

## Fort Santiago

Strategically located on the banks of the Pasig River and on the northwest corner of Intramuros, Fort Santiago overlooks Manila Bay and was built to protect from invaders arriving by sea.



Fort Santiago  
(photo taken in early 1900s)

Fort Santiago has a savage history. Over the centuries many Filipinos were imprisoned, tortured and left to drown in the Fort's notorious dungeons, which were beneath the high tide level.

The Philippines' national hero, José Rizal, was imprisoned here for almost two months before his execution in 1896. You can visit his cell (now the Rizal Museum). It was here that he composed his final poem, [\*Mi Ultimo Adiós \(My Final Farewell\)\*](#), which was smuggled out of his cell in the base of an oil lamp.

In all the Philippine Islands the most interesting object is Fort Santiago. When back in the twelfth century the first fearless mariner discovered a chain of islands across the China sea inhabited by "Saracens," he reported a peaceful people; but the next account of them tells of Sulu pirates and savages who lived by fighting and plunder.

When Magellanes again discovered the Islands in 1521 he found a people who knew how to fight, and lost his life at their hands. Urdaneta had difficulty in maintaining peace with the inhabitants of Cebu, and report came to him of a large island called Luzon with a great bay and a sturdy people. When the expedition, under command of Captain Martin de Goiti and Juan de Salcedo, arrived in the year 1570 opposite the town of Manila, a rude but strong wooden palisade was already erected by the natives at the south side of the mouth of the Pasig, and there were twelve bronze cannon, of native manufacture, mounted for the defence of the place. All of this furnishes good ground for belief that Fort Santiago has a history that may be traced back past the dawn of modern Philippine history to the time when the first group of savages were gathered by the Pasig under the leadership of a Mohammedan rajah, and built a log enclosure for defence against other savages about them. The mouth of the river has always been the strategic position of the whole country, and on that same spot Fort Santiago stands to-day. What the tower of London is to England, the Vatican to Rome, and Bunker Hill monument to the United States, Fort Santiago is to the Philippine Islands. Very few of the thousands who pass before it every day stop to give a thought to the fascinating history of the heavy walls over which float to-day the stars and stripes.

The story of this monument will someday be written by a sympathetic heart and a romantic pen, and then we will realize what a historical treasure it is that stands so little noticed by the curio hunters who come and go, while the old fort is heedless of their passing

Accounts differ a little as to just what happened when Salcedo's expedition sailed into the bay of Manila, but Fr, Juan de la Concepción says that Rajah Soliman rallied his forces and and manned his twelve bronze guns in the palisade and made a goodly defence of the place, but the besiegers were victorious and set fire to the city and afterwards captured Cavite. Another account states that surrender was made without opposition. The cannon were captured and taken to Panay, a treaty was made and signed in blood by Salcedo and Rajah Soliman, and the expedition returned to Cebu

When Legaspi heard of the fine location and great bay of Manila, he at once made preparations to shift his headquarters, and, in April, 1571, he took the city, and found it empty, as the inhabitants had fled after setting fire to their houses. Legaspi soon placated the rajah, and in June of the same year founded the city of Manila, and the written history of Fort Santiago began. The old palisade was once strengthened, and the natives were commanded to build a wall about the place, to erect a good house for the governor and one hundred and fifty houses for the Spaniards. All this they promised readily enough, but were attacked with "philippinitis" and forgot to do the work. This made it necessary for the Spaniards to work on the fort themselves. The wooden walls were reinforced with earth; but the new governor, Santiago de Vera, seeing the need for more stable protection than a wall of stakes, cleared the ground and laid the first stones of the fort that bears his name. These stones are still in the wall, though difficult to identify at the present time.

When Governor Dasmariñas arrived in 1590 he brought instructions from the king of Spain to fortify the place so as to insure it against all attacks by land or sea and at once set about the work. His first construction was that of the circular wall still standing in front of the parapet of the fort itself. It is in the lower level, and is washed by the waters of the Pasig. Since the American occupation a road has been built by which the visitor may enter the fort from the Malecon drive. The entrance and the stairway, leading from the lower portico to the new building on top of the wall, are also of very recent construction. When Dewey anchored off the breakwater, and General Merritt entered the inner quadrangle to sign the articles of capitulation, there was no building of any sort on the wall, but it was fortified with the best artillery the city afforded.

With the establishment of the civil government in 1901 the use of the place as a fortress was forever abandoned, and it serves now as the headquarters for the Philippines Division of the United States army. The building on top of the wall is one of the most pleasant and comfortable office buildings in Manila, and serves as headquarters for the commanding general.

"La Real Fuerza de Santiago,"(the royal stronghold), as Governor Dasmariñas left it, consisted of a straight grey front projecting into the river mouth. An open gun platform above was supported by arches and called the : "Battery de Santa Barbara," in honor of the patron saint of all good artillerymen. A lower tier of fire was afforded through embrasures in the casements formed by the arches. Simple curtain walls without interior buttresses, extended the flanks to a fourth front facing the city.

The casements were afterward filled in and the embrasures closed and the curtain wall facing the city was changed to a bastion. The detailed description of these early construction were carried to England by the British after their conquest of Manila and some of the maps and papers are now in the British Museum in London. In the report of Governor Tamon sent to Spain in 1739 occurs a detailed description of the fort which is of interest to military men, but unintelligible to the uninitiated. Suffice it to say that the fort itself in its present form has stood practically unchanged for about three hundred years, and is getting old enough to command the respect due any construction that through all the changing vicissitudes of three centuries has stood unchanged.

The pay-roll of the garrison before the British invasion throws a curious light on living condition in the old days. The "warden" must have been quite an aristocrat, as he received a monthly salary of 66 pesos. The lieutenants were paid 15 pesos, the servants three pesos, the Spanish soldiers two pesos, and the native soldiers were rewarded for their devotion but a regular payment of a peso and a quarter every month. The total annual pay of the whole garrison amounted to 4, 600 pesos. This might furnish a hint on economy to the war department, but it is not likely to serve as a precedent.

Many strange things have happened under the shadow of the old fort, and there are old Spaniards living in Manila who shake their heads wisely and intimate that if they were to tell all they knew, it would be an astonishing story indeed. How much they really know is a question, but certain it is that the natives have a great fear of the old place. The records of the church historians associate the fort with several remarkable visitations of the shades of saints who had been buried and were supposed to remain so, but as a special favor to the city, failed to "stay put."

There are all sorts of stories floating about the old fort. So far as the walls are concerned, there is some foundation for the stories. There are store rooms and magazines, and the outer curtains are connected with the main walls in some cases by underground passages, or were, before these tunnels were destroyed. The filling of the old moat closed them, probably forever. When the wall at the end of Calle Aduana was removed, the inner chamber was found filled with human skeletons.

There were, however, underground passages and deep-built cells in the fort itself. When the Americans took charge of the place there was no opening in the wall where the large stairway is now located on the river face, but from the large room now used as a magazine there was a circular well just under the new stairway. This well was entered by means of a series of winding stone steps, and led down to a passage considerably below the level of the water in the river. This lower passage led back from the river and was lined on each side by cells which could be closed from the front and which were so low that it was impossible to stand them. There was also a movable gate by which the water could be admitted from the river, and all the evidence pointed to the use of those cells for purposes of "unintentional" executions of persons whom it would be expedient to have out of the way without open trial or public capital punishment. The natives have a terror of this old place and have no desire to see anything below the surface of the walls. When the present improvements were made in the fort the old well was closed up, and if there is any way of reaching it at the present time it is unknown to the engineers who have made the changes of recent years.

We tried to enter through a door at the foot of the stairway leading up to the driveway around the fort; but a careful exploration with electric light revealed nothing more than a series of empty chambers which had evidently used as magazines. All but two of these are more or less filled with earth and stone, and the passage is finally blocked entirely. After the trip underground, reference to a plan of the fortification showed that the passage explored led beneath the large granite steps that lead up the northeast side of wall to the adjutant general's office.

The "muchacho" who carried the wire for us insisted that the place was full of snakes, and it was only when he was assured that we were armed for the comers, that he consented to accompany us.

There are plenty of people about Manila who look wise when Fort Santiago is mentioned, and affirm that there are underground passages leading "back as far as the old army and Navy Club," if not indeed to Malate (or Zamboanga for that matter), but no one of these knows where to find the secret door to the hidden chambers. He always knows though, the man who does know, and this man always says "next door neighbor" till the would-be explorer gives up the chase.

There is an old Spaniard who knows all about it but he won't tell. There is also a native who possesses the key to the charm, but he lost his mind some years ago and can't talk on one subject long enough to tell the way to the mysterious door. Then there is an American who knows and will tell only when he is drunk, and he is now virtuously sober, and Heaven forbid that I should ever persuade him to backslide.

But what's the difference? Here goes! There was a woman walled up in one of those lower chambers with a baby born the day she entered. When the Americans came sixteen years later, they found her with her sixteen years old child, who has never been outside that midnight cell. Another political prisoner was to have been drowned, but on the excitement of the events proceeding the surrender of the place, he was forgotten, and the American found him, a maniac, having had no food for two weeks. In other chambers we found awful skeletons telling their ghastly tales with no need of commentary. Strange noises used to be heard at night, coming from these lower chambers, until the entrance thereto was walled up, and that chapter of shudders forever closed.

Did I see these things? No; but I saw a man who knew a man who had a friend that got it straight, though he was not at liberty to tell who said so, and I had to promise never to breathe it to a living soul. Let no gossiping reader betray my sacred trust.

Three flags have floated over Fort Santiago. For three hundred and twenty-eight years the Spanish ensign was unfurled to the tropic breeze, except for the brief time when the British flag supplanted that of the rightful lords of the island named after their discoveries and conquerors.

The unfurling of the third flag makes one of the greatest stories of modern times and is still fresh in the minds of every American in the islands. In this great act of history Fort Santiago played a major part that is not always fully appreciated. If Fort Santiago has no other cause for renown, the glory of the event of 1898 would be reason enough to make it famous. In the inner court General Merritt met with the Spanish governor-general on the memorable 13th of August and arranged the preliminary agreement for the surrender of the citadel of the Orient. There was but little sleep in Manila that night. The American troops were in the city and the insurgents were outside disappointed because they were

not admitted to equal rights with the victors. The Spaniards were disarmed, and the people lived in quaking terror of what the morning might bring. The next day the final articles were signed and the populace held its breath, for the tales of what occurred when the British sacked the city in 1772 were enough to cause a shudder.

For a week no one ventured out of his house; but none of the terrible things came to pass. There was no pillage, no bloodshed, no rapine nor plunder. The astonishment of the natives knew no bounds. It was too good to be true. Every American has reason to be proud of the fourth conquest of old Fort Santiago.

During the "days of the empire" the military features of the old fort were abandoned, and the office building was erected on top of the wall, and while the Stars and Stripes wave over the monument it will probably never again be used as a fortification.

Out in the bay lie the great white battleships with their sleeping thirteen-inch guns guarding the peace of the city, and Fort Santiago looks very small and helpless before such modern engines of destruction. The stone work belongs to the old age and not to the new, and while the flag floats over us and the cruisers in the bay keep watch before the city we shall be better guarded by the flag and those guns than by any walls of wood or stone.

What material the old fort would furnish for a Hawthorne or Haggard! The old tales might be woven into a work that would raise the hair with horror, and much of the tragedy might be but facts of history. It is well that the old stories are not better confirmed, and what does it matter? The perpetrators are dead or deported, the explorers have gone home, the records are inaccessible.

For the antiquarian who would delve into the musty past of the most interesting of all structures in the Philippines, there is much material, but it is hard to reach. There is data enough, though, to clothe the old fort with pictures of strenuous history and make the silent stones tell strange tales from the forgotten past. As a genuine source of history, literature and romance Fort Santiago is one of the most unique relics of the oriental world.