

Frontier War defences of early Queensland*

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Western colonists on every continent built forts to dissuade native attack, yet as recently as 1995 it was claimed that in Australia, ‘native aborigines were not a sufficient threat.’¹ The severity of Australia’s Frontier Wars is increasingly evident, making ‘absence’ of settler defences an anomaly. In the past, Australian structures were identified in local lore as fortified, but to date, this has been dismissed as either a misreading of their architectural features or settler ‘myths’.²

This article offers a preliminary typology of modes of frontier war defence in Queensland c.1824-1880. Analysis will show that, given para-military structures along Queensland’s frontiers, the colony was significantly more militarized than is commonly acknowledged.

Travellers’ stockaded camps

Nineteenth century travellers in Australia were advised to fortify camps and boats³ and equip tents with a ‘well-stocked arsenal’⁴ as precautions against Aboriginal attack. The ‘fortification’ was usually minimal. The Archer brothers ‘armed with a couple of guns and a brace of pistols’ reported they ‘fortified’ their camp by placing all the saddles on edge round their heads ‘to fend off any missiles’ while keeping a ‘weather eye tolerably open.’⁵ Similarly, in 1853, Ernest Henry’s party camped ‘purposely to avoid surprise’ on a river bed devoid of undergrowth, with large gums nearby, ‘tolerably near enough, from which the boy could fire, if molested.’⁶

By contrast, large expeditions, especially punitive military forays⁷ sometimes built wooden stockades.⁸ Major Mitchell established Fort Bourke, a sizeable stockade which was used for 11 years.⁹ In 1851, pastoralist Gideon Lang advised the Leichhardt recovery expedition to carry tools to construct a log ‘blockhouse’ that would be ‘perfectly safe [and] keep any number of blacks at bay.’¹⁰ During the Burdekin expedition in 1859, a complex stockade was erected:

We placed four upright poles in the ground enclosing a space about 12 ft by 8 ft then joined them by long saplings passed through the forks at the top, dug a trench about 1 ½ ft deep all round in which we placed saplings leaning a little outwards against those at the top. We then placed all plates against the upright to

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keep them firm, filled in the trench, first laying poles on either side at the base of the saplings. We then placed two very tall forked poles at either end with a ridge pole across and spread our largest tent over all. Altogether it was very strong and well loop-holed, the walls were 8 or 9 feet high.¹¹

Penal-Military outposts

Many of Australia’s earliest penal-military outposts had defences against potential Aboriginal attack. Governor Phillip stated that his first concern was



Locations of structures with purported fortification against Aboriginal attack.
 (Map by author, drawn by Linda Thomson, Aboriginal Environments Research Centre, University of Queensland, 2019)



Fort Wills, on the Cooper, a few miles from Nappa Merrie Station.

(Miscellaneous photographs, Fryer Library Collection, UQFL459, Box 5, PHS 733/734)

to ‘throw up a slight work as a defence against the natives.’¹² During ‘the Sydney Wars’, Phillip built a ‘small redoubt’ at Rose Hill specifically ‘to prevent any disputes with the natives,’¹³ adding more at Parramatta and South Head. By the 1840s, a string of police and military stations ran along Murray River crossings to prevent ‘skirmishes’.¹⁴

Thus it is not surprising Queensland’s first penal settlements had structures designed to counter Aboriginal hostilities. Captain Logan ordered that Brisbane’s surrounding cornfields be guarded by ‘crow minders huts’ – treehouses manned by short-term convicts.¹⁵ Reverend Palethorpe described them as ‘bifacial boxes... high up the trees,’ from which ‘sentries’ took ‘pot shots’ at Aboriginal raiders. They were still evident at New Farm decades later.¹⁶ Dunwich military barracks meanwhile operated as a protective ‘fort’ amidst Aboriginal-soldier skirmishes.¹⁷

Between 1843 and 1848, despite the cessation of the penal colony, Brisbane’s military barracks doubled its ammunition and manpower.¹⁸ This was in response to mounting resistance from local tribal alliances.¹⁹ Tellingly, in November 1849 the barracks sent two divisions (24 soldiers) from the 11th Regiment to attack 100 to 500 campers at nearby York’s Hollow, and were opposed with boomerangs and other projectiles. Up to 12 Aboriginal people were wounded on that occasion.²⁰

Similarly, in 1847, the 99th Regiment under Captain Henry Day and Lieutenant George de Winton set up a 'military encampment' at Gladstone, forming almost half the founding population.²¹ The colony was disbanded after a few weeks through an edict from Earl George Gray. By that time, it had constructed little beyond its well-armed, strategically-organized tents. However, De Winton posted night sentries around settlers' tents and had his soldiers 'clear away the trees and bush around' the colony following a night attack. Due to the assemblage of some 200 warriors, he 'took military possession' of the area – initially 'one corporal and three men (soldiers)' and eventually 20 soldiers (Colonel Barney says 32 soldiers) 'scouring the bush in light infantry order.' De Winton states no Aboriginal people were harmed, whereas Colonel Barney states they were 'dispersed.'²²

A more solid fortification was Helidon barracks. From 1843 to 1846 it served as a checkpoint manned by a dozen soldiers. It was built to quell constant ambushes along the Brisbane-Toowoomba road, guard bullock dray camps,²³ and escort convoys. Its soldiers led protracted battles.²⁴ They used nearby Mt Tabletop to 'scan the horizon for the smoke of camp fires', and 'warn... the teamsters'.²⁵ Sadly, there is no contemporary description of its 'rough barracks.'²⁶ Later accounts state it comprised a 'sergeant's guard'²⁷ built partly of brick.²⁸ It likely contained a blockhouse and store. Locals recall a watchtower and even a cannon.²⁹ The fort's removal was lamented by Brisbane residents.³⁰

In 1860, Governor George Bowen established Volunteer Rifle squads specifically for settlements 'surrounded by savage tribes'.³¹ By 1861, Bowen cancelled this to enlarge the Native Police force.³² Consequently, Volunteer Rifle squads were never deployed,³³ yet their exercises were intimidating. In 1860, the public complained about the Volunteers' habit of regularly discharging rifles around Breakfast Creek's Aboriginal camps.³⁴ In 1867, Brisbane Volunteers stormed the grounds of Victoria Park Aboriginal camp as 'practice', terrifying the occupants.³⁵

Policing camps and barracks

After 1850, responsibility for frontier warfare fell to police (often ex-military).³⁶ Frantz Fanon recalled 'the frontiers of the colonial world are shown by barracks and police stations.'³⁷ Stockaded cells at Cooktown police station, 'larger than... [those at] Brisbane' were considered indicative of the town's prosperity,³⁸ and the station's Aboriginal warder recalled forays that saw him speared.³⁹ Equally, the 'settlement' of Bowen was led by police with Police Magistrate George Dalrymple travelling with Lieutenant Williams and six Native Police troopers ahead of the first settlers, while Lieutenant Walter Powell and his troopers landed a naval contingent from the *Jeannie Dove*

and the *Santa Barbara* under Captain McDermott. The Police Magistrate described his operation as:

a sudden co-operation of land and sea forces, the former horsed and prepared for emergency, would either strike terror, which would result in immediate flight, or enable a blow to be struck, in the event of attempted outrage.⁴⁰

Dalrymple's party, with 30 orderlies, extra troopers, and 'twelve gentlemen volunteers' patrolled the landing site, ready to 'clear off the aborigines'.⁴¹

Defences at Bowen included a 'rough fort' on Stone Island;⁴² a 'headquarters camp' kept under night watch by orderlies; and Native Mounted Police, stationed 'a little to the rear of the town.' The 'headquarters camp' corralled 261 horses and cattle. Dalrymple stated that 'every arrangement' was made for 'the protection of the settlement' including fencing and regular patrols.⁴³

More usually, Native Mounted Police corps dealt with Aboriginal groups. Their barracks and camps numbered in hundreds, but were probably not fortified. Burke and Wallis's extensive survey failed to locate defensive features.⁴⁴ Due to the mobile nature of the units, construction was lightweight and temporary. At Cape York, buildings were dismantled and recycled.⁴⁵ Otherwise, Native Police sought temporary accommodation at homesteads.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, some Native Mounted Police barracks were called 'forts' (Auburn, Boulia and Belyando),⁴⁷ 'stockades' (Rannes, Taroom, Belyando and Bungaban),⁴⁸ and fortified hilltops (Mitchell River),⁴⁹ Captain Uvedale Edward Parry-Okeden dubbed Auburn barracks 'Fort Grant', describing it as an 'old stone fort, built for protection against the blacks'.⁵⁰ Edward Kennedy remembered quarters 'built of logs',⁵¹ as were barracks at Surat and near Townsville.⁵² Wondai Gumbal had stone walls.⁵³ Boulia barracks ruins were described as stone and clay, with 'loopholes through which the troopers fired on attacking natives'.⁵⁴ Early settler Louisa Masters recalled Mistake Creek (Belyando) Barracks having slits in its slab walls for firing.⁵⁵ WR Rudd who lived at Coen in 1910, remembered Coen 'police fortification' ruins as 'hardwood slabs six inches thick... loopholed for defence,' and a covered walk with 'breast high' walls running from the barracks to the water supply.⁵⁶ In 1950, *Townsville Daily Bulletin* even penned a 'tour' of Native Police 'forts':

At several places ... stood buildings that could be termed 'forts' for they were built as ... refuge from aborigines... usually they were the headquarters of the old Native Mounted Police.... In the west, these fortified buildings were built of rammed earth (pise) or merely dried black soil mud. ... One such old fort at Devonport Downs, on the Diamantina... was constructed of black soil mud sun dried as hard as rock ... with spear proof apertures for rifles.⁵⁷

Archaeology does not seem to support this, and too few images or buildings survive to be certain. Furthermore, 'stockade' at the time referred even to simple holding pens with 10-14 foot timber or casing fences.⁵⁸ These enclosed



*Mud forts at Tin-Tin-Chilla Station, Adavale district, c.1905,
(Photographer, HJ Walton; Source, State Library of Queensland)*



*Spring Creek Native Police Barracks in the 1860s, showing open fields maintained
around the establishment.
(Edward B Kennedy, *The Black Police of Queensland*, figure facing p. 134)*

‘lock ups’ or ‘cells’ with wooden posts for leg irons⁵⁹ could hold numerous Aboriginal people.⁶⁰

Barracks were sometimes attacked, yet despite petitioning for fortification, resources and workmen were rarely granted or available.⁶¹ Queensland’s 1861 *Select Committee* promised ‘guard house and cells’ for Native Police⁶² but this may never have occurred.⁶³ Only at Adavale is there photographic proof of a fort purportedly built by ‘black troopers’ – pisé walls seven to eight feet high, a foot thick, featuring portholes.⁶⁴

On the other hand, camps were positioned to enhance surveillance and avoid surprise attack. Troopers’ huts at Boralga and Sandgate were positioned with views over the water.⁶⁵ Many officers’ quarters stood on stilts, and most camps occupied (or cleared) large, open flats. These were horse paddocks (Morrisset organised paddocks at every principal station to enable troopers to quickly mount fresh horses),⁶⁶ but also functioned as security and surveillance. In fact, it was frontier custom to position one’s self where Aboriginal movements could be best seen.⁶⁷ Barracks had additional ‘observation camps’⁶⁸ where troopers occupied ‘an open place,’ taking turns to keep watch,⁶⁹ additionally posting someone to guard the main camp.⁷⁰

Being placed on corridors of communication, travel and attack,⁷¹ barracks were ‘central’ whenever country was being occupied.⁷² The Sandgate Barracks occupied the heart of a conflict zone, amidst Aboriginal base camps.⁷³ Boralga Barracks were conveniently beside a telegraph office on the road to the Palmer River gold fields, close to cattle stations and at a confluence of waterways.⁷⁴ Placed ‘at regular intervals,’⁷⁵ the camps ‘moved to the outside country ... [as] an outside line of Police Stations from North to South ... [and] an inside line of Police Stations from North to South.’⁷⁶

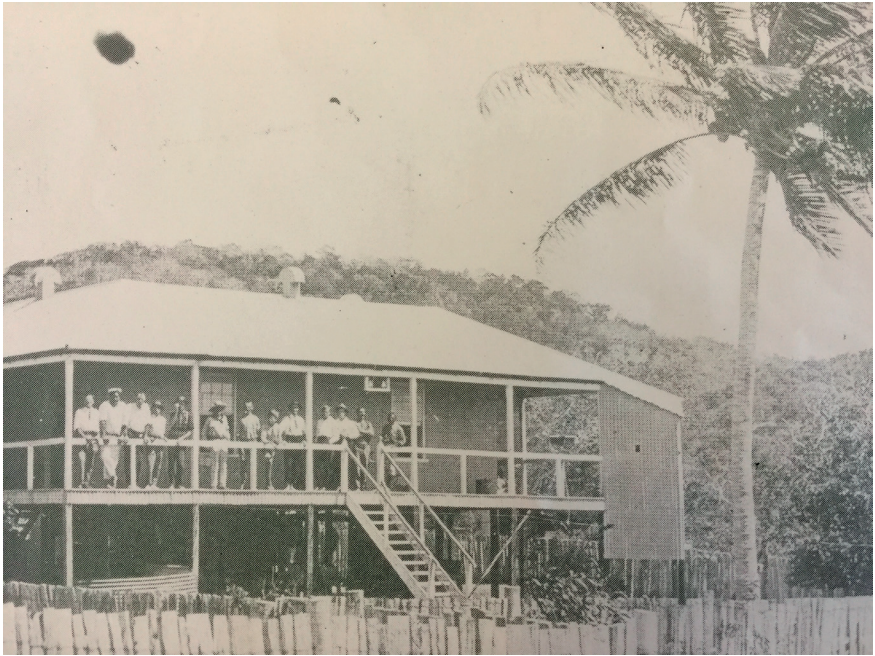
Fortified telegraph stations

The nature of telegraph stations as fortified is undisputed. From the 1850s it was recommended they include stockades.⁷⁷ Communication being essential to defence, telegraph stations and Native Police Barracks were often aligned or co-located.⁷⁸

Design for stations was fairly standardised: small, thick-gauged, galvanized iron rooms with ‘towers’ at each corner – combination turret, rifle shooting and refuge room (often 4 x 5 ft in size); elevation (often on stilts); iron-shuttered or bolt-able windows; loopholes at each ‘turret’ positioned to maximize coverage; and protected verandas.⁷⁹

Defensive squatting layouts

Downs squatter Patrick Leslie designed his sheep runs defensively:



Paterson Bay telegraph station, showing a corner gun room.

(Royal Historical Society of Queensland, Item P2126)

for the protection of men and stock, [we] made one station on the north bank of the river, and two others opposite – one on either side of Sandy Creek, thus giving mutual protection.⁸⁰

Likewise, Don Gary recalled settling southern Queensland strategically:

stations were separated about ten miles from each other, for it was the custom to form their homesteads close together for protection for one another from the attacks of the blacks, which people were very numerous.⁸¹

This evenly-spaced ‘stringing’ is evident in Baker’s 1846 map of southeast Queensland. Aside from protection, it enabled combined squatter offensives: ‘word (was) passed along from station to station, and the stockmen would collect at some appointed place.’⁸² Gideon Lang even recommended the Colonial Secretary induce settlers to place roughly five armed ‘hutkeepers’ at each set of outstations, as a form of frontline defence.⁸³ In north Queensland, Charles Eden remembered putting this into practice:

I had three shepherds in charge of 2,000 sheep each. They had to be armed with a Terry Rifle and Colt’s revolver, as the blacks were always on the aggressive. Even my own hut was loop-holed to fire through, and we found that very useful.⁸⁴

Gideon Lang also advised new settlers to ‘command the water.’⁸⁵ For example, walled encampments erected on *Rocklands* Station near Camooweal

enabled owners to halt Aboriginal people travelling along prized waterholes.⁸⁶ For extra measure, squatters occupying new lands sometimes added hilltop stockades:

(we) started for a camping place better calculated for resistance...the summit of a small hillock afforded a good view round, and in half an hour, a sufficient number of logs were cut for defences, ...we lay down, leaving as usual one 'hand' on the lookout.⁸⁷

Fortified homesteads

Around the world, frontier homes were often fortified.⁸⁸ This should be more likely for Australia, given that settlers here often formed the 'frontline':

The Government plunder their (the blacks') lands; and the whites who go to the front, the advance guard of civilisation, are left to fight it out with the blacks.⁸⁹

As noted, studies to date have been sceptical concerning Australian 'home forts'. A recent desktop study by Burke, Kerkhove et al., nevertheless identified over 97 'fortified' homes in Queensland.⁹⁰ Some such as Edward Baker's home near Rockhampton featured sliding shutters attached by cords to rifle triggers which were only accessible via a ladder and a securely fastened trap door.⁹¹ Most homes, however, were much simpler: slab huts, kitchen (cooking) huts, and outstations, defended with:

1. Thick, tough walls;⁹²
2. No (or one) window;
3. Tiny, high-set windows;
4. Loopholes for shooting;⁹³
5. Iron or wood bars and barricades across windows and doors;⁹⁴
6. Arsenals (cupboards, boxes or racks of guns);⁹⁵
7. Elevated positioning;⁹⁶
8. Cleared surrounds.⁹⁷

Loopholes were the main element. They were often 'at the height of a man's shoulder' to enable keener observation without exposure.⁹⁸ In some cases holes were very high, requiring the shooter to stand on a box. This provided extra vantage. Most were drilled at each wall or corner, to enable shooting from all directions.⁹⁹ This matches military practice.¹⁰⁰ They were plugged unless in use.¹⁰¹ Some homesteads had a hole in each slab wall.¹⁰²

All bush huts had thick walls, but according to pioneer Ernest Henry, fortified huts were especially sturdy: 'stouter timber... ironbark slabs, two or three inches thick.'¹⁰³ George Beardmore, an early Tiaro settler, stated that his 1853 home, 'in view of possible attack from *myalls* (wild Aboriginals)' had strengthened living and sleeping areas, with loopholes and 'strong doors and window shutters.'¹⁰⁴ Doors were often ironwood, of 'enormous strength...

enhanced by a couple of crossbars of ironbark.¹⁰⁵ Many had strong wooden latches.¹⁰⁶

Imbil Homestead used round timbers,¹⁰⁷ creating something akin to a blockhouse or log cabin. Charles Eden recalled a house ‘built of whole she-oak trees, plenty of which grew in the creek adjoining.’¹⁰⁸ Security of windows was provided by making them sparse and hatch-like:¹⁰⁹

(Their) windows ...consist simply of hinged wooden shutters, which fitted over a frame somewhat like the hatch of a ship, and which could be opened or closed at will... for in those days blacks were numerous and often hostile.¹¹⁰

Defensive fencing was rare, but *Borgorah* homestead (St George) had a stockade in 1854:

in those days it was absolutely necessary, after dark, to be within the precincts of the stockade which was erected around the homestead. ...there were four old blunder busses, fired by flints, stationed at each corner.¹¹¹

In some cases, alarms and signals of boards or lights were used.¹¹² Darling Downs station owners erected hill beacons to warn of approaching Aboriginal groups.¹¹³ James Tyson describes bell towers being common at isolated homesteads where ‘all hands downed tools and rushed to defend the place’.¹¹⁴ In the same region, *Jimbour*’s ‘citadel’ water tower was purportedly surveillance-related¹¹⁵ as a ‘defence against aborigines.’¹¹⁶

Elevated positioning enabled surveillance. Ross Scott-Cowen’s father told him that *Tambo* Station homestead was deliberately built on a rise, and later used as a vantage point to fire at attacking Aborigines.¹¹⁷ Robert Johnstone similarly described a homestead positioned on a ridge, whose occupants shot at his troopers.¹¹⁸



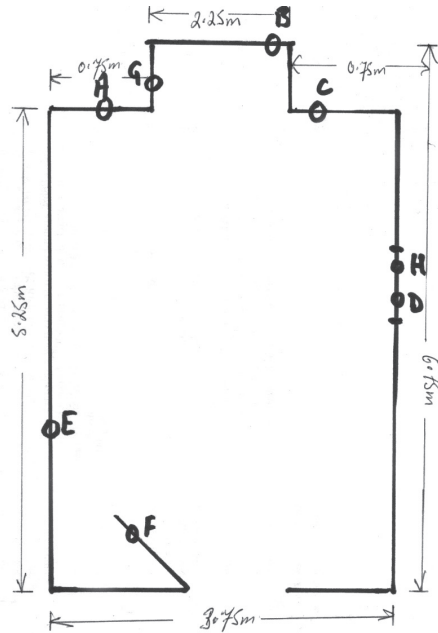
Fortified shepherd's hut 1840s-1850s, from Colinton Run, now at Ringsfield Homestead, Nanango.
(Photograph by author, 2019)

In fact, positioning of homes had defensive elements. Bald Hills’ first homesteads were built ‘in sight of each other’, as protection.¹¹⁹ Early maps confirm this arrangement.¹²⁰ Whenever homes were built too close to dense scrub, residents were sometimes reprimanded by police

for ‘badly situating’ because Aboriginal attacks often used scrub cover.¹²¹

Prospectors’ and timber getters’ huts

Miners and timber getters worked in remote areas, magnifying their vulnerability. Chinese miners on the Palmer erected stockades both against rival clans and Aboriginals. Bloody skirmishes are recorded involving these stockades.¹²² George Harris noticed prospectors’ and timber-getters’ huts at Cockatoo Creek (Taroom) with small holes bored against Aboriginal attack.¹²³ He reported similar huts, with ‘peep holes,’ around Kin Kin timber leases.¹²⁴ These had ‘doubly-thick slabs’.¹²⁵ Into the 1880s, gold-mining camps in the forested hills west of Cairns likewise sometimes had ‘strong’ bush huts with loopholed slabs.¹²⁶



Floor design of fortified shepherd’s hut now at Ringsfield Homestead, showing strategic placement of loopholes.

(Sketch by Rod Pratt, 2019)

The largest miner’s fort was probably ‘Fort Coen’, which founded the town.¹²⁷ Between 1876 and 1879, it was a loopholed base for 15 miners where:

they built a stout log hut as a fortified headquarters. Here the party separated, one consisting of four men ... remained at the log hut, prospecting the surrounding hills and gullies. ... Apparently the other two parties were not so successful; two of them were killed by the blacks, a third man escaping, it is recorded, to ‘the fortified hut at Coen, [was] pursued for some distance by scores of natives’.¹²⁸

Early Queensland as a militarised world

The Ogilvie and Delaney families recalled most homesteads having loopholed walls and a ‘good stock’ of guns and ammunition ‘for defence.’¹²⁹ In 1851, the *Moreton Bay Courier* described defensive portholes as ‘usually made in huts on the frontiers’ for ‘resisting the assaults of the natives.’¹³⁰

None of this should be surprising. Queensland was born amongst penal barracks, lookouts against French or Russian invasion, and frontiers dotted

with Native Mounted Police camps. Brisbane comprised 400 residents in the late 1840s. The 99th Regiment added another 50 men, making one-eighth of the population military. Additionally, it had ‘remnants of the convict regime ... a few time-expired men ... employed about the barracks and the court-house’.¹³¹ Finding ‘nothing to keep guard over,’¹³² these folk and the soldiery became pastoral defenders:

there existed a *camaraderie*...we clubbed together ... we (the military), as temporary residents, identified ourselves with the growing fortunes of the colonists, and the popularity enjoyed by the regiment was in no small measure due to this feature.¹³³

Soldiers became police – the same men occupying both positions¹³⁴ – and merged into the fabric of frontier society:

every station was a resting place to the mounted police, who were known to everybody. And then a policeman almost always had a supply of all he wanted.¹³⁵

Some Queensland sheep and cattle stations even adopted military names: ‘The Barracks,’ ‘Fort William,’ and ‘Fort Constantine.’¹³⁶ Pastoralists were often ex-army or ex-navy. Captain George Griffin, who saw action at Algiers for the Napoleonic Wars, built *Whiteside*’s first homestead, and mounted a swivel gun in front of his house to fire at Aboriginal men.¹³⁷ Thomas Coutts, former officer on *Lady Leith*, likewise kept a loaded deck cannon ‘to scare the niggers’ at *Rosewood* homestead.¹³⁸

Administration of early Queensland was conducted from military-penal complexes. Until 1861, all new arrivals to Brisbane were processed and accommodated in rooms over the former prison barracks’ court house,¹³⁹ a ‘substantial edifice’ that dominated Brisbane.¹⁴⁰

Military models dominated the frontier. Homesteads copied wooden forts which had two centimetre thick slab walls¹⁴¹ with ‘stout planking... pierced with holes’.¹⁴² Builders of pastoral ‘forts’ copied blockhouses observed in the Maori Wars.¹⁴³ The style of John Moss’s hut defence at Cockatoo Creek derived from his readings of early warfare:

the darkies then closed in round the hut (he told me he had read Roman History) and he opened the strong wooden door slightly so that only an assailant at a time could press in sideways... I often camped with John Moss... and we talked over the early Roman, Carthaginian, Hannibal and English battles.¹⁴⁴

By the 1890s, Queensland grew embarrassed of its rugged origins. Loopholed huts and convict prisons were deemed an eyesore. Most were demolished. In 1911, William Clark – a veteran of skirmishes near Roma – found his ‘old world’ crumbling. Watching a parade of elderly pioneers in the heart of Brisbane, he remarked on the contrast between their tiny fortified huts and the city’s Edwardian mansions:

Here and there some of the men drop out of the procession and enter little slab huts ... standing upon allotments of land which are now occupied by handsome

suburban residences. The windows... like the hatch of a ship. ...walls pierced with augur holes, for in those days blacks were numerous and often hostile ... (We) fought the demon of fear day after day with a heroism that can scarcely be understood by those who have not experienced its agony.¹⁴⁵

While first settlements in northern Australia at Fort Dundas, Post Essington, Escape Cliffs and Fort Wellington,¹⁴⁶ and similar instances in Tasmania and Sydney can be cited, this article has shown that ‘frontier war’ designs and structures also once dominated Queensland’s landscape: fortified camps, military posts, barracks, rural layouts, prospectors’ stockades, fortified telegraph stations, and fortified homesteads. These layouts and features were minimal compared to fortifications on other continents, yet they indicate early Queensland was much more militarized and fearful than is commonly acknowledged.

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