

Fort St. David (Cuddalore) Seat of British Presidency (1746 – 1752)



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Abstract

Among all the European nations which came to India for trading purposes, there remained at last only two, the English and the French. Each one of them was anxious to oust the other. The Anglo-French struggle had three phases in India. The first phase of the Anglo-French struggle commenced in 1746. Madras was capitulated within a week on 21 September 1746 by the French. Nicholas Morse, the governor of Madras had to surrender after brave resistance to the French forces in 1746. Paradis formally declared that Madras was the property of French East India Company for the king of France on the 30th October 1746. Dupliex was not satisfied with the mere capture of Madras. He now tried to complete the elimination of the British by the capture of Fort St. David. The fort was built by the British in Cuddalore in the year 1702. For the next eighteen months, he directed his efforts to the capture of Fort St. David. Though Dupliex, the French Governor tried to eliminate the British from Cuddalore he was unsuccessful due to the brave, resistance exerted by Stringer Lawrence. Fort St. David was the seat of British presidency from 1746 to 1752, since Madras was capitulated by the French.

Keywords: European Nations, Trading Purpose, Brave Resistance

Cuddalore was a part of Carnatic region and came under the English East Indian company in 1801 A.D¹. Devanampattinam, where the Fort St. David was located, named after lord Devanatha of Tiruvendipuram which is three Kilometers west of Tiruppadiripuliyur. Thiruppadiripuliyur in ancient days was a great centre of Jains. Manjakuppam was the official centre of Cuddalore.

Cuddalore was called by different names in the past. As it is located very close to the sea it was called Cuddalore which meant sea –town. As it is situated on the junction of the rivers Gadilam and Paravanar it was called Cudalur. In the seventeenth century Muslims called this place as “Islamabad” which meant habitation of the Muslims².

On the purchase of Devanampattinam, (Fort St. David) in 1690 A.D. the British converted it into a military town and used the existing ‘castle’ there for conducting business transaction and also the residence of Deputy Governor of Fort St. David. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Devanampattinam and Cuddalore emerged as military town which gave them urban outlook. The administration relating

to textile trade resulted in the creation of white towns. The development of Cuddalore was frequently checked by the Anglo French wars and by cyclones³.

Fort St David was the last British stronghold on the cormandal coast. Several land attacks were made by Dupleix on Fort St. David. The first occurred on the 8th December, 1746, when the French, after seizing the company’s Garden House at Manjakuppam, were repulsed with loss. The Nawab kept his army under his sons Mahfuz khan and Muhammad Ali in the vicinity of Fort St. David for three months, after which he made terms with the French and withdrew. The most important attack was delivered on the 1st and 2nd March, 1747 and the enemy fell back.

Dupleix managed to buy off Mahfuz Khan, but when on 3 March 1747 Paradis marched with a considerable force finally to subjugate Fort St David, as he thrust a feeble British covering force aside and came within sight of the ramparts of the Fort he beheld the mortifying sight of British sails rising up over the horizon. Soon the British naval squadron anchored off Fort St David, and as Griffin started ferrying

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sailors and marines to the shore Paradis had no recourse but to beat a hasty retreat. Griffin landed 500 sailors and 150 marnies as a temporary reinforcement to the garrison, and put one of his captains, Captain Gibson, in charge of the Fort. With nothing much else to do, Robert Clive appealed for a commission, being granted one dated 16 March 1747 into the 2nd Company of Foot Soldiers at Fort St David'. Edmund Maskelyne also took a commission about this time.⁴

On the 16th June 1748, the French made an attack on Cuddalore, but they were again repulsed with loss⁸. It was not long before his little army had an opportunity to prove its worth. In May 1748, in answer to Dupleix's prayers, a French squadron arrived in Indian waters. Too weak to challenge Commodore Griffin, the French admiral yet managed to lure the British squadron away from its station off Fort St. David. Dupleix struck at once. Suddenly French troops appeared almost under the walls of Cuddalore. It was obvious to the French that the British were alarmed, as they could be seen hauling back guns and stores from the town to Fort St. David, clearly intending to move out at once. After dark however, Lawrence stealthily re-occupied the town walls. At midnight the French confidently marched up to take over what they presumed to be an empty town, only to be greeted by a totally unexpected blast of musketry. The surprise was complete, and in the darkness all control broke down. The disheartened fugitives could barely take advantage that they were nearly out of range of the French artillery, but the British guns, were unlikely to be more effective. On one occasion when the guns had been run up on to their platforms in a battery, it was found that, owing to a regrettable miscalculation, a wood completely obscured the French fortifications. As blunder succeeded blunder, sickness began to exact an ever heavier toll, and the morale of the besiegers steadily declined. Robert Clive observed, 'a strong detachment was sent to possess the French bounds which was effected with little opposition, but so prevailing was the panic among the men that in the night time the advanced sentries were continually firing without seeing anybody and very often at one another; this kept the whole detachment in alarm, and I am persuaded that the appearance of 50 of the enemy would have put us to flight'.

The French, however, were not without their misfortunes. Paradis, upon whose inspiring leadership much depended, fell mortally wounded while organizing a sally. During the same sally Clive had an opportunity to display his powers; as some French, headed by a grenadier company, approached the trench he was holding, the platoons on his right and left though fit to make a hasty departure, but Clive's platoon some thirty men, stayed firm. They exchanged fire with the French grenadiers at a range of ten yards; the grenadiers tried to form up for a charge, but their line fell to pieces before a storm of bullets, and they ran back leaving some thirty of their comrades on the ground. Eight of Clive's men had been hit.⁵

For nearly three years from the 30th October, 1746, the date of the repudiation of the treaty of ransom, interest centres at Fort St. David.⁶

The Deputy Governor and Council of Fort St. David learned no details of the fall of Madras until the early days of October, 1746. On the 17th they sent a letter¹ to England by the sloop Portobello, Walter Hook, master, which sailed from Negapatam on the 22nd, reporting the loss of Fort St. George. This dispatch, which detailed all the facts then known, was received in England on the 20th April, 1747. Rumours which had arrived earlier from Paris were discredited. The Gentleman's Magazine⁷ published an article on the resources of Madras, derived apparently from Salmon's Modern History, and concluded with these words:-

Extract from the 'Gentleman's Magazine

'It is not easy therefore to conceive that there can be any truth in a flying report we have from Paris in relation to the French making themselves masters of this settlement. The only place they have on this coast, or indeed of any consequence in the East Indies, is Pondicherry, which lies seventy miles south of Fort St. George, so that this could be no surprise; nor was it ever suspected that the French had either a land or naval force in those parts capable of reducing a place of such consequence, and every way so well provided.'

The London Magazine⁸ gave a description of Fort St. George, condensed from Lockyer's account, and illustrated with Fryer's plan! this was followed by Cole's narrative of the surrender, and Salmon's description of the place with Moll's map, none of the authorities being acknowledged.

The British regarded their treatment by the French as needlessly harsh:- Fort St. David to the Company 'The Proceedings of the French both at Madras and Pondicherry have in General been so Cruel and Inhumane that they seem rather to imitate a Persecution as opposed to a War. They have refus'd to Exchange a Single Prisoner, notwithstanding the Several they owe us, and We have some of theirs; and on a Sudden drove away all the Women and Children that had Liberty to stay at the Mount, plundering them of everything they had, and afterwards set fire to their houses; and this at a time when they were preparing to come against this Place.'⁹

The Company to the Governor and Council at Fort St. David wrote thus: 'On the 20th of April the Porto Bello Sloop brought us your advice of the 17th October 1746, and by Letters from Bombay received Overland We learn with great Satisfaction that you had Repulsed the French and Continued in Possession of the Place in December last'.

'Having taken the same into Serious Consideration, We have Judged it proper, upon such a surprising Revolution in our Affairs as the loss of Madrass, to Constitute Fort St. David our Head Settlement, and to Appoint John Hinde, Esquire, to be President and Govenour of Fort St. David and

all our Settlements and Affairs on the Choromandel, Orissa and Sumatra Coasts, with the Advice and Concurrence of Edward Croke, Stringer Lawrence, Charles Floyer, William Holt, Alexabder Wynch and Thomas Cooke, junior, as his council, and a Commission is accordingly enclosed under Our Seal in the Ship Porto Bello's Packet'.

'And in case the Nabob should give Us Possession of Madras again, the Effects that we may have there must be Removed to Fort St. David, keeping only a bare Possession of Madras'¹⁰.

Mr. John Hinde, Deputy Governor of Fort St. David, died on the 14th April, 1747. The senior councilor, Edward Croke, withdrew his claims in favour of Charles Floyer, who succeeded as Deputy Governor, becoming President and Governor on the receipt of the Company's orders on the 24th July, 1747.¹¹

Major Stringer Lawrence, an experienced officer, fifty years of age, who having seen service in Spain, Flanders, and the Highland rising of 1745, arrived in January, 1748, after a voyage lasting eleven months. He assumed charges from captain George Gibson, a naval officer lent by Griffin to command the garrison. The French attack on Fort St. David was repelled by him.

Commodore Griffin boldly remained on the coast throughout the north-east monsoon of 1747, in order to protect Fort St. David, He was relieved¹ by Admiral Boscawen² at the end of July, 1748, with characteristic energy, Boscawen at once assumed the offensive. He sailed to attack Pondicherry on the 4th August, Lawrence co-operating by land. The early days of the siege were marked by two misfortunes. Lawrence was taken prisoner, and Hallyburton was killed by one of his own men:-¹²

The siege of Pondicherry by Boscawen proved abortive, and in October, on the approach of the monsoon, it was raised. In the following month news arrived from England that preliminaries of peace had been signed at Aix-la-Chapelle on the 19th April, 1748, and instructions were received to cease hostilities in India six months after that date. On the 28th November Lawrence was released, and Holland, who had been acting for him, soon after left for Bengal.¹³

Orders from the Company nominated Major Lawrence, Mr. William Holt, and Mr. Alexander Wynch, all members of the Fort St. David Council, to be Commissaries for receiving possession of Madras under the definitive treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle of the 7th October, 1748.¹⁴

21 August 1749 Boscawen officially took over Madras from the French commandant, Barthelemy¹⁵. On determining

that Fort St. George should again become the Presidency, the Directors wrote as follows: to Fort St. David 'Fort St. George being now again the Seat of Our Presidency, you must, with the Assistance of Mr. Robins, make it as convenient as possible by re-pairing the Warehouses, Magazines and storehouses. 'We very much approve of Mr. Robins's Scheme for completing the Fortifications and works at Fort St. David, as mentioned in his Letter to us of the of the 25th September.¹⁶

Madras remained subordinate to Fort St. David from its rendition on 30th October 1746 until the 6th April, 1752, when it again became the Presidency.

Conclusion

The British ruled India for about two hundred years. Cuddalore remained a gateway to the British.

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