

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

HABS VI-171
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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

SHIPLEY'S BATTERY

HABS VI-171

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 295301 N 2028284, NAD 1983

ShipleY's Battery on Hassel Island is in UTM Zone 20. The coordinates are 64.936797 W and 18.334315 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: ShipleY's Battery is a rare example of British military defensive 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 as part of the Northern Hassel Island Historic District and listed under NRHP Criteria A and C in the areas of Archaeology-Historic, Architecture, Commerce, Engineering, Industry, Military, and Transportation.¹ The battery was built during the first British occupation of St. Thomas in 1801-1802 and renovated for the second occupation from 1807-1815. Located on a peak at the north end of Hassel Island, the thick masonry walls of ShipleY's Battery provided a five-gun position controlling the western approaches to the Gregerie Channel. Together with Cowell's Battery and Fort Willoughby (originally called Prince Frederik's Battery) on the south end of the island, British occupying forces had commanding force over any ship approaching Charlotte Amalie harbor.

Description: ShipleY's Battery is a five-gun position facing west to the approaches of the Gregerie Channel. The structure is composed of rubble masonry with yellow brick lining the corners and gun embrasures. There are also the ruins of a masonry guardhouse 20 yards west of the battery.² Originally, the battery had a wooden palisade wall surrounding the guardhouse and east side of the battery, creating an enclosed fort.

The battery consists of two semi-circular gun positions 23' in diameter, which flank a central three-sided parapet wall that measures 38' long. The flanking positions have raised infantry banquettes, or foot paths, that run along the length of the interior walls. Below the banquettes are raised, circular masonry floors where cannons were placed.

The three-sided central parapet contains three gun embrasures, or openings, that open out from approximately 2' wide on the interior to 6' wide on the exterior. Between the embrasures are additional banquettes. The exterior of the battery wall varies from 8' to 15', and the interior height is 5' high from floor to coping. The width of the battery walls vary from 6' to 10'.

¹ Annie Hillary, Russell Wright, and Thomas Richards, Virgin Islands Planning Office, "Northern Hassel Island Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1978.

² The guardhouse is included in the collection as HABS No. VI-171-A.

The ruins of the guardhouse are 21' feet square. The west wall contains two door openings, and the other three walls each contain two window openings. The walls measure 1'x6" in width and are approximately 8' high. The building likely had a frame pyramid roof. The walls are composed of rubble masonry with red and yellow brick lining the corners and openings, and they exhibit traces of the original plaster finish.³

History: Shipley's Battery was built during the first British occupation of St. Thomas from March 1801 through February 1802. The site of Shipley's Battery was previously identified in the late 1770s by Lt. Peter Lotharius Oxholm, who recommended the north and south peaks of Hassel Island as strategic defensive locations.⁴

The construction of Shipley's Battery was carried out under the planning and direction of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Shipley, after whom it was named.⁵ Shipley submitted a report in June 1801 that listed the structures and construction costs to date during the first occupation of Hassel Island. Among these was "Fort Shipley, including the Officers, and Men's Guard House, Store Rooms, Casemated Magazines, Flagstaff, Palisades, Etc." The total cost of the battery's construction was \$10,104. Other facilities inventoried in this report were the Officer's Quarters, Enlisted Men's Barracks, Cowell's Battery, and other support structures.⁶

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 resulting 1803 report described the guardhouse at Shipley's Battery as "a House 20 feet in Square divided into 3 rooms, the House is schinglet [shingled roof] and underpinned and generally in good Condition. It has been used as Guardhouse at the Battery."⁷ The 1803 Danish survey also produced two maps that offer the most detailed historic illustrations available of the British buildings on Hassel Island. The maps show Shipley's Battery and the guardhouse with a wooden palisade surrounding the eastern side of the battery.

³ Frederik C. Gjessing, "Historic Resource Study, Hassel Island, U.S. Virgin Islands," 1981, 53-54.

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>. St. Thomas Historical Trust, "Shipley's Battery," <http://www.hasselisland.org/sites/shipleys-battery/>, accessed October 17, 2013.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ "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.

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. Shipley's Battery and the other fortifications on Hassel Island were re-established and expanded to accommodate a new regiment of troops.⁸ Ordnance reports from 1812 and 1813 stated that Shipley's Battery contained five 18-pound guns with associated carriages and nearly 200 rounds of 18-pound shot.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. Shipley's Battery was abandoned, although the guardhouse was eventually put back into use as a small-pox hospital, as illustrated on the 1873 map of St. Thomas harbor and Hassel Island.

By the early twentieth century Shipley's Battery and guardhouse were again abandoned, succumbing to the ruinous effects of neglect, hurricanes, and overgrown vegetation. It remained neglected and overgrown in 1978 when Hassel Island was sold by the Paiewonsky family to the National Park Service.

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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.

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, 2; 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.

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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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