

Fort Willoughby
Hassel Island
St. Thomas County
Virgin Islands

HABS No. VI-90

HABS
VI,
3-HASI,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

ADDENDUM TO:
FORT WILLOUGHBY
Hassel Island
St. Thomas county
U.S. Virgin Islands

HABS NO. VI-90

HABS
VI,
3-HASI,
2-

XEROGRAPHIC COPIES OF COLOR TRANPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20001

ADDENDUM TO:
FORT WILLOUGHBY
(Prince Frederik's Battery)
Virgin Islands National Park
Hassel Island Historic District
Hassel Island
St. Thomas
Virgin Islands (Us)

HABS VI-90
HABS VI,3-HASI,2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
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Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

Addendum to FORT WILLOUGHBY (Prince Frederik's Battery)

HABS VI-90

Location: Hassel Island Historic District, Virgin Islands National Park, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands.

USGS Central Saint Thomas Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: E 296006 N 2027326.

Fort Willoughby on Hassel Island is in UTM Zone 20. The coordinates are 64.930339 W and 18.326051 N, and were obtained in March 2014 with NAD 1983. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Significance: Fort Willoughby is significant as both a Danish and British military defensive work on Hassel Island. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 under Criteria A and C in the areas of Architecture, Commerce, and Military.¹ The site was also recorded as HABS No. VI-90 in 1979. Originally called Prince Frederik's Battery, it was built by the government of the Danish West Indies in 1777-1780 on the southeastern end of the peninsula known at that time as Estate Orkanhullet (Hurricane Hole), now Hassel Island. Located on the western border of St. Thomas harbor, the cannons of Fort Willoughby defended the harbor entrance from colonial rivals and prevented privateers from seizing merchant ships in the harbor. On March 3, 1801, Fort Willoughby participated in a skirmish with Danish brig of war *HDMS Lougen* in driving off a British sloop of war, *HMS Arab*. British troops later used the battery and renamed it Fort Willoughby during their first occupation of St. Thomas in 1801, and it was again repaired and used during the second British occupation from 1807-1815.

Description: Fort Willoughby is located approximately 25' above the waterline on the rocky southeastern point of Hassel Island. The battery includes the ruins of two rectangular, rubble masonry buildings and a terraced gun platform with low parapet wall. The remains of the northern building measure 20'x12' and contain what were three rooms, including a privy, storage room, and kitchen. The interior and front (west) elevation walls are mostly collapsed. The southern building measures 27'x18' and contains a small vaulted powder magazine, a small guardhouse, and a cistern. Bricks line the buildings' corners and their arched window and door openings.²

The five-sided stone gun platform, or terraplein, is reached by three flights of stone stairs. It faces south and southeast to cover the entrance to St. Thomas harbor. The platform is paved with flagstones and measures approximately 80' long and 29' wide with a 3' parapet wall on the

¹ Russell Wright, Thomas W. Richards, and Annie Hillary, Virgin Islands Planning Office, "Hassel Island," National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1976.

² Frederik C. Gjessing, "Historic Resource Study, Hassel Island, U.S. Virgin Islands," 1981, 28.

east and southeast elevations.³ On the south corner of the platform are the remains of a staircase built during the British occupation.

History: Fort Willoughby was completed by the Danish colonial government in 1777-1780 to defend the mouth of St. Thomas harbor from rival colonial powers and privateers. The location and design of the battery were planned by Lt. Peter Lotharius Oxholm, the Danish military officer who surveyed defensive works and prepared island maps throughout the Danish West Indies.⁴ Figure 1 shows a circa 1780 plan view of the battery by Oxholm. The battery was the last of several Danish colonial fortifications built around St. Thomas harbor, including the 1672 Fort Christian and two fortified towers on the hills above Charlotte Amalie: the 1679 Blackbeard's Castle (originally called Skytsborg), and the 1689 Bluebeard's Castle.⁵

According to local sources, the battery saw action during a skirmish between the Danish brig *HDMS Lougen* and the British vessel *HMS Arab*. The encounter happened on March 3, 1801, just weeks before the British occupied St. Thomas for the first time. The British ship was patrolling the waters south of St. Thomas after receiving orders to stop all Danish, Swedish, and Russian ships. The *Arab* challenged the *Lougen* as it was headed into St. Thomas Harbor. The *Lougen* responded with a broadside that opened a 40-minute engagement that left both vessels damaged. The *Lougen* managed to escape into the harbor under the protective guns of the battery, which fired round and grape shot at the *Arab*, causing it to break off the engagement. The skirmish was the first sign to St. Thomas that Denmark was at war with Britain.⁶

On March 27th, 1801, the British returned to St. Thomas and occupied the island without resistance. After his arrival in 1801, British Lt. General Thomas Trigge ordered forces to fortify Hassel Island for the occupation. Trigge's orders were carried out under the planning and direction of Lt. Col. Charles Shipley, who refurbished the battery and renamed it Fort Willoughby, and built Shipley's and Cowell's Batteries. This work resulted in the creation of three heavily armed batteries guarding St. Thomas harbor.

In February of 1802 news that Britain had ended its state of war with Denmark reached St. Thomas and British troops were withdrawn from Hassel Island. The Treaty of Amiens followed in March 1802, which ended the war with France and ushered in a short-lived period of peace

³ Ibid.

⁴ Daniel Hopkins, "Peter Lotharius Oxholm and Late Eighteenth-Century Danish West Indian Cartography," in "Historical Geography of St. Croix, United State Virgin Islands," University of Missouri-Kansas City, <http://cas.umkc.edu/stcroix/mapping/framesetOxholm.htm>.

⁵ Frederik C. Gjessing and William P. Maclean, *Historic Buildings of St. Thomas and St. John* (London: Macmillan Education, Inc., 1987), 32-37.

⁶ Stephen R. James, Jr., "Submerged Cultural Resources Survey of an Area Adjacent to Prince Frederik's Battery, Hassel Island, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands," Panamerican Consultants, Inc., Memphis, TN, 2011, 1; St. Thomas Historical Trust, "The French Revolutionary War & The Napoleonic Wars," <http://www.hasselisland.org/history/war/>, accessed October 21, 2013.

between the two nations. In April of the same year the British formally returned St. Thomas to the Danish government.⁷

Over a year later, in June 1803, the Royal Danish Council requested a survey of the British buildings on Hassel Island to determine whether or not they were still in usable condition. The survey report did not mention Fort Willoughby but it did produce two maps that illustrate its location and relationship to the other British buildings on Hassel Island.

Britain again declared war against France in 1803 and Denmark in 1807, resulting in the second occupation of the Danish West Indies from 1807-1815. In December 1807, St. Thomas surrendered to a combined army and navy force of 2,500 troops commanded by Admiral Alexander Cochran and General Henry Bowyer. Fort Willoughby and the other fortifications on Hassel Island were re-established and expanded to accommodate a new regiment of troops.⁸ An ordnance report stated that in 1812 Fort Willoughby was armed with two 18-pound guns, and in 1813 with two 18-pounders, one 8-pounder, and one 6-pounder.⁹

In 1815 British troops withdrew from St. Thomas and turned the Virgin Islands back over to Denmark following the defeat of Napoleon and the signing of the Treaty of Paris. No records found for this report tell how Fort Willoughby was used by the government of St. Thomas after the second British occupation. A ca. 1900 postcard image of the battery in Figure 2 shows it with three canons still in original position.

By the early twentieth century the battery was in ruins, as were all of the other British fortifications on Hassel Island. In 1948, the dire physical state of Fort Willoughby attracted the attention of Isador Paiewonsky, whose family owned most of Hassel Island at that time. Paiewonsky approached the local government, which owned the battery site, and said “Restore it or let me do it – but there’s no time to wait.” The government accepted his offer and sold the property to him for a token \$500 with the understanding that he would restore it and keep it open for public access. “This was a jungle when I got it,” said Paiewonsky. “Acacia was covering the terrace and the acacia tree roots were ripping up the old stone – you couldn’t see a terrace. And the fort! There were four or five big manchineel trees inside and what was left of the structure

⁷ Charles W. Consolvo, “Black Soldiers in Paradise: Can the Presence of British West Indian Regiments on St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands be Confirmed From Surface Artifacts?” (Master’s Thesis, University of Leicester School of Archaeology and Ancient History, 2010), 16; Roger Norman Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), 259.

⁸ Carl Peter Nissen, “The Diary of Captain Carl Peter Nissen, 1792-1837,” referenced in “Military Significance of Hassel Island,” manuscript on file at the St. Thomas Historical Trust; Buckley, 262-65.

⁹ Ordnance on St. Thomas, transcripts of correspondence located in The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom, WO 55/237, 256-260, WO 55/239/52, WO 55/240/26, WO 55/212.

you could push in with your hands. It was only a matter of time – two years at most – before it would be destroyed completely.”¹⁰

Paiewonsky hired masons to restore the battery and supervised their work on a daily basis, removing trees and “rebuilding with whatever bricks and stone were available. In fact, every time an old house was being destroyed in St. Thomas, I went with a truck to get the bricks for the restoration.”¹¹ Paiewonsky’s historic preservation efforts effectively saved Prince Frederik’s Battery for the rest of the twentieth century.

In 2010, the St. Thomas Historical Trust received an American Battlefield Protection Program grant to conduct an underwater archaeological survey and architectural study of Fort Willoughby. The work completed architectural drawings of the buildings and structures, a report recommending preservation work for the complex, as well as digital laser scans of the battery and a 3D virtual reconstruction of the site as it appeared after its construction in the late-eighteenth century. Using recommendations from the report, the St. Thomas Historical Trust hired masons to repair and replace sections of deteriorated masonry in the battery. The archaeological survey located previously identified nineteenth century ship debris, a ballast pile, and cannon balls associated with the battery.¹²

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¹⁰ Penny Feuerzeig, “Hassel Restoration: ‘Labor of Love,’” *The Daily News*, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, 30 March, 1977, 1, 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² St. Thomas Historical Trust, “American Battlefield Protection Program Grant,” <http://www.hasselisland.org/projects/abpp-grant/>, accessed October 22, 2013.

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St. Thomas Historical Trust

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Historian: David L. Price, New South Associates, February 2014.

Project Information: HABS documentation of Napoleonic War resources on Hassel Island was conducted by Lord Aeck Sargent (LAS) under contract to the National Park Service (NPS). Rob Yallop of LAS served as Project Manager, leading a team of architects in preparing the measured drawings. Atkins Global conducted 3D laser scanning of the resources under the direction of Roberto Mantecon. David Diener of New South Associates (NSA) was responsible for the large format photography while David Price of NSA conducted archival research and prepared the narrative reports. Steven Hammack supported the history research with research in the United Kingdom. Dennis McCarthy of the NPS served as the manager for this project while Robert Arzola, HABS Architect, served as technical reviewer.

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