

Government Houses in Hobart Town

By

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(Read 14th March, 1944)

PLATES XV-XIX

Although only one hundred and forty years have passed since the first settlement was established on the Derwent, yet in that short period various errors relating to buildings and places have become current, errors which tend to obscure the historical facts concerning those early days.

The present-day stories regarding Lieut. Bowen's house at Risdon serve as an example of such misconception. The approximate position of the building, the first Government House in Van Diemen's Land, is shown in Bowen's plan (Walker, 1889, p. 48). On 3rd September, 1804, Lt.-Gov. David Collins 'ordered all the houses that were at Risdon to be pulled down' (Knopwood), but doubts have been expressed as to whether the order was carried out. However, in 1840, when McCormick, Surgeon on H.M.S. *Erebus* was the guest of Thos. Gregson, whose residence and farm included the site of the first settlement, McCormick wrote in his diary: 'I arose at eight a.m. and strolled to the bottom of the garden, sketched the old ruins of the first house ever built on the island, by its first governor. It now forms the summer-house of the family and the hives for the bees'. (McCormick I, p. 104.)

It is therefore evident that, though Gregson's house was on or near the original site, Bowen's dwelling formed no part of it. This is confirmed by Calder in 1878, who described the remains of the Risdon houses as 'mere broken walls' (Shillinglaw, p. 74, note). Walker (1889, p. 73) writes of 'dilapidated wooden buildings, for many years well known as the residence of Mr. Gregson, the little cottage in front being not improbably Lieut. Bowen's original quarters. About 100 yards behind the cottage, there still stand the ruins of an oven, with brick chimney, which Mr. Gregson for many years religiously preserved as the remains of the first house erected in Van Diemen's Land'. Surely this is contradictory. Had the cottage been regarded by Gregson as Bowen's original home, would he not have referred to it with even greater pride than that with which he exhibited the oven? To-day, 1944, what now remains of Gregson's commodious residence (McCormick I, p. 206) is often pointed out as Bowen's house, whilst photographs and prints of the same house are inscribed as 'The first Government House in Tasmania' or 'Government House, Risdon, 1804'.

Similar misconceptions have arisen in regard to Government House in Hobart Town. To the question, 'How many Government Houses were there in Hobart?' the answer may be three, four, or even six, with a corresponding divergence of opinion as to the position of any one of the three, four, five, or six, as the case may be. This paper, therefore, based on the available historical evidence is an attempt to clarify the existing confusion.

It is also necessary to define the term Government House. Throughout this paper it is restricted to the recognized official permanent residence of the Lieutenant-Governor or other vice-regal representative and does not include any house which may have been hired or lent for the temporary accommodation of the resident or visiting Lieutenant-Governor or Governor. Hence, such buildings as Macquarie House do not come within the scope of this paper.

Collins, with his party, landed at Sullivan's Cove on 20th February, 1804, and in less than three weeks Government House was completed, the Lieutenant-Governor sleeping in his house for the first time on March 9th. (Hookey, p. 17; Shillinglaw, p. 66.) This house has been described as consisting of (a) two rooms (*Mercury*, 12/9/1903), and (b) three rooms (Giblin II, p. 10), and is said to have been built of spars with a thatched roof (*Mercury*, 12/9/03), of 'rough timber' (Walker, Giblin), whilst still other writers refer to it as 'wattle and daub'. It is generally agreed that it was placed on or near the site of the entrance to the present Town Hall in Macquarie-street, on the rise between Argyle and Lower Elizabeth street. The situation is shown on Harris's sketch, 1804-5. (Walker, 1889, p. 48.)

Moore Robinson (MS.), however, says that within 18 months Collins constructed a rough building to take the place of his canvas tent, and the *Cyclopedia of Tasmania*, 1900, I, p 39, states that it was not till the close of 1805 that Collins left his canvas dwelling. In support of this contention that Collins' house was not erected before the end of 1805, Joseph Holt, General of the Irish Rebels, has been quoted as having written in December, 1805, on the occasion of his visit to Hobart 'His Excellency made me remain with him a good while in his tent'. (Crocker II, p. 251.)

In view of the marked discrepancy between the records of Knopwood and Holt, it is worth while to read Holt's statements again. Collins had invited Holt to call in the evening. 'He presented me with some wine and cakes and made me sit down. Governor Collins further-requested that at my convenience I would go through the government crop and the settlers' crops'. Holt did so. 'I examined the wheat upon the farms of all the settlers and brought back with me for the Governor samples of both the wheat and the smut. I waited on the Governor'. Here follows Holt's report. 'His Excellency made me remain with him a good while in his tent, and expressed a wish that I would inspect the stock'.

Knopwood's diary contains various references to the Governor's frequent visits to the farm, where he also entertained guests. On 10th November, 1804, Knopwood writes 'We dined with the Governor at his marque at the farm'. Hence we may conclude that Holt visited Collins on that occasion in the Governor's tent at the farm. It should also be remembered that the Holt MSS. were written in 1818, founded upon notes which Holt states that he had made when in the Falkland Islands in 1813. (Crocker I, p. xxii.) We may, therefore, accept as authentic Knopwood's entry for 9th March, 1804, as the date of completion of the first Government House in Hobart Town.

By December, 1804, bricks and tiles were being made in the settlement, and these were of such quantity that shingles imported from Sydney were no longer needed, and, by 1807, Collins had built a new house of brick, on a site, if not identical with, at least adjoining the first Government House. On 2nd December, 1807, Knopwood records 'A party of gentlemen, including myself, dined at the Governor's in his new house for the first time he dined there'. This new house, even though of brick, was a humble dwelling for a Lieutenant-Governor, for, sixteen months later, when Bligh visited Hobart Town in 1809 he described it 'as a

poor, miserable shell of three rooms, the walls a brick thick, neither wind nor weather proof, lately built and without conveniences'. (*H.R.A.* I, VII, pp. 125-129.)

Macquarie, during his visit in 1811, after denouncing Government House 'as much too small, incommodious and in a state of decay', selected a site for a new Government House on Fosbrook's land on Macquarie Point. 'In the meantime, the present Government House was to be completely repaired with as little delay as possible and shingled, should it appear necessary to do so'. (*H.R.A.* III, I, pp. 456, 459.) Meehan's plan, drawn according to instructions from Macquarie, shows Government House in what is now Lower Elizabeth-street, 'on the south-east side of Macquarie-street, close to the corner of Elizabeth-street'. (*H.R.A.* III, I, p. 825, note.) In Walker (1889, p. 246), Meehan's plan, 1811, has been superimposed in colour on Harris's Plan, 1804-5, and the degree of accuracy varies in different copies. Although Macquarie recognized the need for a new Government House, he gave definite instructions to Giels and Davey that barracks, hospital, and other public buildings must be completely finished before the new Government House was attempted, and then only when time and means permitted. (*H.R.A.* III, I, p. 482.) Repairs to the house had proceeded but slowly, and seven months after Davey's arrival Macquarie wrote 'I was much disappointed to find that even the Government House had not yet been put in sufficient repair to enable you to occupy it'. (*H.R.A.* III, II, p. 33.) However, on 10th May, 1814, a grand ball was given at Government House (Knopwood). Temporary repairs only had been effected, and it was not till barracks, hospital, and gaol had been built that further additions and alterations to Government House were authorized, the foundation stone being laid by Davey in January, 1817 (Hudspeth MS.).

On Sorell's arrival, he reported that 'the state of Government House is uninhabitable, not only with regard to comfort, but even as to security and common decency. I have undertaken some addition and alterations and I am at Mr. Birch's until the house can be occupied' (*H.R.A.* III, II, p. 196), and he was still at Mr. Birch's in December, 1817. During this period, alterations were in progress, the old part being pulled down and the material used in the new rooms, whilst additions, servants' quarters, kitchen, stable, coach-house, and verandah were completed by 1820. (*H.R.A.* III, II, pp. 241-259.) The building was 110 feet long and is commonly known as the 'Sorell Government House', the position being clearly shown on plan, 1824 (Plate XV). It was still regarded as a temporary abode, since Macquarie had by no means abandoned the project of a suitable vice-regal residence on the Domain. This is evident from the resumption of the grants, though Whitehead's farm had been selected as the site in preference to that on Macquarie Point. (*H.R.A.* III, IV, p. 684.)

An account of Macquarie's visit in 1821 is given in General Orders, 16th July, 1821: 'It was with much satisfaction His Excellency beheld the numerous changes and improvements which Hobart Town had undergone since the period of his former visit in 1811. The wretched huts and cottages, of which it then consisted, being now converted into regular substantial buildings and the whole laid out in regular streets, several of the houses being two storeys high and not deficient in architectural taste. The principal public buildings which have been erected are a Government House, a handsome church, a commodious military barrack, a strong jail, a well constructed hospital, and a roomy barrack for convicts'. (*H.R.A.* I, X, p. 501.) Tribute is paid to Sorell, under whom, during a period of little more than four years, all the principal public buildings and the greater part of the private ones had been erected.

The Government House, however, was not a new building, but was the re-modelled 1807 structure, for in an official report to Bathurst, 27th July, 1822, Macquarie writes:—

‘List of public buildings and works erected at the expense of the Crown from 1st January, 1810, to 30th November, 1821, both inclusive—*inter alia*—

In Van Diemen’s Land at Hobart Town, Derwent

1. The old Government House enlarged and much improved, with some new additional rooms and all necessary out offices, having a garden and shrubbery added thereto, and the whole premises enclosed with a neat paling (7 feet). (*H.R.A. I, X, p. 699.*) At this date George’s Square was not included in Government House premises, and the fencing thereof forms a separate item. This is also evident from the plan (Plate XV).

That it was but the 1807 house repaired, re-modelled, and added to is confirmed in 1824 by G. W. Evans, Deputy Surveyor-General: ‘This is to certify that the present house occupied by the Governor of Van Diemen’s Land has ever been in an unsafe state since I first saw it in 1811. The different additions to it has supported it in a great degree; those additions were also added in so loose a manner as to have occasion for abutments to support them; the building is annually giving way, and I consider it quite unsafe as the residence of the Governor of the Colony, as I think it probable that some severe gale of wind will cause the destruction of it’. Evans’ opinion is supported by David Lambe, Colonial Architect, a year later. ‘The whole of this house is in a very dilapidated and precarious state, the ceilings throughout are cracked and in many parts have fallen in. The foundations of the wall at the eastern end have given way and the whole wall is inclined outwards; this is only supported by three abutments. I should give it as my opinion from the insecurity of the building that it is impossible to repair this house so as to make it permanently a secure residence’ (*H.R.A. III, IV, p. 298.*), yet this ramshackle building remained the vice-regal residence till 1858. The original three rooms were of brick, but for the alterations and additions generally timber was used (Clyde Papers) and all such additions were but makeshifts, since the proposal to build a new Government House on the Domain had not been abandoned. Arthur, after his arrival, reported to Bathurst that ‘The building was in such a ruinous state on my entering it that Colonel Sorell assured me he was always in the greatest alarm when it blew hard, fearing it would come down and bury his family in the ruins’. (*H.R.A. III, IV, p. 288.*)

Bathurst thereupon authorized the construction of a new Government House. A site selected by Macquarie (*H.R.A. III, VI, p. 237*) adjoining the Colonial Gardens was approved by the Commissioners of Survey (Craig, 1944), stones were quarried and part of the foundation had been excavated when the increased dilapidation of the existing Government House became so alarming that it was impossible for the family to continue in it even for another week. At this juncture, a despatch from Bathurst gave instructions to Arthur to suspend work on the new building. (*H.R.A. III, V, p. 713-714.*)

In this emergency, J. Lee Archer, Colonial Architect, suggested that ‘the front of the present house might be considerably strengthened by an additional building so as to fill up the recess in the centre and that the eastern end might be equally supported by the like operation, and that the house might thus be rendered habitable in the course of three or four months’. Whilst these repairs were being carried out Arthur’s ‘very large family was lodged in a most incommodious cottage from the month of February until the end of July’. (*H.R.A. III, VI, p. 236.*) Probably this was the Government cottage at New Norfolk.

Estimates for the new Government House were again prepared in 1827, but by 1828 additions and repairs to the existing building were seriously undertaken and, by 1831, fourteen extra rooms, one being 36 ft. x 23 ft., had been added, offices, and domestic offices extending on a north-south line across the angle of the present Franklin Square near the Hydro-Electric premises, whilst the main building occupied Lower Elizabeth-street, extending over to where the Town Hall entrance now stands. A sketch is given in the Almanac, 1829 (Ross), and additions listed in 1831 (Ross) when 'Government House, the residence of the Lieutenant-Governor and family, the Executive and Legislative Council Chambers, the offices of the Private Secretary, and the offices of the Town Adjutant and Barrack Master were all situated nearly under one roof'. Some of the plans of these additions are in the library of the Royal Society of Tasmania.

In the time of Franklin, the project of a new Government House was revived, and tentative plans drawn by Jas. Blackburn were approved by Sir John Franklin, 1841. The verandah of the old house at that date was 133 feet long and the Legislative Council chamber 74 feet 9 inches long, giving a total frontage of 207 feet 9 inches. The position is shown in Edgar's plan, 1840 (Plate XVI). When compared with Kay's plan, 1850 (Plate XVII), it is evident that few alterations were made during the intervening ten years. In Calder's plan, 1852, the whole area from Arygle to Murray street is marked Government House premises, though some charts show the greater part of the present Franklin Square as the Government paddock. In Sir J. Eardley-Wilmot's time, this area was a park in which a collection of native animals was kept (Meredith).

A description by Melville (1852) is of interest. 'To the right of the market, as you proceed along the edge of the cove or new wharf, is Government House. It is prettily situated on a steep bank. Its frontage is in Macquarie-street and it terminates in the line of thoroughfare or main street called Elizabeth; in its rear it commands an excellent view of the harbour. The house itself is a disgrace to the colony. It consists of a mass of buildings arranged with no plan or order, the whole rookery being composed of a mass of additions made as more room was required by successive occupiers'.

Work on the new Government House commenced by Franklin was suspended after the arrival of Eardley-Wilmot, and the erection remained in abeyance until 1853, when an entirely new plan less extensive in style was adopted. Work on this new plan was commenced in 1853, and this new Government House was occupied by Sir H. E. Fox-Young in 1858.

As the new Government House neared completion, negotiations for the disposition of the grounds and buildings of the old Government House were in progress, and the City Council resolved 'To petition Parliament for a site, such site to be selected from the land at present occupied with Government House' (Minutes, 31/8/57) and in 1858, the ballroom and allotment were reserved for petitioners (Plate XVIII, fig. 1). As soon as the premises were vacated steps were taken for the continuation of Elizabeth-street from Macquarie-street through Government House to Morrison-street and the City Council block was fenced (Plate XVIII, fig. 2). Within five years, all traces of Government House had disappeared and the *Mercury*, 6th January, 1863, stated 'If any of our absentees who can only remember the uncouth and mean looking Government House of former days with its miserable outhouses were soon to return to Hobart Town, they would gaze with pride and pleasure upon the great improvements which have been effected', and again on 19th February, 1863: 'Levelling the site for the Franklin monument is proceeding with considerable rapidity. The large gum trees which have been left growing since the first settlement of the colony in 1804 are in progress of removal' (Plate XIX).

It is evident, therefore, that there were two Government Houses in Hobart Town, both situated in Macquarie-street. The first a wooden building, near the entrance of the present Town Hall, was occupied by Governor David Collins, 9th March, 1804, till the close of 1807. The second, consisting of three rooms, built of brick adjoining the first, was occupied by Collins, December, 1807. This building with many alterations and additions gradually extended southwards across Lower Elizabeth-street and finally into the corner of the present Franklin Square. This second Government House served successive governors from Collins to Fox-Young, 1807-1858. Its position is clearly shown in the accompanying plans and may also be seen in Duterrean's picture of Elizabeth-street, Hobart Town, 1836, now in the Tasmanian Museum.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am indebted to the Government Archivist for permission to examine old files, to the Secretary for Lands for tracings of early plans, and to Mr. R. Morris for the loan of photographs.

[It should be noted that owing to circumstances, over which the writer and the editors had no control, the quotations given do not show the original orthography, and eliminations are not marked,—Editors P. and P.]

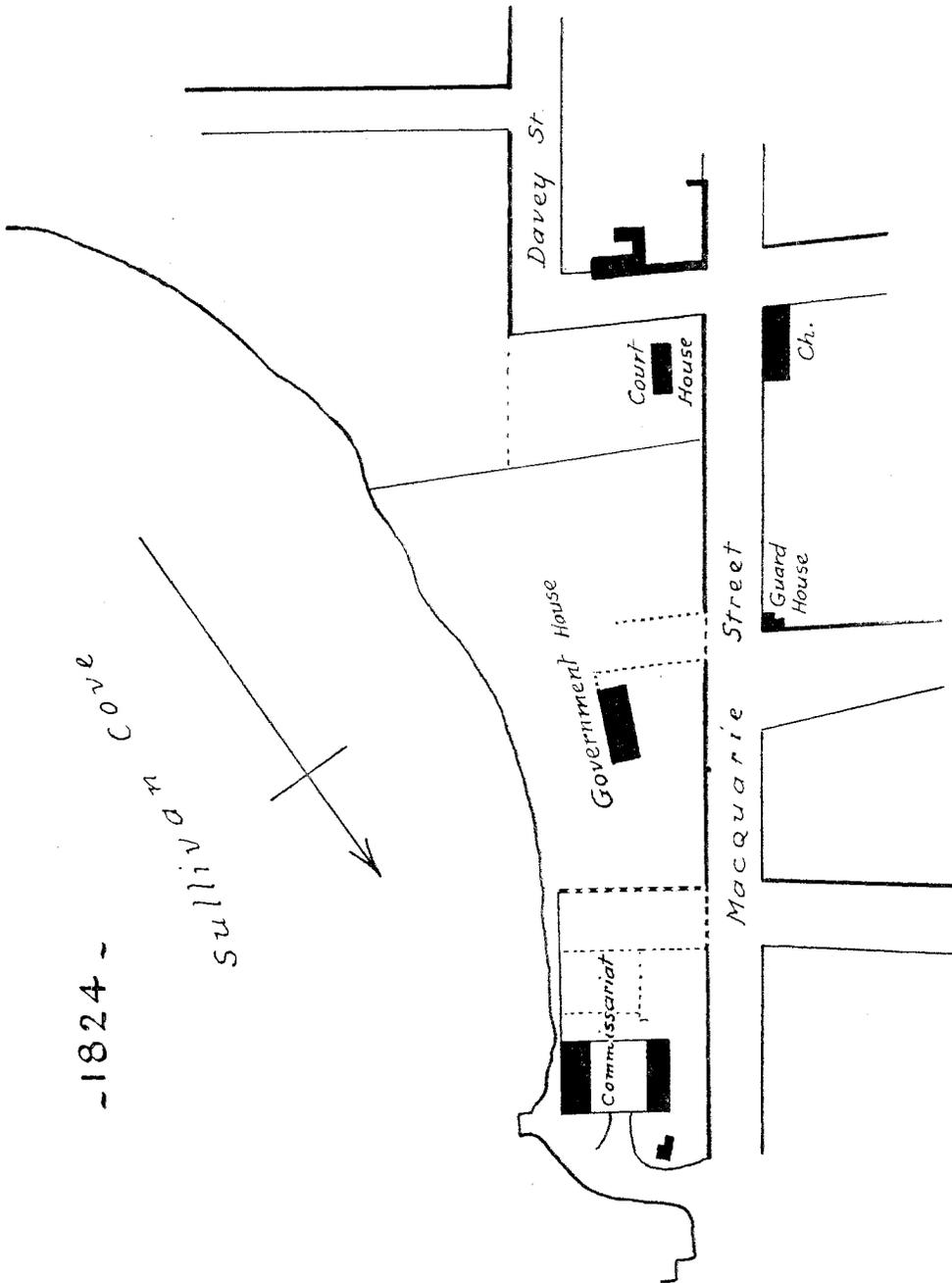
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(These two last papers are reprinted in the Walker Memorial Volume 'Early Tasmania', 1902.)

PLATE XV

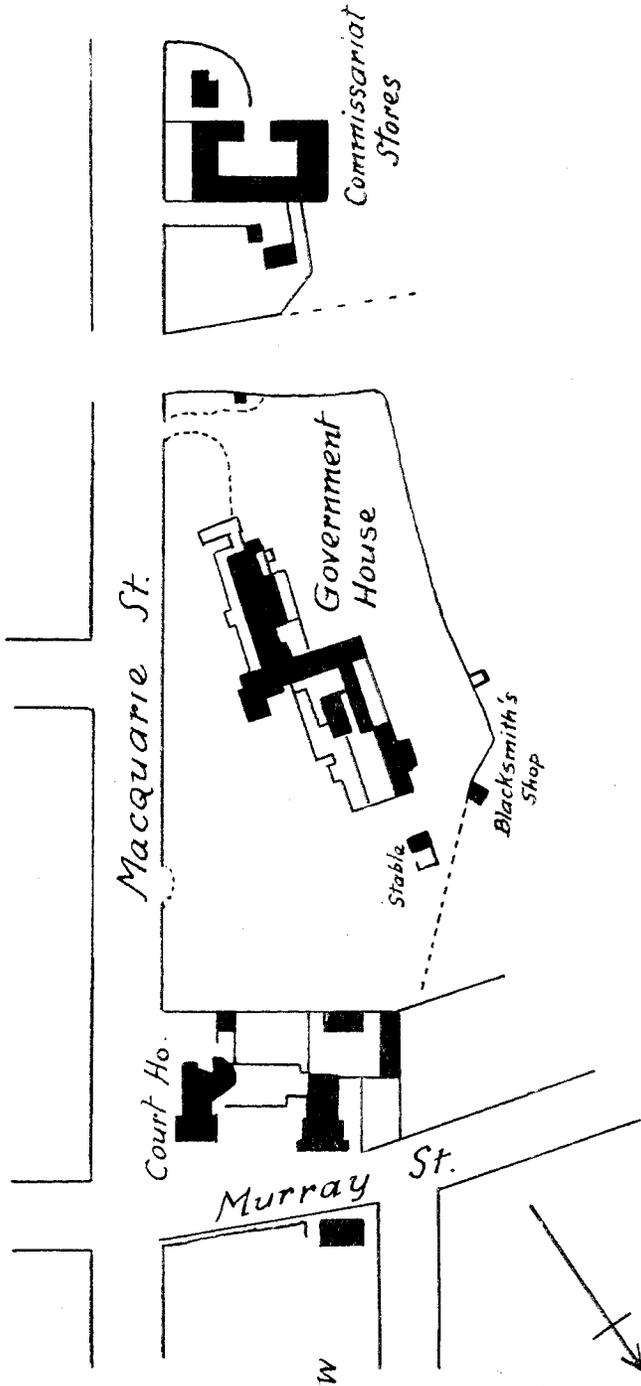
Part of Plan of Hobart Town, 1824. (Lands and Surveys Department.)



-1824-

PLATE XVI

From Plan of Hobart Town, 1840. (Lands and Surveys Department.)



Champ, Surveyor General. F.S. Edgar, Draftsman ~ 1840

PLATE XVII

From Plan of Wharves, Hobart Town. W. P. Kay, September, 1850. (Library Roy. Soc. Tas.)

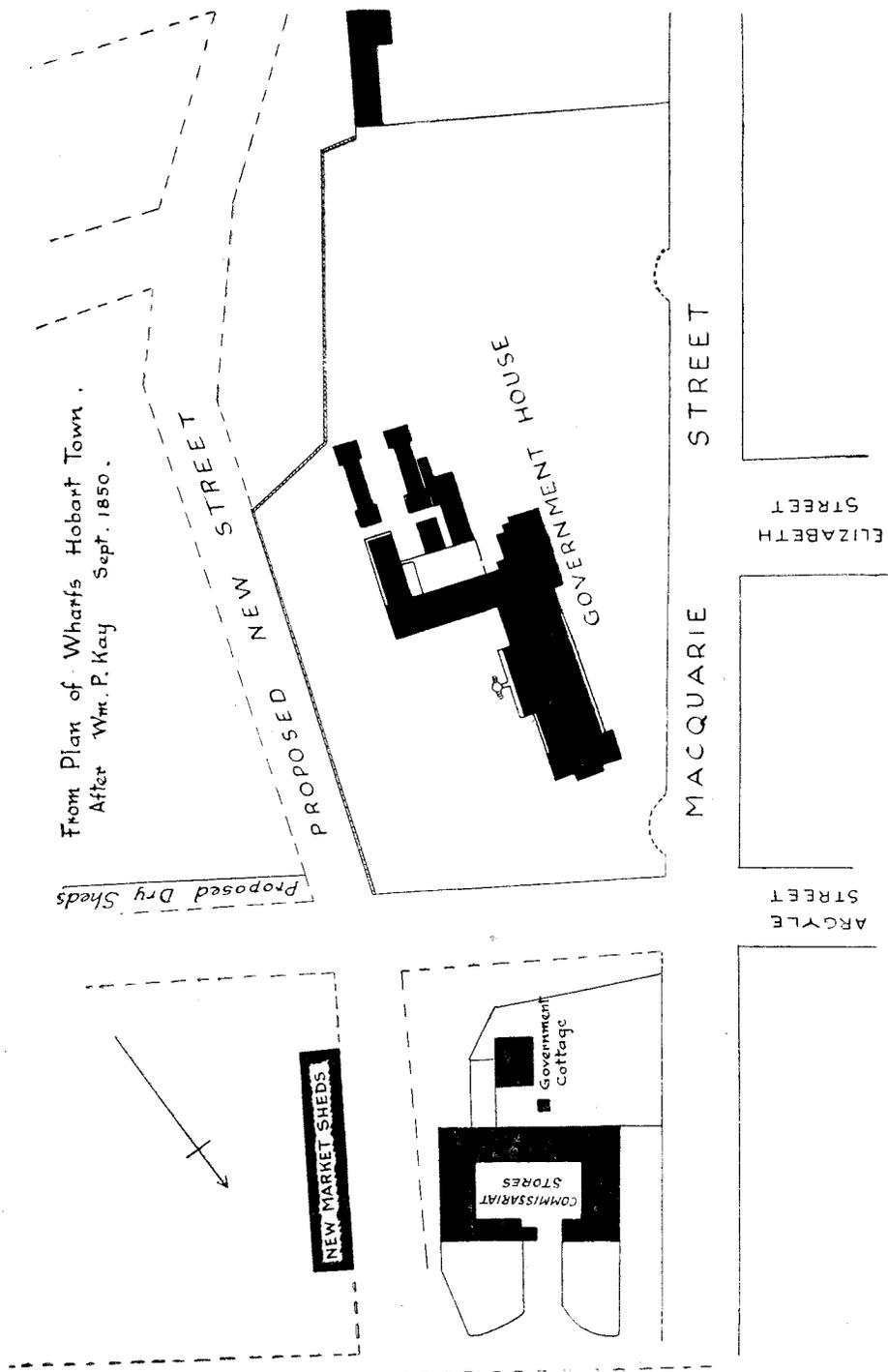


PLATE XVIII

FIG. 1.—Ballroom, Government House, used as Municipal Offices, 1858-1865.

FIG. 2.—Macquarie-Elizabeth streets, corner of block acquired by the City Council, 1858.

