

A PLAN FOR FORT SANTIAGO

By F. Ben Brillantes

WHEN I was in the United States last year in the interest of the Philippine Ex-Political Prisoners' Association, I made it a point to visit as many monuments and memorials as my crowded days allowed. By so doing, I would not only satisfy a cherished desire but at the same time get ideas which might be useful in future plans of the Association for honoring the numberless unknown heroes who died resisting the enemy during the occupation.

One of the memorials that struck me not only for its beauty but also for its efficient administration was Mount Vernon, former home of George Washington. The place, a sprawling 475-acre estate in Virginia, has been restored and is maintained by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, an organization founded by Miss Ann Pamela Cunningham, of South Carolina, and chartered by the state of Virginia. The members of the Association serve without remuneration. Funds were raised by individual subscription and the estate was acquired in 1856.

For the maintenance of the estate, the Association derives its income from admission fees. This income has made possible the maintenance of the property and the introduction of all proper means of protection. During the early years, when income was small, progressive restoration was made possible by contributions from members of the Association and other interested individuals or patriotic groups.

After visiting Mount Vernon, I began thinking of Fort Santiago and how it could be restored to its original grandeur and splendor and as a fitting memorial to the hundreds of martyrs who died in the hands of the Japanese during the occupation. I asked myself, "Why not a similar plan for Fort Santiago?"

No doubt the government in its long-range program of reconstruction has in mind the ultimate restoration of this historic landmark. But while its immediate attention is focused on the more pressing public works jobs like roads, bridges, hydro-electric plants, waterways, irrigation dams, school buildings, public edifices and other projects, it could leave projects like Fort Santiago reconstruction which has a universal appeal to freedom-loving peoples of the world, in the hands of private organizations like for example the Philippine Ex-Political Prisoners' Association.

I had talked this matter over with individual members of the Association including its substantial supporters and they have enthusiastically endorsed a plan whereby Fort Santiago could be reconstructed and administered under the auspices of the Association, following the lines set by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association in connection with George Washington's memorial.

The PEPPA makes no pretenses that it could do better than any other organization with similar aims in this regard. But to the members of the PEPPA, Fort Santiago is very dear. It is their symbol of sacrifice for the cause of universal free-

dom, a shrine in which has been preserved all that is dear to lovers of Democracy. Beneath its surface are buried hundreds of political prisoners whose only crime was that they loved the democratic way of life much more than the life the Japanese conquerors promised them for their collaboration.

That Fort Santiago should be preserved for its historic background no one would contradict. For more than 400 years and under the flags of five nations, it has occupied a prominent place in the history of Manila. In fact it is still one of the most interesting spots in the city regardless of what it stood for during the Japanese occupation. In world history it has been to the Philippines what the Bastille was to France, the Tower to England and the Morro Castle to Cuba. Like all such famous fortresses, it has been the subject of many weird and often terrifying tales of brutality and hatred.

In May, 1945, the fort was occupied by the United States Army Transportation Corps and was designated as the T.C. General Depot. This organization was responsible for clearing away the debris and giving the bodies of hundreds of Filipinos and foreign elements who were killed there by the Japanese decent burial.

The American forces returned the fort to the Philippine Republic in 1949, and since then, administration of the place has been placed under the Department of Public Works and Communications.

Fort Santiago acquired fame as early as 1480 when a strongly palisaded earthwork was built by the grandfather of Rajah Soliman, who appreciated the strategic value of the position of the mouth of the Pasig river which commanded and still commands traffic on Manila Bay.

Twelve bronze cannons were installed in the fort and these enabled Soliman to rule and consolidate the fierce tribes until 1570 when an expedition from the Spanish settlement on the southern island of Cebu under the command of Martin de Goiti and Juan de Salcedo, captured the fort and sacked the city. On May 19, 1571, Miguel Lopez de Legaspi, first governor of the Philippines founded the city of Manila and work was begun to strengthen the walls of the fort.

In 1584, Santiago de Vera, sixth governor general, cleared the ground of all the original palisades and laid the first stones of the fort that was later to be named after him.

In 1762, 16 British warships with a force of nearly 7,000 sailed into Manila Bay and laid siege on the fort. The Archbishop of Manila, as acting governor, after a token defense, surrendered the city to the British admiral in October of that year. The British forces pillaged the city and partially dismantled the fort during their year and a half of occupation. When peace was restored, reconstruction of the fort started. That was in 1778.

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A Plan For Fort . . .

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On May 1, 1898, Admiral Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay and on August 13 of the same year, the city of Manila and the fort were peacefully surrendered to the American forces under General Wesley Merritt.

During the American occupation, the moat which had completely encircled the walls, was filled and transformed into a sunken garden. Many of the old cannons, roundshot and other military equipment were carefully preserved for their ornamental value.

The Japanese invaders raised their flag over the fort on January 3, 1942. The rest of the story since the Japanese occupied it is now a matter of common knowledge.

The history of Fort Santiago is not complete without mention of the fact that it was in one of its cells, now partially restored, where Dr. Jose Rizal spent his last days before his execution and where he wrote some of his memorials including his famous "Mi Ultimo Adios".

A place with a history like Fort Santiago is worth preserving for posterity.

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