

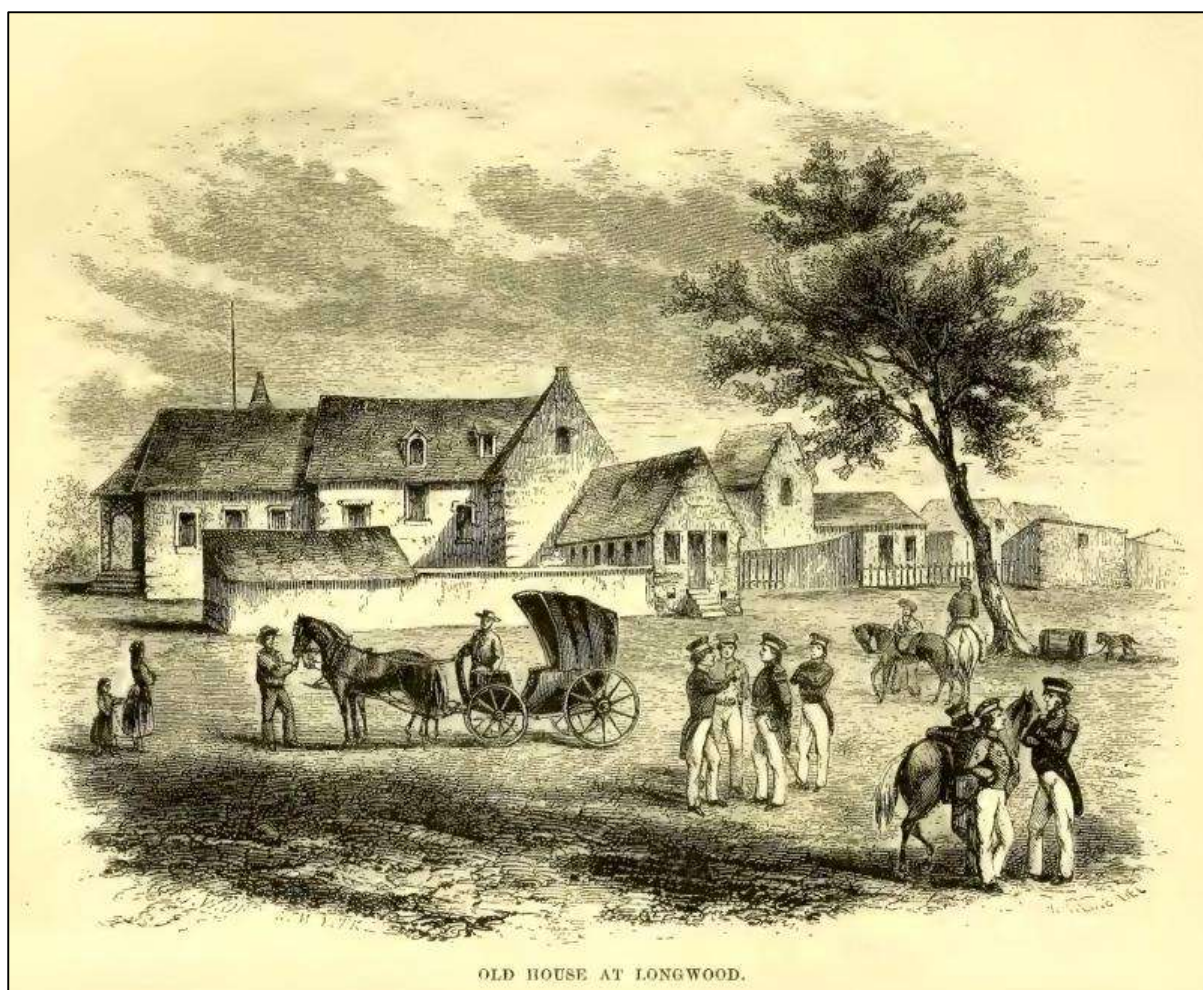
## STEAMSHIP INVASION OF ST HELENA

In 1853, Commodore Matthew C. Perry successfully undertook the mission set by US President Millard Fillmore to negotiate the ending of Japan's 220-year-long policy of isolation, opening two Japanese ports to American trade. In part, Perry succeeded by impressing the Japanese by the modernity and strength of his forces, this being the largest naval force the United States had ever sent overseas up to that time. The squadron left Norfolk, Virginia on 24 November 1852 and included two steam warships, the *USS Mississippi* and *USS Susquehanna*, and two large sloops of war, *USS Plymouth* and *USS Saratoga*.



USS Mississippi

The squadron only anchored at St Helena for a single day (10-11 January) to pick up some coal for their boilers, yet this proved sufficient time for the Americans to see all the usual Napoleonic sights. The following sketch shows impressions of the Americans visiting Longwood.



Perry's visit was well described by Trevor Hearl in a 1991 edition of *Wirebird*,<sup>1</sup> but Trevor failed to mention one interesting military aspect. Following a close study of St Helena's defences, Perry not only thought the island was vulnerable to attack but also provided an appraisal of how he would personally use his mixed squadron of steam and wind-powered ships to take the island:<sup>2</sup>

'At the time of Bonaparte's residence, the island was strongly fortified and fully garrisoned, and indeed was deemed impregnable. But this was before the introduction of armed steamers into the navies of the world. The island is strongly fortified on the north side, while the south, exposed to the whole strength of the trade winds, is on that account almost inaccessible. But the batteries were constructed to prevent the approach of sailing vessels, and this they might probably accomplish, as they are on the high cliffs commanding the only ways by which sailing vessels can approach. Sailing vessels approaching the Jamestown anchorage are obliged, by reason of the lee currents, to pass to the eastward of the island, and haul close around Sugarloaf Point; and as soon as they luff under the lee of this they become partially becalmed, and are at once exposed to the guns of a very heavy battery, called "Prince Rupert's Line" and from thence all the way to the anchorage is a succession of forts, well provided with heavy artillery. On the westward, the fortifications are less strong, because, as the current is constantly setting in that direction, it is exceedingly difficult, and at times impossible, for a sailing vessel to beat up to the town; hence there are but two small batteries on that side, which it would not be difficult to silence. But it is easy to see how, with the aid of steam, a moderate land and naval force might now attack the island with strong probabilities of success. But the approach should be from the west. Just under the lee of "West Point," the western extremity of the island, the water is always smooth, and by the aid of steam, the forces might all be concentrated there.'

‘A close line of battle ahead might be formed, securing the armed sailing vessels as closely as possible to the steamers, the armed ships in tow, and the troop ships lashed to the port quarters of the steamers. The land troops might be formed into two divisions, and supplied with light artillery, for forcing the gates of the town, and for covering the advance of the attacking columns up the steep roads which lead into the country and to the rear of the batteries on the cliffs. The boats should be lowered and secured to the port sides of the troop ships, ready for receiving and landing the soldiers, the two divisions of which are destined for different points.’

‘These arrangements having been made, and the ships cleared for action, with springs from both quarters, so as to spring to starboard or port, as might be necessary, the whole flotilla might be moved close to West Point, and thence trace the shore along at the distance of about a quarter of a mile, avoiding the shoal called “Long Ledge” on the charts, and keeping as close as possible under “Ladder Hill”, on which there is a heavy battery, until it opened the town and anchored with springs in line of battle, and extending along the whole front of the road. On giving the starboard broadside, the ships might spring to port or starboard, as winds or currents made necessary, remembering, however, that vessels do not always swing to the wind in this road.’

‘Meantime one division of the troops might keep to the eastward, and land at the quay, and thence marching along the causeway, force the gates with their artillery; while the other, avoiding the line of fire of the ships, might pass to the westward of it, and tracing the shore under “Ladder Hill,” land at the west flank of the water battery which covers the town front. The town once gained, the troops might at once secure the summits of the roads leading into the country, as guns temporarily mounted on the adjoining hills would effectually command the town and harbour.’

‘The only real obstacle to a force thus approaching from the west, by steam, would be the strong water battery commanding the whole extent of the little bay which forms the harbour. This, of course, would have to be silenced before there would be any chance of capturing the place; but then, it must be remembered that the whole attacking force could be concentrated on this spot, if it approached from the west by steam. In such an approach, it could keep close to the shore, which is bold; and such is the elevated position of the principal forts, that their guns could not be sufficiently depressed to bear upon steamers coming from the westward.’

‘These remarks were made by the Commodore, as illustrating the great changes wrought by the introduction of steam into naval warfare. When the island was fortified, engineering skill accomplished all that was required in the existing condition of things. To a force approaching by sailing vessels, it probably would now prove impregnable, for wind and tide were valuable auxiliaries, which were taken into account in planning the works; but a new motive power makes its appearance, which is quite regardless of these natural auxiliaries, and new systems of defence are at once made necessary. This is but one of the changes wrought by this mighty agent, which seems destined to do so much in revolutionizing the condition of the world.’

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<sup>1</sup> Trevor W Hearl, ‘Commodore Perry at St Helena in 1853’, *Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena* 3 (Spring 1991): 22–24.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Calbraith Perry and Matthew Calbraith Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1857), 114–19.