



The Convict Bathhouses, Boaz and Ireland islands



Figure 1: The most visible of the remaining bathhouses, located at the southern end of Boaz Island, was photographed several years ago when it was still in good condition. The chimney is a later addition.

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This is part of a series of architectural articles by the Bermuda National Trust that will highlight some of Bermuda's endangered historic buildings.

When the building of the Dockyard began in 1809 the British Admiralty had a desperate need for labourers. So, 74 English and 54 Bermudian craftsmen were hired along with 164 labourers and an unspecified number of enslaved persons who were hired from their Bermudian owners. In 1823 it was decided that employing convicts from the over-populated English prisons would be a better solution. The HMS *Antelope* was fitted out to accommodate 300 convicts to be employed at Dockyard and other fortifications on the island. In 1826 the *Dromedary* arrived with another 300 convicts, followed by the *Coromandel* in 1828 with yet another 300. By the end of 1846 the *Tenedos* and *Thames* had arrived and the convict population totalled 1,759. In total, some 9,000 convicts were employed and were quartered in old warships known as 'hulks'.



Figure 2: Bathhouses at Boaz Island look for all the world like bastions or bulwarks that are normally found at the corners of forts. Note openings that allow the sea water to enter.

At Boaz Island and at the southern end of Ireland Island are the remains of some of buildings erected by the convicts in hard Bermuda limestone for use as bathing houses. They appear as small towers, in effect cells open to the sky, but walled in so as to form a room on the water's edge. They were designed to have sea water flow into them through holes at such a height that there was always water for bathing. The buildings had a single entry consisting of steps down into the water, and convicts were therefore confined during their ablutions. This prevented escapes that might occur if the men were allowed to bath directly in the sea. While most were circular structures, square shaped bathhouses were also built.



Figure 3: A happy result for the bathhouse on Hospital Island which was restored in 2014 through a partnership between the National Museum, WEDCO and Correia Construction.



In 1848 a prison was built at Boaz Island and the circular ones were built nearby. No further convicts were sent to Bermuda after 1861 and the last of them returned to England in 1863. At some point most of the bathhouses were roofed with one having a chimney added.

Many of the bathhouses were severely damaged or destroyed by hurricanes. As far as it is known these structures are unique to Bermuda and as part of the history of the Bermuda Dockyard and its convict establishment should be preserved.



Figure 4: The bathhouse turned cookhouse is in danger of being taken over by the fast-growing casuarina.

For more information on the convicts employed at the Dockyard, the following books are highly recommended: *Forty Years of Convict Labour* by C F E Hollis Hallett and *The Andrew and the Onions* by Ian Stranack. Also consulted was *Heritage Matters* Vol. 10 by Dr Edward Harris and a *Bermuda Sun* article of 30 July 2014 on the restoration initiative on the bridge and bathhouse at Hospital Island.