TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES

Defending Honolulu

D. L. MacKaye

Records of the department of war and the department of the navy of the Hawaiian government began late in the '30s but the bulk of the records do not begin until the late '40s. What documents are dated previously to 1850 are unimportant or uninteresting, relating mostly to the cost of the upkeep of the Hawaiian Army which seems to have caused an expenditure equal to that of the Hawaiian Band at the present day. Much of it is correspondence between Lieutenant-General Liliiho, commander-in-chief, (afterwards Kamehameha IV) and Major Francis Funk, adjutant. These two officers kept up a continual cross fire of correspondence concerning "busted" guns and accidents to ammunition. The brig Loe brought a ton of powder from San Francisco and this for three years remained the chief event in Hawaiian military circles. Bids were also received to established a battery of eleven guns on one of the points near the harbor but there is little record of it. The first interesting document is dated 1850 and is a report by an English army officer on the best method of defending Honolulu. Some of his recommendations seem to have been accepted but the chief interest lies in the picture of the town of Honolulu at this date which can be seen between the lines.

Salt Pan point, which he describes as a point to which the city might eventually grow and (at that time) difficult of access is the spit of sand where Camp Very is now situated. This he named as a proper place for one of the most important forts of the city. Accompanying the report is a map which he evidently copied himself and took from one published in London in 1836. It gives a good idea of the town, the situation of the principal buildings and the entrance to the harbor. This latter was materially different than at the present time, coming from a point that seems to be Ewa of the present lighthouse and running straight mauka, ending in a saucer shaped basin of small dimensions.

The report, in its entirely is as follows:

MEMORANDUM

Concerning the Military Defense of Honolulu, Sandwich Islands.

Under the present circumstances of the Sandwich Islands, it appears to me that it would only be incurring unnecessary expense to erect fortifications to defend the town and harbor of Honolulu against a foreign enemy. It is nevertheless extremely desirable in my opinion for the future benefit of the place that suitable sites for field batteries and land forts should be selected at once and reserved in the hands of the Crown and that the town shall be laid out so that sites shall never be encroached upon but shall always remain avaible for the defense of the town as it hereafter may become necessary. This has been much neglected in some of the British colonies and the injurious consequences of the neglect is now being felt in some, which it is now wished to fortify. In all large towns lately formed in the British Colonies this has been more attended to. Sites for all kinds of public purposes and military as well as civil have been duly selected and reserved.

In selecting sites for military purposes the principal object to be considered is the defense of the harbor and after that the security of the King's magazines and arms, ammunition and money.

Sea Defense.

For the defense of the harbor the best English authorities on the subject agree that sea batteries should be placed so as to command the anchorage opposite the town and not at the entrance of a fort and that they should be from twenty to thirty feet above the sea. Upon examination of the small chart of Honolulu harbor published by Arrowsmith of London in 1830 and after a short personal inspection of the harbor itself, it appears to me that the best site for a sea battery answering to the above conditions is the extreme point of the coral reef directly in front of the present fort. I prefer this to any site further to seaward because it more completely commands the landing as well as the anchorage but especially as it appears probable that the town will extend over that reef and that a walk will be built all along the edge of it as far as the east point where the salt pans are. At least one acre should be reserved for this battery. In order to provide a clear space around it the wharf, when built, should be broad and public so that the batteries shall flank it the whole length. If the King should desire to have a saluting battery I should recommend that it be erected on this site and that agreeably to the above conditions there be a masonry escarp of about twenty feet and a masonry tower in the rear to hold the magazines and protect the rear.

Land Defenses.

For the defense of the town the land forts should be so situated as to defend the approaches of the town and flank the sea batteries and should not be commanded by higher ground within the range of artillery, the principal fort forming a citadel in which the magazines should be placed. There is no site about Honolulu answering to these conditions. Punchbowl Hill is not commanded but it is too high to defend the town and would be very expensive to fortify. The east or Salt Pan point would probably make the best site for a fortress, being uncommanded, difficult of access by land and sea and close to the harbor but it would be exceedingly expensive to construct a fortress there. It should not however be occupied in any other way then it is at present in order that it may be available.

The spur from Punchbowl Hill immediately east of the present British consulate is a good site for a land fort. It commands two approaches to the town and by reserving a broad road of 100 yards width straight from it to Salt Pan Point, it would assist in the defense of the harbor and an enemy in order to take it would be obliged to find artillery on Punchbowl Hill. I recommend that about twenty acres be reserved on this spur below the steep slope of the hill, being at a level of about 150 feet above the sea.

Civil Buildings.

The above are the reserves I recommend for military purposes but as it appears there are several public buildings for civil purposes required in Honolulu I think they might be arranged so as to form part of the military defense above proposed. I think the civil public buildings of the town should always be so situated and so planned as to be capable of resisting an attack by musketry. The want of such provision has been felt in large towns during popular riots and it appears to me that such provision is peculiarly desirable in a town like Honolulu where a native Government has to control a large and irregular foreign population. It is in fact the only kind of defense work required in the Sandwich Islands at present and in the early stage of the town very easily provided for. The principal public buildings at present required appear to be 1st, a goal, 2nd, magazines for arms and ammunition, 3rd, barracks for soldiers, 4th, police officers. The folowing plan would make these buildings defensible in themselves against the sudden assault and also form part of the military defense of the place.

Goal, Magazines, Barracks.

1, 2, 3. The Goal, Magazines and Soldiers Barracks, I recommand to be placed together on the site above mentioned on the spur of Punchbowl. It is an advantage to have these three buildings a little seperated from the town. There is space for all three on that site and they will of themselves form a land fort proposed for that position and a place of security for the Kings magazines and arms, ammunition and money. They should be placed so as to form a line of buildings facing Punchbowl Hill, thereby covering the ground in front from the fire of musketry from the top of it. The extreme building should project so as to flank the others. A deep ditch should be dug around them and the bottom of it planted with cactus or some prickly plant which would form a defense in itself.

Police Offices.

4th. There will probably be two police offices required in Honolulu, one for native and one for foreigners. I recommend the native police office to be placed in the center of the square to be reserved in the middle of the town which should contain about two acres and the foreign police office to be placed in the reserve to be made for the sea battery. Each of these police offices should should contain barracks for the policemen, rooms for the court and lock up rooms for the confinement of prisoners during short periods and each building should be planned so as to flank itself.

The bread road proposed to be reserved from the goal to Salt Pan Point will include the space between the King's palace and the native church and would serve as a boulevard for the inhabitants of the town.

When the wharf along the coral reef is to be made the Terra Puggolana which abounds in Tahiti will be found useful as a cement.

(Signed) T. B. COLLISON,
Capt. Royal Engineers.

San Francisco, Sept. 28, 1850.

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