any questions?"

"No, sir." Mat said. "Everything's fine!"

Late one afternoon when the stagecoach rattled over the cobblestones of New York and stopped, Mat hailed a hack.

"To the wharf!" He stood so straight his collar touched his ears. "I'm reporting to my ship — the *Brandywine*!"

"Aye, aye, Captain!" The driver touched his forelock. The hack bumped along the busy wharves of South Street, past a forest of towering masts. They stopped. "Here you are, Commodore." He pointed with his whip. "The boat from the *Brandywine* will pick you up right where that other lad's standing."

The tall figure in midshipman's uniform turned. A handsome chap, with a slim dark face. His black eyes swept a glance over Mat.

Mat went forward, his hand outstretched. "I'm Mat Maury."

The midshipman didn't seem to see Mat's hand. "I'm Phillip Ross Lowman the Third." He turned his back on Mat and watched the boat cutting through the water toward them.

When the boat came alongside, Mat picked up his valise.

Phillip Lowman spoke without turning his head. "Let the men handle that. You're supposed to be an officer and a gentleman. Or didn't you know that, mister?"

Mat's ears burned. He stumbled getting into the boat.

The oars rose and fell as one, speeding the boat toward their ship. As they neared the *Brandywine*, the size of the dark hulk stunned him. She towered above them like the wall of a canyon. Mat's heart pounded. What right had he to be called a midshipman? What business had he with a warrant, signed by the President of the United States:

And I do strictly charge and require all officers, seamen and others under his command to be obedient to his orders and directions...

In a daze he climbed; in a daze he saluted the quarterdeck. He faced the officer of the watch and hoped his voice wouldn't shake. "Midshipman Maury reports his presence aboard, sir."

TRAIL BLAZER of the Seas

From the author of *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch*, winner of the 1956 Newbery Medal, Jean Lee Latham writes an absorbing biography of Matthew Fontaine Maury, the man considered to be the father of modern oceanography.

In the early 1800s, voyages from New York to San Francisco took six months. That was before Maury, a lieutenant in the US Navy, blazed a trail for ships to follow. The first ship to follow Maury's directions based on his wind and current charts cut nearly two months off that time.

During the 1840s, Maury fought against bitter opposition for seven years, to receive the cooperation needed to gather data for his charts. Years later, in 1853, nine-tenths of the world's ships were helping Maury collect data and blaze more trails.

Maury championed additional ideas: he campaigned for a Naval Academy, for better fortification of our southern ports, and separate shipping lanes for eastbound and westbound routes in the Atlantic to avoid deadly collisions.

The author gives a warm, lively picture of the man and a clear explanation of his achievements. Powerful, authentic drawings by Victor Mays.

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