

BRITISH BARRACKS COMPLEX
(1801 British Barracks)
Virgin Islands National Park
Hassel Island Historic District
Charlotte Amalie vicinity
St. Thomas
Virgin Islands (Us)

HABS VI-168
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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

BRITISH BARRACKS COMPLEX

HABS VI-168

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 295588 N 2027586.

The British Barracks Complex on Hassel Island is in UTM Zone 20. The coordinates are 64.93419 W and 18.3279 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 ruins of the British Barracks Complex are a significant component of the British military fortifications on Hassel Island built during the Napoleonic War era (1793-1815). The barracks were built during the British occupation of St. Thomas in 1801-1802 during the Napoleonic Wars. The barracks were then re-used and expanded during the second British occupation of the island from 1807-1815. The complex included five barracks designed to house 48 soldiers each, a kitchen, cisterns, housing for non-commissioned officers, and a separate living quarters for married soldiers. At least two companies of British West India Regiment soldiers, composed of enslaved African-American soldiers and European officers, were stationed on Hassel Island during the first British occupation.

Description: The British Barracks Complex is located on the ridge immediately south of Careening Cove. The ruins are generally oriented east-west across their broad hilltop location. The ruins primarily consist of masonry foundations of former wooden buildings, including five barracks building foundations, a latrine, guardhouse, and a magazine located a short distance downhill to the north. The stone walls of the barracks kitchen and a cistern are still standing.¹

The five barracks foundations are lined up parallel to one another from east to west. They are composed of rubble masonry with brick used in corners. Their overall dimensions measure approximately 18'x20' and are spaced approximately 20' apart. The foundation walls measure approximately 2' wide and vary in height from 6" to 3' in height. They are in very poor condition.

South of the barracks foundations are the rubble masonry walls of the barracks kitchen, or cookhouse. The kitchen measures approximately 9'x18' in plan and the walls are approximately 18" in width. Brick masonry is used on the building's corners and on the one remaining window frame on the east elevation. Gjessing (1981) states that at the time of his survey there was evidence that the building was divided into two rooms and the cooking bench was intact, but

¹ The kitchen is recorded for the collection under HABS No. VI-168-A.

these features are no longer visible. Immediately southwest of the kitchen are the rubble masonry remains of what is thought to be a rum locker.

At the west end of the barracks complex is the area's one remaining cistern. The cistern measures approximately 12'x14' and have rubble masonry walls approximately 2' wide and 6' high. There are traces of original plaster on the interior of the walls.

Immediately west of the cistern are the remains of the latrine, an approximately 5' square rubble masonry foundation with brick corners.

Downhill and to the east of the barracks are the rubble masonry remains of the guardhouse. The original building measured approximately 20'x30' with walls approximately 2' in width, but only portions of the east and south wall remain.

History: The British Barracks Complex was constructed during the first British occupation of St. Thomas in 1801. The complex was designed to house the troops who were stationed at newly constructed Shipley's Battery and Cowell's Battery.

British military garrison buildings in the Caribbean varied greatly in design and building materials, from permanent stone and brick structures to more temporary wood frame buildings.² Those on Hassel Island represented the latter group, with the exception of masonry kitchen buildings. The five barracks buildings featured wood frame construction on rubble masonry foundations. According to British documents, the barracks were designed to house 48 men each.³ There were also separate living quarters for married soldiers and non-commissioned officers.

The complex included all of the support buildings necessary for a military garrison, including a masonry kitchen that was described as having "a brick Chimney and built in Iron Grating."⁴ Other buildings and structures included a magazine, guardhouse, and cisterns.

When the British invaded St. Thomas on March 28, 1801, their forces included a total of approximately 4,500 troops. Documents show that of that original force, 350 were stationed on St. Thomas and Hassel Island.⁵

² Buckley, Roger Norman, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 327.

³ "List of Structures and Costs Constructed During the First British Occupation of Hassel Island, An Abstract from a Record Dated 28 June 1801," manuscript in possession of Charles W. Consolvo, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, USVI.

⁴ "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," Record Group 365:466, The National Archives, Copenhagen, Denmark, manuscript in possession of Charles W. Consolvo, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, USVI.

Among the troops stationed there were at least two companies of the West India Regiment, a British infantry regiment formed in the year 1795. The regiment recruited free African-Caribbean people along with enslaved Africans purchased by the British military to reinforce the regular British regiments in the region, which were decimated by diseases like malaria, yellow fever, and alcoholism. From 1795 to 1808 the British purchased nearly 14,000 enslaved Africans and created twelve individual regiments, which were commanded by British officers and non-commissioned officers.⁶

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 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 resulting report described the barracks complex, noting that most of its buildings were at that time “in good Condition.”⁸ The 1803 Danish survey also produced two maps that offer the most detailed historic illustrations available of the 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. The enlisted men’s barracks and the other fortifications on Hassel Island were re-established and expanded to accommodate a new

⁵ Manuscript in possession of Charles W. Consolvo, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, USVI, based on records in the United Kingdom’s Public Record Office (PRO), War Office (WO), including WO 64/136, 1801.

⁶ Rene Chartrand and Paul Chappell, *British Forces in the West Indies, 1793-1815* (London: Reed International Books, 1996), 18; 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?,” A Dissertation Submitted to the Academic Staff of the University of Leicester School of Archaeology and Ancient History, 2010.

⁷ Consolvo, 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 “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.

regiment of troops.⁹ According to one source, the additional troops were housed in new barracks built in Careening Cove.¹⁰ The remains of these barracks have not been identified.

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. The fortifications on Hassel Island were abandoned and the wood frame buildings of the barracks complex fell into disrepair. In 1978, Hassel Island was sold by the Paiewonsky family to the National Park Service. Today, all that remains of the barracks complex are stone foundations, the masonry walls of the kitchen, and a single cistern.

Sources:

Buckley, Roger Norman.

1998 *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

Consolvo, Charles W.

2010 "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.

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.

Gjessing, Frederik C.

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

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ "Military Significance of Hassel Island," manuscript on file at the St. Thomas Historical Trust, 2.

Nissen, Carl Peter

- n.d. "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 Museum, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas.

St. Thomas Historical Trust

- n.d. "1801 British Barracks Complex," available at <http://www.hasselisland.org/sites/1801-british-barracks-complex/>, accessed December 3, 2013.
- n.d. "Military Significance of Hassel Island." Manuscript on file at the St. Thomas Historical Trust Museum, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas.

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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