

Port Kennedy, Thursday Island (Waiben)

The Early Years from Isolation Island to a Hub in the Expanding Web of Colonialism

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Port Kennedy on Thursday Island (Waiben) was established in 1877 and replaced the dilapidated and poorly situated settlement of Somerset. The new island location for the northernmost settlement extended colonial dominion over what was regarded by the press as a lawless archipelago. The action in effect pre-empted other colonial claims. More significantly, Cape York had become an important resupply point on the Queensland Government-funded steamer mail service through the Torres Straits.

Colonial expansion in northern Australia was driven by the pastoral industry. Development consisted of inland pastoral leases serviced by isolated coastal settlements connected to shipping services. This allowed supplies to be sent inland and produce to be exported, with everything channelled through Sydney. When the Colony of Queensland was proclaimed in 1859, this arrangement was a significant impediment to growth. Efforts were made to develop an alternative commercial sea route through the Torres Straits. Queensland's first Governor, Sir George Bowen, had argued that it would not be long "before the establishment of steam navigation between Australian and India and China, via Torres Straits,"¹ in

correspondence to the Secretary of State for Colonies. This led to the founding of Somerset in 1864. The Government had to charter the steamship *Souchaye* to prove the practicality of the Torres Straits route in 1866. Government Mail contracts in 1872 and again in 1880 were used to secure regular shipping services through the Torres Straits. The 1880, contract with the British India Steam Navigation Co provided a direct service from London via the Suez Canal to Queensland ports, terminating at Moreton Bay – it specifically excluded any ports south of Brisbane.²

Jasper Ludewig's "The Architecture of Colonial Jurisdiction: Annexation of Queensland's Offshore Islands"³ adopts an infrastructuralist analysis in the exploration of architecture and sovereignty. The author notes the active exploitation of the areas outside colonial jurisdiction by private enterprise. While this is true, colonial private enterprise took advantage of circumstances with little concern for acknowledged boundaries. Resources were to be exploited. While the Government's initial intent at Port Kennedy was for a purely administrative outpost, much as Somerset had been, private enterprise took advantage of the circumstances the

1.

Sir George Bowen, Dispatch No 73, Letterbook of dispatches to the Secretary of State for Colonies, December 9, 1861, p. 110. ID: ITM 17671, Queensland State Archives.

2.

London and Queensland Mail Service Articles of Agreement, May 6, 1880, Clause V p. 9. ID: ITM 105080, Queensland State Archives.

3.

Jasper Ludewig, "The Architecture of Colonial Jurisdiction: Annexation of Queensland's Offshore Islands," *The Journal of Architecture* 28, no. 8 (2024), 1315–1358, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2023.2298447>.



Figure 1:
Burns Philp & Co. Limited store and jetty, Thursday Island, c. 1897. (State Library of Queensland, <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/blog/queensland-places-thursday-island-burns-philp-co>)

new location offered, resulting in a very different settlement. This is demonstrated by the business dealings of James Burns and Robert Philp.

Burns had originally established a mercantile business in Townsville in 1873. Townsville was remote and poorly serviced by the Sydney-based Australian Steamship Navigation Co, which led Burns to charter vessels to meet the demands of the growing community. Burns moved to Sydney in 1877 to concentrate on his shipping interests and ostensibly sold the business to Philp. It was renamed Robert Philp General Storekeeper, Shipping and Commission Agent,⁴ with Burns retaining a financial interest. The two men were in constant communication, and the correspondence indicates they operated more like a single business than two separate entities. In 1879 Burns opened a store in Normanton in the Gulf of Carpentaria. His shipping expertise, developed in Townsville and expanded to service north Queensland, meant that Normanton was simply an extension to his existing network. Thursday Island was strategically important in this extended network. Their business ventures were consolidated into Burns Philp & Co. Limited in 1883 and

the company lasted into the 21st century. However, their basic approach to colonial enterprise and expansion was established in these early years.

Records in the Queensland State Archives show the architecture of the remote colonial administrative outpost of Port Kennedy as planned in 1877, as well as subsequent jetty infrastructure. Newspaper reporting, along with the collections of John Oxley Library at the State Library of Queensland, provide records of the built form in its expanded role as a colonial hub. More importantly, through correspondence and publications associated with Burns Philp & Co. Limited, these collections provide evidence of how colonial enterprise took advantage of circumstances at Port Kennedy. This research is not focused on the built expression of their success, but rather the ships, investments, partnerships and mail contracts that facilitated their growth, and in the process, expanded the web of colonialism.

4.

Robert Philp Letterhead, 1877, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Sir Robert Philp Papers; Box 8583 OM 65-32/8 3/393.