

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

HABS VI-167-A  
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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, SIGNAL STATION BARRACKS**

**HABS VI-167-A**

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 295727 N 2027290.

The Signal Station at Cowell's Battery on Hassel Island is in UTM Zone 20. The coordinates are 64.932851 W and 18.325628 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: The Signal Station Barracks at Cowell's Battery are significant for their association with St. Thomas's bustling harbor traffic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The resources were listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 as part of the same nomination that listed Cowell's Battery (HABS VI-167), which listed them under Criteria A and C in the areas of Architecture, Commerce, and Military.<sup>1</sup> In the late-nineteenth century Charlotte Amalie was a thriving commercial port and Cowell's Battery was transformed into a maritime signal station. The station was used to signal the arrival of ships to people in St. Thomas harbor by raising and lowering black balls called "day shapes" on a mast and yardarm erected within the former battery's walls. A barracks and latrine were added to the site to house the station's four-person staff.<sup>2</sup> The Signal Station at Cowell's Battery remained an important transportation element of the harbor from the nineteenth century until it was closed in 1974.

Description: The signal station was added to the ruins of Cowell's Battery (described in HABS No. VI-167) in the late nineteenth century. The original signal station mast was wooden and located on top of the battery's east wall where the battery's two circle structures intersect. At an unknown date the original wood mast was removed and replaced with a steel mast and yardarm positioned on the south side of the battery's interior.

Immediately south of the battery is the signal station barracks, also called the signal tender's station. It is a one-story masonry building with stucco exterior and a hipped metal roof on wood rafters. The overall dimensions of the building measure approximately 24'x38'. A 5'-wide gallery porch with metal columns and a wood baluster runs along the west and south sides of the building. The interior contains three rooms with wood wall partitions, wood plank floors, and bead-board ceilings. Each room has its own exterior entrance. The building retains original

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

<sup>2</sup> The Signal Station Latrine is recorded for the collection under HABS No. VI-167-B.

wood storm doors and storm shutters with original hardware. There is a 12'x8' masonry cistern with stucco exterior on the southwest corner of the building.<sup>3</sup>

Just north of the barracks is a one-story latrine building with a flat poured-concrete roof, brick exterior, and a rubble masonry foundation. The building measures approximately 6'x8'. The entrance is on the south elevation. The east and west elevations each have two louvered windows, with an additional louvered window on the north elevation.<sup>4</sup>

History: After the British occupations of St. Thomas in 1801-1802 and 1807-1815 Cowell's Battery was abandoned until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The earliest document showing the signal station at the former battery, labeled "Signal Cowel" (sic) is the 1873 French map of the St. Thomas harbor. The map shows buildings in the locations of the present-day signal station barracks and latrine. It is not known whether these are earlier buildings that were eventually replaced with the present barracks and latrine. No records were found for this HABS documentation that put a definitive construction date on the barracks and latrine, although a previous investigation claims they were built by the U.S. Navy while stationed on Hassel Island from 1917-31.<sup>6</sup>

The signal station, known locally as "Signal Hill," became an essential part of port operations in Charlotte Amalie harbor until it was closed in 1974. It was used to alert port authorities, merchants, and residents when a ship was coming into port. The tall mast and yardarm at the signal station hoisted five black ball-shaped signals (later intersecting discs) called "day shapes" that could be arranged to tell whether the vessel approached the harbor from the east, southeast, southwest, or west; the type of craft it was; its nationality; if it was in distress; and whether it needed a channel pilot to guide it safely into port.<sup>7</sup> The day shapes were visible by the naked eye from the mainland and are shown in Figures 1 and 2 at the end of this report. An explanation of the signal system is included in Figure 3.

The signals were particularly important to St. Thomas's large ship repair industry in the late-nineteenth century. Each repair company employed a boat with a crew of rowers who were dispatched to the approaching ship. "The first one out to the arriving ship usually had the overhaul [repair] work," said Isidor Paiewonsky, local historian and former resident of Hassel Island, "and the merchant had to depend on the speed in answering the signals and the brawn of

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<sup>3</sup> Frederik C. Gjessing, "Historic Resource Study, Hassel Island, U.S. Virgin Islands," 1981, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> St. Thomas Historical Trust, "Cowell's Battery & Signal Station," <http://www.hasselisland.org/sites/cowells-battery-signal-station/>, accessed October 22, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Stipe, "Hassel Island's Signals Speak No More – Station Closing Ends Method Which Dates Back 200 Years," *The Weekly Journal*, March 1 [year not shown], no page number, newspaper clipping in possession of Charles W. Consolvo, St. Thomas.

his rowers to get first chance at the business.”<sup>8</sup> These services made St. Thomas renowned in the Caribbean for its ship repair services.

The signal station was staffed with four men called signal tenders who worked 24-hour shifts and lived in the barracks building. One of the signal tenders was named Albert George, who worked for 17 years at the station. George related that he and the other signal tenders learned to tell when a vessel was about 30 minutes out of the harbor before they sent for a channel pilot so that he was on hand at the right moment. The signal station was closed by the Port Authority in the 1974 after most ships had transitioned to radio communications and day shapes became obsolete.<sup>9</sup>

Sources:

Gjessing, Frederik C.

1981 “Historic Resource Study, Hassel Island, U.S. Virgin Islands.” Draft report on file at the Virgin Islands National Park.

Stipe, Sylvia

n.d. “Hassel Island’s Signals Speak No More – Station Closing Ends Method Which Dates Back 200 Years.” *The Weekly Journal*, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas. March 1 [year not shown], no page number shown. Newspaper clipping in possession of Charles W. Consolvo, St. Thomas.

St. Thomas Historical Trust

2013 “Cowell’s Battery & Signal Station.” Available at <http://www.hasselisland.org/sites/cowells-battery-signal-station/>. Accessed October 22, 2013.

Historian: David L. Price, New South Associates

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

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., no page number.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., no page number.

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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