

NUNAWADING MILITARY HISTORY GROUP

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Part 7 of Australian Frontier Wars

The Northern Territory (1824 part of New South Wales)

Fort Dundas was a short-lived British Military settlement on Melville Island between 1824 and 1828 in what is now the Northern Territory of Australia. It was the first of four British settlement attempts in northern Australia before Goyder's survey and establishment of Palmerston, now known as Darwin. The three later attempts were at Fort Wellington, Port Essington and Escape Cliffs.

Captain J. J. Gordon Bremer set sail on HMS *Tamar* from Port Jackson on the 24 August 1824 to colonise the northern part of Australia. His ship was accompanied by HMS *Lady Nelson*, and *Countess of Harcourt*. The ships transported Captain Maurie Barlow, Lieutenant John Septimus Roe, Lieutenant Everard and 23 men of the 3rd Regiment, a subaltern and 26 men of the Royal Marines, a surgeon, three commissariat workers, three free men seeking adventure and 44 convicts.

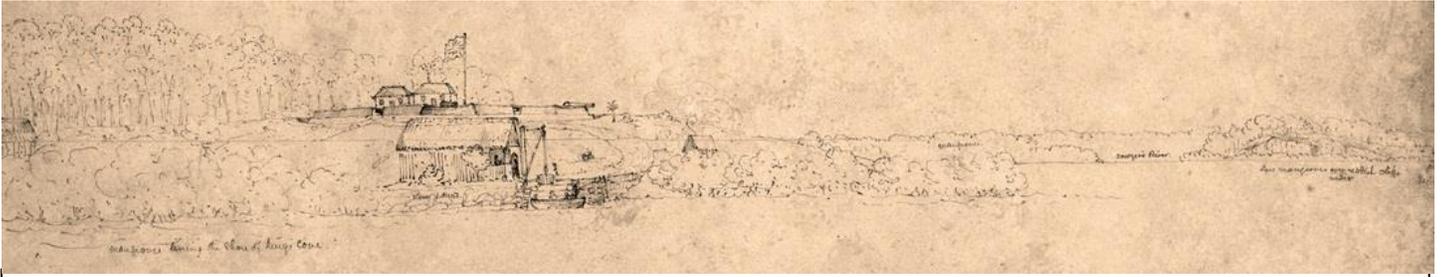


Location of Fort Dundas on Melville Island

The construction of a settlement began upon arrival on 27 September 1824. It was officially proclaimed on 21 October 1824, on Trafalgar Day. It was named Fort Dundas and was named after Robert Dundas, the First Lord of the Admiralty.

The intention was to commence and develop trade with the Malays. During the first two years, the settlers never saw a Malay. Furthermore, the settlers had not been able to penetrate more than 20 miles into the island's interior "due to the hostility of the natives – being in the most savage state of barbarism, and all attempts to conciliate them proving abortive"; such was the report to the British Government. The establishment of the settlement caused the border of New South Wales to be moved west from the 135th meridian to the Western Australian border (129th meridian). Captain Bremer was relieved by a Scot, Major John Campbell in 1827. Campbell's party was the first to include women. The first marriage in the Northern Territory occurred shortly after at the fort. In his party was the wife of Lieutenant Hicks, who died shortly after.





JS Roe sketch of Fort Dundas, 1 November 1824

The Tiwi put up strong resistance to the new settlers on their land.

There was no contact between the colonisers and the indigenous people of the Tiwi Islands, the Tiwi people, during the first few weeks of the settlement. Bremer noted that the first recorded meetings occurred on 25 October 1824. Exploring a small river on Bathurst Island across the strait from the settlement, Bremer came into contact with a party of ten Tiwi men. Bremer described them as initially defensive and aggressive, calming down upon the presentation of gifts:

After some time they gained confidence and came so near as to take a handkerchief and other trifles we put towards them on an oar... having given them all the boat afforded I left them apparently well satisfied.^[1]

On the same day two convicts were seized but not injured. The Tiwi retreated when troops appeared on the scene, taking the convicts' axes with them. Bremer suspected the Islanders had been watching the settlements for some time and saw the valuable metal and tools.

Attacks on the fort became regular, "sometimes daily". Two people were speared to death including the fort's surgeon, Dr Gold. He was discovered with 31 spear wounds. Seven spear heads remained in his body. One had passed through his head "from ear to ear". The storekeeper John Green had 17 spear wounds and his skull was smashed open.

Bad relations with the Tiwi people, tropical storms, isolation and low food and medical supplies caused Campbell to request that the post be closed and the garrison taken away from "this vile island". He was relieved by Captain Humphrey Hartley, but orders were received shortly after to abandon the fort in late 1828. The last of the settlers left by April 1829. One soldier could not be found and was left behind, with his wife and family sailing without him.

South Australian governor Lord Kintore later declared Bremer's selection of Fort Dundas as ill-suited and "never satisfactorily explained".

Following unsatisfactory reports of the Fort Dundas settlement, Captain James Stirling was sent from Sydney in May 1827 aboard HMS *Success* and the *Mary Elizabeth* to establish a new settlement east of Melville Island. On 18 June 1827 he took formal possession of Raffles Bay where he landed an establishment force, with their supplies, on the eastern shore and named the outpost Fort Wellington. The force comprised Commandant Captain H.G. Smyth and 30 soldiers from the 39th Regiment, 14 marines, a surgeon, storekeeper and 22 convicts.

From the beginning the settlement suffered from diseases such as scurvy, attacks by hostile Aborigines, and the logistical problems arising from its isolation. The hoped for trade with the East Indies failed to eventuate. Despite the arrival in September 1828 of Captain Collet Barker as the new Commandant, who established better relations with the local Aborigines, the settlement was abandoned in August 1829.

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