

HASSEL ISLAND
Virgin Islands National Park
Hassel Island Historic District
Charlotte Amalie vicinity
St. Thomas
Virgin Islands (Us)

HABS VI-166
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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
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HASSEL ISLAND

HABS No. VI-166

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

Hassel Island is in UTM Zone 20. The coordinates are 64.9344 W and 18.3293 N, and were obtained in March 2014 with NAD 1983. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Historic Context: Hassel Island During the Napoleonic Wars, 1793-1815

Hassel Island was a key British military base in the Caribbean during the Napoleonic Wars that followed the French Revolution in 1793. During this time, Great Britain and its coalition allies fought against Napoleon Bonaparte's aggressive expansion of the French Empire across Europe. British and French colonies in the Caribbean were crucial to both sides' war efforts as the plantations and natural resources of the Caribbean supplied great wealth that financed much of the fighting in Europe. Britain also sought to conquer and occupy Dutch and Danish colonies in the region in order to deny their strategic and commercial advantages to the French.¹ As a result, Britain twice seized and occupied the Danish West Indies, including St. Thomas and Hassel Island, from 1801-1802 and again from 1807-1815.

Alliances among nations continually shifted due to diplomacy and conquest during the Napoleonic Wars. Though not initially involved in these wars, Denmark's reliance on its overseas merchant trade and its Caribbean colonies in the Danish West Indies, including the islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John, brought it into conflict with Britain by 1800. In response to Britain's blockade of France and the Royal Navy's seizure of neutral merchant ships with cargos bound for France, Denmark's Crown Prince Frederik decided to protect his nation's trading interests by joining the League of Armed Neutrality, which used a warship convoy system to protect merchant vessels. This alliance was made among Russia, Sweden, Prussia, and Denmark.² Incensed, the British sent a fleet of ships to Copenhagen to force the Danish navy to stand down and to convince Prince Frederik and his ministers to withdraw from the league. These diplomatic measures failed and resulted in the Battle of Copenhagen in April 1801, which nearly destroyed the Danish navy and forced them to abandon the league. This battle was won by British Rear Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson's bold attack and refusal to obey orders to discontinue action.³

¹ Roger Norman Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida), 253-256.

² Christopher Hibbert, *Nelson: A Personal History* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), 253; Stephen Pope, "Campaigns in the West Indies" in *Dictionary of the Napoleonic Wars* (Facts on File, New York, 1999), 519-520.

³ Hibbert, 255-267; Pope, 69, 149.

At the same time that it crushed the Danish navy at home, Britain turned its attention to tensions with Denmark's Caribbean colonies. Privately-owned ships authorized by France to attack British ships, called "privateers," operated with impunity in the Danish West Indies. Britain sought to extinguish French influence in the Caribbean and made plans to seize the Danish West Indies.⁴

Britain's war with Denmark made its way to St. Thomas in March of 1801. On March 3, a British warship engaged a Danish warship on the south side of St. Thomas. Cannon fire from Prince Frederik's Battery (Fort Willoughby) assisted the Danish ship as it retreated into St. Thomas harbor and eventually drove off the British ship. This skirmish was the first sign to the local Danish government that their nation was at war with Britain. On March 27th 1801, a fleet of 29 British warships arrived in St. Thomas where the clearly overpowered Danish government surrendered without a fight.⁵

A detachment of British troops was stationed in St. Thomas under the command of Lieutenant General Thomas Trigge, who made plans to fortify the peninsula at the mouth of the harbor now known as Hassel Island. The north and south peaks of the peninsula and its southeastern tip were previously identified in 1780 as strategic defensive positions by Lieutenant Peter Lotharius Oxholm, the Danish military officer who surveyed and mapped defensive works throughout the Danish West Indies.⁶ His map of Hassel Island is shown in Figure 1. At this time, the peninsula was connected to the mainland by a narrow spit of land at its north end that was later removed in 1864 by the Danish government to improve water circulation in the harbor.

Prior to the British occupation, the peninsula was known as Estate Orkanhullet and was owned by James Hazzel, Sr. Hazzel, also spelled "Hassel," owned a house and complex of buildings on the ridge at the midpoint of the island and operated a careening wharf for ship repair in Careening Cove. By 1806, the careening wharf was jointly owned between James Hazzel, Sr., and his son James Hazzel, Jr.⁷ The Hazzel's ownership and control of the island was interrupted by the British occupation.

After his arrival in 1801, Trigge ordered forces to fortify Hassel Island for the occupation. In a letter to the war office dated April 13, 1801, Trigge reported:

As the town [Charlotte Amalie] is considered to be particular unhealthy and the Fort is situated at one of the extremities; I have thought it necessary, as well as on

⁴ Isaac Dookhan, *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies), 47; Buckley, 258.

⁵ Frederik C. Gjessing, "Historic Resource Study, Hassel Island, U.S. Virgin Islands," 1981, 9.

⁶ 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>.

⁷ Gjessing, 11.

this account, as to afford greater protection to the place to order the Post to be established on the Peninsula which forms the West Side of the Bay; and have directed barracks to be erected capable of containing two hundred men, to be built by contract and completed by the 28 of the next month.⁸

Trigge's orders were carried out under the planning and direction of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Shipley of the Royal Engineers, who used enslaved laborers conscripted from local plantation owners to build Shipley's Battery, Cowell's Battery, and other fortifications on Hassel Island. Shipley also refurbished Prince Frederik's Battery, the 1780 Danish battery on the southeastern tip of the island, and renamed it Fort Willoughby.⁹

Shipley submitted a letter report on July 16, 1801, that listed the structures and construction costs to date during the first occupation of Hassel Island. Among these were "Fort Shipley, including the Officers, and Men's Guard House, Store Rooms, Casemated Magazines, Flagstaff, Palisades, Etc." Other facilities inventoried in this report were the Officer's Quarters Complex, British Barracks Complex, Cowell's Battery, and other support buildings and structures. The total cost of construction was \$51,316.¹⁰

In this letter, Shipley also provided cost estimates and promised to provide plans of the works on Hassel Island as soon as he received them from his subordinates. He stated that although nothing had been done that was not absolutely necessary, he felt compelled to explain the "striking difference in the compensation for gun carriages at St. Thomas" than that spent on other captured islands. Shipley wrote that since the existing Danish carriages were barely serviceable, and no materials were in store, he found that several carriages and traversing platforms were required due to the nature of the works, but that if needed they could be removed to the older colonies.¹¹

Shipley's works on Hassel Island featured common construction techniques for temporary British fortifications in the Caribbean. Shipley's Battery, Cowell's Battery, and the cookhouses were of masonry construction but all barracks and other buildings on Hassel Island were wood frame on masonry foundations. The British used substantial masonry barracks buildings in their more permanent Caribbean bases such as those atop Shirley Heights, Antigua.¹²

A short-lived time of peace between Britain and France was created by the Treaty of Amiens, which was signed in preliminary form in October 1801 and finalized in March 1802. Napoleon

⁸ "Military Significance of Hassel Island," manuscript on file at the St. Thomas Historical Trust, no date, 1.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Lt. Col. Charles Shipley, National Archives, British (NAB), War Office (WO) Papers, WO 55/943.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Buckley, 328.

and his ministers sensed British war-weariness and pressed for every concession France could get. British appeasement meant that France kept control of the Netherlands, the German states along the western bank of the Rhine River, as well as Savoy, Piedmont, and Nice. Additionally, Britain agreed to return nearly all its colonial conquests to the *status quo ante bellum*, which meant that British occupying forces throughout the world had to withdraw from colonies previously owned by France or its allies.

British troops withdrew from the Danish West Indies in February 1802, based on the terms of the preliminary treaty. In April of the same year the British formally returned St. Thomas to the Danish government.¹³ An 1801 document itemizing troop pay in the “Danish Islands” shows the considerable expenditure of £2,237, 5 shillings, and 11 ³/₄ pence for the following occupying units:

- General and Staff Officers
- Royal Artillery
- 2nd West India Regiment
- 8th West India Regiment
- 3rd Regiment Foot
- 11th or North Devon
- 64th Regiment
- 1st Battalion Royals
- 10th West India Regiment
- 14th Regiment
- 20th Regiment
- 37th Regiment
- 39th Regiment
- 53rd Regiment
- 57th Regiment
- 59th Regiment
- 60th Regiment
- 68th Regiment
- Royal Engineers
- Royal Military Artificers

Over a year later, in June 1803, the Royal Danish Council requested a survey of the British buildings on Hassel Island to determine their condition.¹⁴ The 1803 Danish survey also produced two maps that offer detailed historic illustrations of the British buildings on Hassel

¹³ Consolvo, 16; Buckley, 259.

¹⁴ “Chamber of Customs – Older part, The West India and Guinea Revenue Office, Documents concerning the defense authorities and the fortifications in the West Indies I-II, 1775-1832,” Copenhagen, Denmark, The National Archives, 365:466, manuscript in possession of Charles W. Consolvo, St. Thomas.

Island (Figures 2 and 3). The survey described the dimensions and state of the island's buildings, which were at that time in generally good condition.

Despite the Treaty of Amiens, continued French aggression across Europe led Britain to again declare war against France in 1803. For the next several years Denmark attempted to remain neutral in the conflict. British traders in St. Thomas wrote to the king's Privy Council in August 1807, beseeching their government to guarantee British property and for "measures to be taken to avert the Evils which threaten."¹⁵ British patience with Denmark finally wore out in September 1807 when a Royal Navy fleet of 25 ships of the line and 29,000 troops was sent to Copenhagen. The British fleet bombarded the city for three nights, during which 2,000 civilians died and much of the city burned. The Danish government surrendered, handing over 17 ships of the line, stores, and equipment to the withdrawing British. This only encouraged Denmark to enter the war on France's side the very next month.¹⁶

The British again turned their attention to the Danish West Indies and re-occupied St. Thomas that December. This second occupation from 1807-1815 was intended to eliminate France's ability to trade on the islands or use them as staging areas for invasions of British islands.¹⁷ St. Thomas surrendered to a combined army and navy force of 2,500 troops commanded by Admiral Alexander Cochran and General Henry Bowyer. Brigadier General Sir Charles Shipley, who was by this time promoted and knighted, still commanded the Royal Engineers in the West Indies. Shipley sent a report, a plan, and a cost estimate to the Office of Ordnance on February 28, 1808, detailing his plans for improvements to the his 1801 structures. Unfortunately, none of these documents were located at the National Archives during research conducted for this report, although a letter from the Office of Ordnance regarding Shipley's report is extant and dated May 30, 1808.¹⁸

The batteries and other fortifications on Hassel Island were re-established and expanded to accommodate a new regiment of troops.¹⁹ It was at this time that the Garrison House magazine was built to house the ordnance used at Fort Willoughby, which was armed with 6, 8, and 18-pound cannons.²⁰ The earliest depiction of the Garrison House found for this HABS documentation is the 1873 French map of St. Thomas harbor and Hassel Island in Figure 4.

The British troops stationed on Hassel Island from 1807-1815 saw no fighting during their occupation. Most of the war's action during this time took place on the French islands of

¹⁵ NAB, Privy Council (PC), PC 1/3786, no date.

¹⁶ Pope 149, 160.

¹⁷ Dookhan, 47; Buckley, 264-65.

¹⁸ NAB, WO 55/943.

¹⁹ 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, 2; Buckley, 262-65.

²⁰ 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.

Martinique and Guadeloupe.²¹ In 1815 British troops withdrew from St. Thomas and turned the Virgin Islands back over to Denmark following the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo and the signing of the Treaty of Paris. Small parcels of land surrounding each of the batteries on the island were transferred to the local Danish government while the remainder reverted back to the Hazzel family, who operated a careening wharf there for much of the nineteenth century.²²

The Danish government sold their three Caribbean islands to the United States in 1917, just over a century after the British occupation ended. The 1918 aerial photograph in Figure 5 shows Hassel Island and Charlotte Amalie shortly after the sale. The photo reveals that by this time Shipley's Battery was overgrown with vegetation and only the foundations of the British Officers' Quarters Complex remained. The Officers' Mess, however, still retained its roof. Other structures recorded for this HABS documentation are also visible in the photograph, including the Hassel House, the Lime Kiln, the Coal Barge on the western shore of Careening Cove, and the Hamburg America Line complex in Careening Cove.

By the 1940s, the Napoleonic War-era fortifications on Hassel Island had deteriorated further into overgrown ruins. In 1948, the dire 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 and purchased both Fort Willoughby and the Garrison House to restore them. In 1978, the Paiewonsky family sold the majority of Hassel Island to the U.S. Department of the Interior as part of the Virgin Islands National Park, with two sites, the Garrison House and Fort Willoughby, given to the government of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Since 2006, the St. Thomas Historical Trust has worked with the Virgin Islands National Park to clean Hassel Island's shoreline, produce a documentary film about the island's history, clear hiking trails, and promote tourism of the island's historic sites.

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²¹ Buckley, 265.

²² Gjessing, 12-13.

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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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