

Port Essington Settlement

State Records Authority of New South Wales

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Full description

In the early 1820's the British Government decided to establish a settlement in Northern Australia. This settlement at Raffles Bay was occupied from 1826 and abandoned in 1829 [Agency 2563]. In the early 1830's George Windsor Earl was lobbying the British government to establish a settlement in Northern Australia again, to protect British trade interests in the area. (1)

In a letter dated 25 January, 1838 Lord Glenelg instructed Governor Sir George Gipps to establish a settlement in Northern Australia, in order to give protection to British trade with China, India, and Islands of the Indian Archipelago. The Settlement was also established to be an asylum for those who found themselves shipwrecked on the Northern Australian Coast. (2)

The expedition to establish the new Settlement in Northern Australia was placed under the command of Sir George Bremer, who was also issued with a Commission under seal of the Colony to act as Commandant under instructions from Lord Glenelg. (3) Sir George Bremer, Captain John Mc Arthur, Lieutenant Augustus Kuper, and Lieutenant Owen Stanley were appointed Magistrates of the Territory on the 7th of August, 1838. (4)

The main expedition consisting of Her Majesty's Ships Alligator, Orontes, and Britomart and the Schooner Essington departed Port Jackson, on 18 September 1838 (5), and arrived in the area of Port Essington in late October 1838. (6) A suitable landing was sought, and operations to unload stores and personnel were undertaken on 9 November 1838. (7) The site chosen for the establishment of the settlement was Barrow Bay because of the good water supply. (8) The settlement was formally established by December 13, 1838, as indicated by a dispatch by Captain Bremer on that date in which he stated " As this is probably the first establishment in a new country which has been made in her Majesty's Reign, I have honoured the rising town by the name, Victoria ". (9)

Captain John Mac Arthur was placed in charge of the settlement from June 1839 under instructions from Sir George Bremer who sailed for India in the late part of 1839. (10) By April 1840 the settlement consisted of 24 cottages, and gardens. There were also numerous public buildings constructed including two storehouses, a quarter for the officers, a pier extending over 40 feet into the bay, a hospital and a church. A battery consisting of five 18 Pounder guns, and a four-pounder gun defended the settlement. (11)

From 1840 onwards the settlement was visited by several explorers including Ludwig Leichhardt, and infrequently by Malay fisherman in order to fish for Trepang, and conduct limited trade for goods. (12) However, on 10 June 1849 Earl Gray instructed Governor C.A Fitzroy to abandon the settlement in Northern Australia. The main reason given in the dispatch was the failure of the settlement to generate sufficient commerce with the surrounding islands. (13)

On 13 November 1849 the Ship HMS Maeander arrived at Port Essington, with the orders to abandon the settlement. Captain John Mac Arthur then gave the orders for the stores to be loaded. The entire settlement departed on the Maeander by 30 November 1849, and arrived in Port Jackson on 7 February 1850. (14)

Footnotes

- (1) A.H.Chisolm (Editor-in-Chief) Australian Encyclopedia Vol. 6 "Marsupials to Parliament", Angus and Robertson Ltd Sydney, 1958 p. 363
- (2) F.Watson (Editor) Historical Records of Australia, Series 1 VOL XIX, Library Committee of Commonwealth Parliament, Sydney 1919 p. 247
- (3) F.Watson (Editor) Historical Records of Australia, Series 1 VOL XIX, Library Committee of Commonwealth Parliament, Sydney 1919 p.589 - 591
- (4) NSW Government Gazette 7 August, 1838 p. 599
- (5) F.Watson (Editor) Historical Records of Australia, Series 1 VOL XIX, Library Committee of Commonwealth Parliament, Sydney 1919 p.589
- (6) F.Watson (Editor) Historical Records of Australia, Series 1 VOL XX111, Library Committee of Commonwealth Parliament, Sydney 1919 p.461
- (7) House of Lords Copies or extracts of any correspondence relative to the establishment of the settlement at Port Essington London 1843 p. 8
- (8) A.H.Chisolm (Editor-in-Chief) Australian Encyclopedia Vol. 6 "Marsupials to Parliament", Angus and Robertson Ltd Sydney, 1958 p. 198
- (9) House of Lords Copies or extracts of any correspondence relative to the establishment of the settlement at Port Essington London 1843 p. 11
- (10) Cameron, J.M.R (Ed.) Letters from Port Essington, 1838 - 1845 Historical Society of N.T Darwin 1999 p. 8
- (11) Op Cit p.11
- (12) Appendix to the Report of the Select Committee on the proposed overland route to Port Essington, 1843 In Votes and Proceedings Vol 1, 1843 p.571, 573 - 574
- (13) Papers on the abandonment of the Settlement of Port Essington p 3 in Votes and Proceedings Vol. 1 1850 p. 493
- (14) Spillett, Peter Gerald A Forsaken Settlement; An Illustrated History of the settlement at Victoria, Port Essington 1838 - 1849 Landsdowne Press 1972 Melbourne p. 166 - 170

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