

COWELL'S BATTERY
Virgin Islands National Park
Hassel Island Historic District
Charlotte Amalie vicinity
St. Thomas
Virgin Islands (Us)

HABS VI-167
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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
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

COWELL'S BATTERY

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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 295748 N 2027299.

Cowell's Battery on Hassel Island is in UTM Zone 20. The coordinates are 64.932576 W and 18.325658 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: Cowell's Battery is a rare example of British military architecture from the Napoleonic War era (1793-1815) on U.S. soil. The battery was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978 under Criteria A and C in the areas of Architecture, Commerce, and Military.¹ The battery is associated with the British occupations of St. Thomas in 1801-1802 and 1807-1815 during the Napoleonic Wars. Located on the peak at the southern end of Hassel Island, the figure-eight shaped Cowell's Battery provided a two-gun position controlling the entrance to the Charlotte Amalie harbor. Together with Shipley's Battery in the north and Prince Frederik's Battery (renamed Fort Willoughby by the British) on the southeast tip of the island, British troops had command over any ships approaching the harbor from the east, west, and south.

Description: Cowell's Battery is a two-gun position composed of two equal-sized intersecting circles that form a figure-eight shape. The interior diameter of each circle is 20'-6". The battery is entered on the west side by a masonry staircase and a 5' opening in the walls.

The battery walls are constructed of rubble masonry with red brick copings and corners. The top of the battery walls are 6'-4" wide and slope down from the inside to the outside edges, and the wall thickness at the bottom where they reach grade vary from 12' to 15' thick. The interior of the battery walls are 5' high and the floor is paved with flat stone. On the southeast end of the battery next to the entrance stairs is a plastered rubble-masonry cistern.²

Located just east and downhill from the battery are the remains of a rubble masonry guardhouse foundation. The foundation was not cleared at the time of field work and photographic documentation.

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

² Frederik C. Gjessing, "Historic Resource Study, Hassel Island, U.S. Virgin Islands," 1981, 25-26.

History: Cowell's Battery was built during the first British occupation of St. Thomas and the Danish West Indies from March 1801 through February 1802. The site of Cowell's Battery was previously identified in 1780 by Lt. Peter Lotharius Oxholm, the Danish military officer who surveyed defensive works and prepared island maps throughout the Danish West Indies.³

The construction of Cowell's Battery was carried out under the planning and direction of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Shipley. The battery was named in honor of Lieutenant Colonel John Clayton Cowell, who commanded the army battalion stationed on St. Thomas. Cowell died during the occupation and was buried on Hassel Island. Shipley also oversaw construction of Shipley's Battery and he rebuilt Prince Frederik's Battery, a 1780 Danish battery on the southeastern tip of the island that the British renamed Fort Willoughby.⁴

Shipley submitted a report in June 1801 that listed the structures and construction costs to date during the first occupation of Hassel Island. The report stated that Cowell's Battery was under construction "on the high ground to the south of the peninsula for two 24 pdrs. [24 pound guns] heavy mounted on traversing platforms with all appendages connected therewith." The cost of construction was \$5,000. Other facilities inventoried in this report were the Officer's Quarters Complex, the British Barracks Complex, Shipley's Battery, and other support buildings and structures.⁵

After the British withdrew from St. Thomas in 1802, 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 1803 written inventory did not discuss Cowell's Battery but its accompanying map did illustrate the structure and what appears to have been a rectangular guardhouse on its east side. A second 1803 Danish map of Hassel Island shows a similar view, except it does not show the guardhouse at the Cowell's Battery.

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 of 1807 St. Thomas surrendered to a combined British army and navy force of 2,500 troops commanded by Admiral Alexander Cochran and General Henry Bowyer. Cowell's Battery and the other fortifications on Hassel Island were re-established and expanded to accommodate a new regiment of troops.⁶

³ 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>.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Lt. Col. Charles Shipley, "General abstract of Lieut. Roger's estimate, dated the 28th of June 1801," The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom, War Office (WO), Record 1/90, 1.

⁶ 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.

Ordnance reports from 1812 and 1813 stated that Cowell's Battery was armed with two 18-pound guns with associated carriages and ammunition.⁷

In 1815 British troops withdrew from St. Thomas and turned the Danish West Indies back over to Denmark following the defeat of Napoleon and the signing of the Treaty of Paris. Cowell's Battery was abandoned for much of the nineteenth century until it was transformed into a signal station to signal the arrival of ships into St. Thomas harbor (see HABS VI-167-A for documentation of the Cowell's Battery, Signal Station Barracks).

Sources:

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Danish Royal Council

1803 "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, U.S. Virgin Islands.

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⁷ 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.

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n.d. "Hassel Island's Signals Speak No More – Station Closing Ends Method Which Dates Back 200 Years." *The Weekly Journal*. Undated newspaper clipping in possession of Charles W. Consolvo, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas.

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1976 "Hassel Island." National Register of Historic Places Nomination.

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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