

BRITISH OFFICERS' QUARTERS COMPLEX  
(British Officers' Quarters)  
Virgin Islands National Park  
Hassel Island Historic District  
Charlotte Amalie vicinity  
St. Thomas  
Virgin Islands (Us)

HABS VI-169  
*HABS VI-169*

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 OFFICERS' QUARTERS COMPLEX

HABS VI-169

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 295431 N 2027912.

The British Officers' Quarters Complex on Hassel Island is in UTM Zone 20. The coordinates are 64.935601 W and 18.331391 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 Officers' Quarters Complex are a significant component of the British military fortifications on Hassel Island built during the Napoleonic War era (1793-1815). The quarters were listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1978 as part of the Northern Hassel Island Historic District. The district was listed under NRHP Criteria A and C in the areas of Archaeology-Historic, Architecture, Commerce, Engineering, Industry, Military, and Transportation.<sup>1</sup> The quarters were built during the first British occupation of St. Thomas from 1801-1802 and then renovated and expanded for the second occupation from 1807-1815.

Description: The British Officers' Quarters Complex is located on the central ridge of Hassel Island, between the remains of the Hassel House to the north and the 1801 British Barracks Complex to the south. The site is immediately adjacent to the Hazzell Family Cemetery (see HABS No. VI-170), which is on its west side. The Officers' Quarters site contains five discreet groups of ruins, including (from north to south) an in-ground cistern with catchment basin; a dry-stacked stone wall just east of the cistern; the main officers' barracks foundations with adjacent kitchen; the officers' mess area; and the officers' cemetery. Each of these is described below.<sup>2</sup>

Located on the sloping hillside just northeast of the Officers' Quarters area, across the trail from the main compound, is a large in-ground cistern with a catchment basin. The basin is uphill from the cistern and measures approximately 20'x30' with a stone border. It originally had a stone paved surface that was largely destroyed by invasive vegetation. The cistern is at the eastern end of the basin, set approximately 4' below grade, with a paved masonry walkway surrounding the north, south, and east sides. The cistern originally had a vaulted roof as evidenced by the remaining arched walls on its north and south ends. The interior of the cistern features original

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

<sup>2</sup> The main officers' barracks are recorded for the collection under HABS No. VI-169-A; the adjacent cookhouse under HABS No. VI-169-B; the cistern under HABS No. VI-169-C; and the cemetery under HABS No. BI-169-D.

plastered walls. There are other, smaller cisterns associated with the Officer's Quarters buildings (see below), which suggests that this cistern may have been constructed during the second British occupation (1807-15) when the number of troops on Hassel island increased from around 350 to 1,500, some of whom were housed at the Careening Cove, which is down hill from the cistern. This structure is not noted in Gjessing's 1981 survey report on Hassel Island and it is possible that it is not related to the British military occupation.

Approximately 20 yards northwest of the cistern, across the main trail along the ridge of the island, is a dry-stacked field stone wall. The wall was not cleared during the HABS field work and its true size could not be determined. The 1981 Gjessing report on Hassel Island states that there are other similar walls in the area and speculates that they are associated with cultivation in the area before the British occupations of St. Thomas.<sup>3</sup>

South of the above sites are the masonry foundations and wall ruins of the Officers' Quarters barracks area. The centerpiece of this area is the rectangular foundation of the barracks, which measure approximately 65'x42' with a central bearing wall. The foundation is made of the locally quarried "Blue Bit" stone (also known as "Blue Bitch" because of its hardness) with brick corners. The foundation extends out from the sloping hillside to a height of 6' to 8' at the northern end. Two brick-lined doorways in the north wall and one in the center bearing wall indicate the foundation provided a cellar under the barracks. Against the north wall of the main foundation are three additional square foundations that measure approximately 20' square. Against the west wall of the main foundation is another rectangular Blue Bit foundation with adjacent plaster-lined cistern. Just northwest of the main foundation is a retaining wall and masonry remains of a masonry cookhouse with cooking bench and in-ground cistern or well.<sup>4</sup>

South of the above barracks complex is another set of rubble masonry foundations known as the Officers' Mess area. It features one partially intact masonry cookhouse, which measures 28'x13' and contains two rooms with arched doorways and a window on the east elevation. The roof of the cookhouse is collapsed. The remains of a brick-lined bake oven are on the west side of the cookhouse. South of the Officer's Mess is an above-ground cistern with intact plaster on the interior.

Located in the woods just southwest of the Officers' Mess is the Officers' Cemetery, which contains four visible burials with unmarked masonry grave markers.

History: The British Officers' Quarters Complex was constructed during the first British occupation of St. Thomas in 1801. It was designed to house the officers who commanded troops stationed at Shipley's Battery, Cowell's Battery, and Fort Willoughby.

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<sup>3</sup> Frederik C. Gjessing, "Historic Resource Study, Hassel Island, U.S. Virgin Islands," 1981, 44.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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.<sup>5</sup> Those on Hassel Island represented the latter group, with the exception of masonry kitchens and the extensive use of local "Blue Bit" stone in the foundation of the Officers' Quarters.

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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 Officers' Quarters Complex as located "At the House belonging to mr. Hazzell," a reference to the Hassel House just north of the quarters.<sup>9</sup> The inventory of the

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<sup>5</sup> Buckley, Roger Norman, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 327.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> "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.

quarters complex described the main quarters as “a building 40 feet long and 18 feet wide divided into 8 small Rooms, underpinned and in good Condition – yet this House is build of weaker Timber than the others – it has been used as Homes for the English Officers.”<sup>10</sup> The report also described the officers’ kitchen, officer mess, a house, and waterhouse, most of which were “in good condition” at that time.

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 how the Officers’ Quarters buildings were arranged (Figures 1 and 2).

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 Officers’ Quarters and the other fortifications on Hassel Island were re-established and expanded to accommodate a new regiment of troops.<sup>11</sup> According to one source, the additional troops were housed in new barracks built in Careening Cove.<sup>12</sup> 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 Officers’ Quarters fell into disrepair. In 1978, Hassel Island was sold by the Paiewonsky family to the National Park Service. Today, all that remains of the Officers’ Quarters complex are stone foundations, the masonry walls of the kitchen and mess, and cisterns.

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.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> “Military Significance of Hassel Island,” manuscript on file at the St. Thomas Historical Trust, 2.

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.

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 Officers' Quarters," available at <http://www.hasselisland.org/sites/1801-british-officers-quarters/>, 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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