Steps to Avert the Evils Which Threaten: British Military Operations on Hassell Island During the Napoleonic Wars, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands

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Occasional Papers of the Turks and Caicos National Museum
Number 9
2021
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Introduction

This report presents the findings of an historical research project documenting the British military occupation of Hassel Island during the Napoleonic Wars. The research and writing was conducted during the fall of 2013 by Stephen A. Hammock, RPA. Dr. Joe Joseph and David Price of New South Associates provided project oversight and information on relevant files in the British National Archives. Mr. Charles Consolvo, of the St. Thomas Historical Trust’s Hassel Island Task Force, was the source of much of this information, and provided advice on other archival locations in the United Kingdom. The assistance of all three of these gentlemen is greatly appreciated.

The report is organized as follows. Section 1 is the introduction, and Section 2 provides a short cultural context pertaining to St. Thomas Island in general and to Hassel Island in particular (Figures 1 and 2). The methodology for the project is detailed in Section 3. Section 4 presents the results of the historical research, a summary can be found in Section 5, and the works cited appear just before the appendix.

Cultural Context

The cultural background of Hassel Island can broadly be divided into two major eras—the prehistoric era prior to the arrival of European explorers and settlers, and the historic era after AD 1493, when Christopher Columbus sailed through, saw an island chain stretching out to the south, and named it the Virgin Islands.

It is currently thought that the Virgin Islands were inhabited as early 5000 B.C. by unknown prehistoric peoples. The Archaic period Krum Bay complex on St. Thomas, consisting of flaked-stone assemblages, has drawn considerable attention, although scientific archaeology in the West Indies is still developing (Keegan 1994:268). The peoples that we know by name survived in some manner until the arrival of the Spanish, though on St. Thomas each invading group is thought to have conquered their predecessors. The first of these, the Ciboney, may have arrived from South America around 350 B.C, followed by the Arawak around A.D. 150, who were seen as a classic example of the site-unit intrusion by Willey et al (1956:9). Lastly, the Carib arrived around A.D. 1375 (Barton 2012:25, 27).

The landing of the Spanish under Christopher Columbus on St. Croix, just to the south of St. Thomas, hastened the demise of most of the indigenous population of the Virgin Islands, mostly from European disease, the effects of slavery, and warfare (Keegan 1996:268). Some of these original settlers, however, may have survived by fleeing to other islands whenever European ships came near (Oliver 1992: 61-62).

Following an initial failed attempt at colonization from 1666-1667, the Danish successfully settled St. Thomas in 1672 following the establishment of the Danish West India and Guinea Company, after which the island became well-known as a successful location for trade. The Danes later gained ownership of St. Croix and St. John’s (Gjessing 1981: 3). During the 18th century, Danish sugar production dominated St. Croix. This was based on African slavery, an institution that was predicated upon the slaves being non-Christian heathens, according to the Danish West Indian Slave Code of 1733 (Wood 2012: 117).

Danish support for France during the Napoleonic Wars caused the British to attack Danish territories from their own nearby
Figure 1. Hassel Island on USGS Topographic Map (1:24,000).

Figure 2. Detail of Hassel Island on USGS Topographic Map.
colonies in the West Indies in 1801. They occupied St. Thomas for a year before withdrawing after the Peace of Amiens, but when war with the Danes broke out again, the British reoccupied the island from December 1807 to November 1815, just after the wars ended (Gjessing 1981: 7-12; Pope 1999: 63-64). It is with these occupations that this report is primarily concerned.

Emancipation for Danish slaves came in 1848, in the wake of a slave revolt on St. Croix, while on St. Thomas, shipping and trade continued to expand and remained lucrative throughout the nineteenth century. In order to improve the harbor, the narrow isthmus separating Hassel from the mainland was opened to the sea in 1865, allowing small boats to pass and turning the former Orcanshullet peninsula (Hurricane Hole) into an island (Gjessing 1981: 17-18). All three of the Danish Virgin Islands were sold to the United States in 1917 for $25,000,000 and are now an American territory known as the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Results of Historical Research

Figure 3 shows St. Thomas in 1765, nearly a century after the commencement of Danish settlement on the island. The major fortification was adjacent to the capital city of Charlotte Amalie, and was called Fort St. Thomas or Fort Christian, according to the French. There are no fortifications shown on Orcanshullet Peninsula at that time, as Hassel Island was known then. However, the Oxholm map of 1778 (Figure 4) appears to show the newly built Prince Frederick’s Battery, which was renamed Fort Willoughby during the British occupation just over 20 years later.

During the 1770s, Lt. Peter Lotharius Oxholm presented several ideas for fortifying the harbor, though few of them ever came to fruition. It appears, for instance, that Prince Frederick’s Battery was meant only to support a stronger battery on the opposite side of the harbor, and that it was to be accompanied by two more batteries on the two highest pieces of ground on Orcanshullet Peninsula. Although his superiors ignored his advice, the British came to the same conclusions in 1801, when their first occupation commenced, and they built Shipley’s Battery on Orcanshullet’s northernmost piece of high ground and Cowell’s Battery on the peninsula’s southernmost piece of high ground (Gjessing 1981: 6-7).

During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, alliances continually shifted due to diplomacy and conquest. While the Danish were not initially involved in these wars, Denmark’s reliance on its overseas merchant trade and its colonies

Methodology

The current project encompassed extensive archival research into the British military occupation of Hassel Island in St. Thomas, one of the three islands making up the U.S. Virgin Islands. Historical research was conducted primarily at the British National Archives at Kew and at the British Library, both in London, England. Inquiries were also made with the Royal Engineers Museum and the Royal Artillery Museum. Secondary sources such as archaeological reports and journal articles were also utilized in order to better comprehend the prehistoric and historic cultures of St. Thomas. Finally, a prolonged search was made on the internet for any information relevant to this brief episode in the history of the U.S. Virgin Islands.
Figure 3. French Map of St. Thomas Island, 1765 (Danish National Archives).

Figure 4. Oxholm Map, 1778, [Showing Orcanshullet Peninsula/Hassel Island] (U.S. National Park Service 2013).
brought it into conflict with Great Britain in late 1800. Crown Prince Frederik, who served as regent after deposing his father King Christian VII, decided to protect Denmark’s trading interests by joining the League of Armed Neutrality and implementing a convoy system using warships to protect merchant vessels. This alliance was made between Russia, Sweden, Prussia, and Denmark (which then included Norway) in response to Britain’s blockade of France, and the Royal Navy’s seizure of neutral merchant ships with cargos intended for France (Hibbert 1994: 253; Pope 1999: 69). The immediate British response was to send one fleet to Copenhagen to force the Danish navy to stand down and to convince the regent and his ministers to withdraw from the league. While diplomatic measures failed, the Battle of Copenhagen, in which the Danish navy was virtually destroyed in early April 1801, forced the Danes 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 (Hibbert 1994: 255-267; Pope 1999: 69, 149).

A second fleet had been sent to the West Indies to seize the Danish colonies of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John, and this campaign began in March 1801. The British had roughly 10,000 soldiers in theater, half from Britain and half being slave-soldiers in the West Indies Regiments, while the Danish only had about 1,500 men, most of whom were civilians organized for home defense. By late March, three British ships of the line, 12 frigates, and 14 transports and other vessels were besieging Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas’s main harbor. The Danish knew they could not win, so they entered negotiations for a “peaceful” military occupation, although the British allowed Danish law and civil government to remain in effect (Gjessing 1981: 8-9).

Lieutenant General Thomas Trigge remained on St. Thomas in charge of the occupying forces, and Lt. Colonel Charles Shipley of the Royal Engineers was instructed to strengthen the fortifications on Orcanshullet Peninsula by constructing two new batteries, in the locations preferred by Lt. Oxholm two decades earlier, and to construct barracks and other necessary structures (Gjessing 1981: 9-11). These works were largely completed by that summer, according to a letter written from Martinique on 16 July 1801 by Lt. Col. Shipley to Lt. General Morse of the Ordnance Office in London. In this letter, Shipley provided cost estimates and promised to provide plans of the works on St. Thomas 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 (NAB 55/943).

This letter provided a detailed breakdown of the expenses of the fortifications on St. Thomas, in which the following were itemized:

- “Completing five barracks, calculated to contain 48 men each, with accommodations connected in therewith, such as Necessary, Kitchen, & etc. - $11,132
- One Commissary’s store, of the same dimensions as the Soldier’s Barrack - $2,110
• Barracks calculated to contain two companies, and eight subalterns, with accommodations connected therewith - $5,053
• Officers Mess Room, 30 feet by 18, with a gallery and accommodations connected therewith - $1,686
• Two hospitals of similar dimensions to the Soldier’s Barracks, with a gallery to one of them, being intended for the convalescents, as also a Surgery and other accommodations connected therewith - $4,244
• Constructing three wooden cisterns of 12 feet by 8, with the appendages connected therewith - $1,128
• Carrying spouting round the different buildings and to the principal reservoirs - $728
• Fort Shipley, including the Officers and Mens Guard House, Store Rooms, Casemated Magazine, Flag Staff, Palisades, & etc. – $10,104
• Pay list of labourers employed in attending the Engineer’s Boat, and of Overseers and Clerk of the Works - $415
• A Gin, 25 feet in height with a hardwood windlass, adapted to mounting the guns on the traversing platforms - $200
• Six small portable magazines, of three feet in length by 25 inches in breadth and 21 in height, with a circular roof - $56
• Guard Room, calculated to contain an Officer, and 25 men, situated near the Barrack - $1,470
• Erecting a Battery on the high-ground to the south of the peninsula, for two 24 pound [cannons], heavy, mounted on traversing platforms, with all appendages associated therewith - $5,000

• Garrison carriages, and traversing platforms for 24 and 6 pound [cannons], heavy - $8,000.

The total amount given by Shipley for these works was $51,316 or £23,092 Windward Currency, and £12,829 sterling (NAB 55/943). This letter was in the hands of the Ordnance Office in early October 1801. A Danish map from circa 1801 depicts these fortifications and is shown in Figure 5. On 22 July 1801 Shipley (depicted after his promotion and knighthood in Figure 6) wrote again to the Ordnance Office, saying that the plans, estimates, and reports would not be ready in time to leave via convoy for London, but those he had available he was enclosing. These included plans of fortifications and sketches of coastlines for St. Lucia’s, St. Bartholomew’s, and St. Martin’s. Number seven in his list was described in this manner:

“Sketch of the peninsula which forms the west side of the Harbour of St. Thomas, describing the situation of the buildings, for the accommodation of the troops, and of the batteries constructed for strengthening the position – accompanied with a paper of explanatory references – and a separate plan of the principal work, marked A upon the sketch.”

The plan, he noted, was not from the official survey, although he was expecting at any time the actual plan from Captain Whitmore showing “a survey of the peninsula at St. Thomas’s.”

Shipley explained this discrepancy by saying that once the ground was cleared, Captain Whitmore and Lieutenant Rogers had made slight alterations to his original plans, and he considered these to be cost-free
**Figure 5.** Lundbye Map Showing St. Thomas Harbor, ca. 1801 (Barton 2012:29).
improvements (NAB 55/943). This letter was received on 19 October by the Ordnance Office. Unfortunately, this sketch and plan were not to be found with the letter at the National Archives, and other searches for them have so far proven unfruitful. However, an 1802 map appears to depict either the southern-most British battery, which had been named Fort or Battery Cowell, or Prince Frederik’s Battery /Fort Willoughby (Figure 7). Incidentally, this map is oriented so that east is in the customary north position at the top of the page, in order to read the label more easily.

Figure 6. Major General Sir Charles Shipley (Jerdan 1833).

A much better plan dating to 1803 also documented the British fortifications on Orcanshullet Peninsula (Figure 8). Because the labels are printed in English, it is possible that this is a copy of the missing British survey, to which handwritten Danish notations were simply added in 1803. This detailed map clearly shows the fortifications and outbuildings constructed under Lt. Col. Shipley’s guidance during the first British occupation and is the most important map depicting these works that has been located to date. The orientation of this map, it must be pointed out, has south where north is usually...
Figure 7. Map of St. Thomas by George King 1802, Showing Fortification on Orcanshullet Peninsula (British National Archives CO 700/VirginIslands13)
Figure 8. Plan of the English Built Batteries and Buildings, 1803 (Danish National Archives).
The Peace of Amiens, consisting of a treaty between Great Britain and France, was signed in preliminary form in October 1801 and finalized in March 1802. Napoleon and his ministers sensed British “warweariness” 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, 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 (Pope 1999:63-64).

British troops withdrew from the Danish West Indian islands in February 1802, based on the terms of the preliminary treaty (Gjessing 1981: 11). An 1801 document (WO 164/136) itemizing troop pay in the “Danish Islands” was recently located in the National Archives at Kew, and shows the considerable expenditure of £2,237, 5 shillings, and 11 ¾ 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

For the next several years Denmark attempted to remain neutral, but both France and Britain pressured the Danes to join their alliances. 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” (PC 1/3786). Finally, British patience wore out in September, and 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 Danes surrendered, handing over 17 ships of the line, stores, and equipment to the withdrawing British. This only goaded the Danes into entering the war on France’s side the very next month, however (Pope 1999: 149, 160).

The Danish Virgin Islands were too vulnerable, though, and surrendered in December to the British, who re-occupied Orcanshullet Peninsula, made improvements to their 1801 structures, and built a new magazine 400 yards north of Prince Frederik’s Battery/Fort Willoughby (Gjessing 1981: 12). Brigadier General Sir Charles Chipley, by this time promoted and knighted, was still commanding the Royal Engineers in the West Indies, and sent a report, a plan, and an estimate dated 28 February 1808 detailing these improvements to the Office of Ordnance. Unfortunately, none of these items were located at the
National Archives, though a letter from the Office of Ordnance regarding Shipley’s report is extant and dated 30 May 1808 (WO 55/943). Figure 9 shows a French ornithologist’s depiction of the harbor of St. Thomas during the second British occupation.

By October 1809 six Royal Engineers officers and their six assistants were handling the engineering duties pertaining to 15 West Indies colonies. These colonies were Martinique, Trinidad, Demerara, Berbice, St. Vincent, St. Christophers, Antigua, Barbados, Surinam, Grenada, St. Lucia, Dominica, St. Thomas, St. Croix, and Tobago. A Captain Story of the Royal Artillery was the assistant engineer in charge of both St. Thomas and St. Croix at this time, though in a letter dated 19 November 1810, Story was denied pay by the Office of Ordnance except for the time he was actually on the islands performing those duties. The reason stated for this was that “no works are carrying on at the Islands in question,” which clearly shows that Shipley’s improvements had been previously completed (WO 55/943). However, by the following summer, newly promoted Major General Sir Charles Shipley was once again making plans to improve and repair the works on St. Thomas for £247, 9 shillings, and 7 ¼ pence, and on St. Croix for £716, 17 shillings, and 5 ¼ pence. This is from a letter dated 7 June 1811 from the Office of Ordnance authorizing these improvements. One shed was not built to house a brigade of field artillery, according to a second letter dated 5 August 1811, because it was not ordered to the West Indies after all (WO 55/943). Furthermore, Shipley’s amounts did not include costs for proposed services, which he had estimated at £437 and 2 ½ pence for St. Thomas and £1,267, 6 shillings, and 6 ¼ pence for St. Croix, according to a response from the Office of Ordnance dated 21 June 1811. The office reminded the general in this letter that “competition is to be resorted to in procuring the workmanship and materials, agreeably to the Board’s Order of the 1st of August 1806” (WO 55/943). The board did not approve these expenses, but in a letter dated 26 August, it did approve £85 Shipley spent on several services performed on St. Thomas, and in another letter dated 9 September, it also approved an expense up to $176 for the removal of the flag staff from Fort Shipley to Fort Cowell (WO 55/943).

During the Napoleonic Wars, the artillery officers in charge of British fortifications in the West Indies were required to send in quarterly returns to the Office of Ordnance enumerating their guns and carriages. Five of these detailed returns have been located at the National Archives at Kew. These include returns for 1812, 1813, and 1814, during the final years of the British occupation. Because of the technical nature of these documents, their relevant portions are included in full in Appendix A.

The British withdrew from the Danish Virgin Islands on 5 April 1815, turning St. Thomas back over to the Danes just two months before Napoleon’s final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June, (Gjessing 1981: 12). The Danish government sold their three Caribbean islands to the United States in 1917, almost a century after the British occupation ended. Today Hassel Island (Figure 10) is part of Virgin Islands National Park, which seeks to protect, preserve, and interpret the cultural and natural resources of the island for residents and tourists alike.
Figure 9. View of St. Thomas Harbor, January 1809 (BL 1809).
Summary

This report has sought to record as many British historic documentary sources as possible pertaining to the 1801-1802 and 1807-1815 occupations of Orcanshullet Peninsula/Hassel Island. All of the previously known material in the British National Archives at Kew were successfully relocated and figure prominently in this report. And while several previously unknown primary sources were also located, the crucial maps and plans that originally accompanied many of the letters from the commander of the British Royal Engineers in the West Indies to various government offices in London have not been located. Furthermore, according to archivists at the Royal Engineers Museum and at the Royal Artillery Museum, the missing plans are not located at either facility.
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Jerdan, William

Keegan, William F.


King, George

National Park Service
Oliver, José R.

Pope, Stephen

Privy Council

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[http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g147405-i23118684-Charlotte_Amalie_St_Thomas_U_S_Virgin_Islands.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com.au/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g147405-i23118684-Charlotte_Amalie_St_Thomas_U_S_Virgin_Islands.html), accessed May 3, 2013.

War Office Papers


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Wood, Margaret C.
2012  Mapping the Complexities of Race on the Landscape of the Colonial Caribbean, United States Virgin Islands, 1770-1917. *Historical Archaeology* 46 (4): 112-134.
Appendix A

Artillery Returns for St. Thomas Island, 1812-1814
Return of Field Ordnance in the Island of St. Thomas, 1 April 1812 (a)

(WO 55/237)
Return of Mounted Ordnance in the Island of St. Thomas, 1 April 1812 (b)

(WO 55/237)
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1812 - The entire of the Guns and Carriages mentioned in this Return are Danish.

[Signatures]

Return of Field Ordnance in the Island of St. Thomas, 1 April 1812 (c)

(WO 55/237)
Letter from Office of Ordnance on 25 May 1812 Regarding “Unserviceable Ordinance and Carriages at St. Thomas”
(WO 55/238)
Quarterly Return of Mounted Ordnance in the Island of St. Thomas, 1 October 1812 (a)

(WO 55/239)
Quarterly Return of Ammunition, Shot, Guns and Carriages with their State and Condition in the Island of St. Thomas, 1 October 1812 (b)

(WO 55/239)
Quarterly Return of Ammunition, Shot, Guns and Carriages with their State and Condition in the Island of St. Thomas, 1 April 1813

(WO 55/240)
Quarterly Return of Guns, Carriages and Ammunition with their State and Condition in the Island of St. Thomas, 1 July 1813

(WO 55/240)
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Return of Guns, Carriages, and Ammunition with their State and Condition in the Island of St. Thomas, 1 January 1814

(WO 55/241)