

FORT DUNDAS/ PUNATA

STATEMENT OF HERITAGE VALUE

Fort Dundas, established in 1824 and abandoned in 1829, is singular in its historical significance as the first colonial settlement along the north coast of Australia, and for its association with the Tiwi campaign to defend their land from the colonists. It is known by the Tiwi as Punata, named after the peninsula of land on which it stands. The motivation to establish Fort Dundas speaks to Britain's imperial and commercial aims, and the proximity of trade routes and foreign colonial powers. Fort Dundas was established relatively early in Australian colonial history, only 33 years after the settlement at Sydney Cove was established. In the 1820s the western boundary of the British colony in Australia stopped at 135° meridian. As Fort Dundas lay 500km further west, the western boundary was simply extended to enclose it.

The failure of the settlement speaks to the difficulty the British had establishing a foothold in the Northern Territory. Fort Dundas was the first of four failed attempts of settlement before Palmerston (Port Darwin) was established in 1869. A series of factors led to the abandonment of Fort Dundas including disease, malnutrition, conflict with the Tiwi and the failure to establish trade with Macassan visitors, or establish any substantial commercial enterprise. Tiwi resistance to Fort Dundas forced a siege mentality on the settlers. Tiwi defiance and resistance against Fort Dundas stands as an important, and for some celebrated, chapter in Australia's Frontier Wars.

The archaeological research value of the site remains significant, despite the limited degree of intactness. The fort remains an impressive engineering feat considering the size of the settlement. The majority of other settlement structures have been reduced to stone rubble or partial flooring, although one wall remains partly intact. Archaeological questions remain, and innovative research design and methods may deliver significant research results.

Fort Dundas/Punata is associated with John Septimus Roe, a person of significance to the Territory and Australia more broadly. He served under Captain Bremer during the establishment of Fort Dundas. Roe's letters provide first impressions of the settlement, he produced sketches and the first hydrographic chart of local waters. Roe was later appointed Surveyor-General of Western Australia. The capture, imprisonment and escape of Tiwi man Tambu Tipungwuti is a focal point in the Tiwi story of Fort Dundas/Punata. His capture and escape precipitated an increase in Tiwi resistance.

Fort Dundas/Punata is of social and political significance to the people of the Northern Territory, as a symbol and reflection of how we choose to tell our collective story. As the first colonial settlement, one that failed in part due to hostility with Aboriginal peoples, the way we choose to frame its story, reflects how we choose more broadly to remember the earliest chapters of our complex and contested colonial past.