



Vellore Fort: Site Of India's First Sepoy Mutiny

It was the site of an uprising that is now considered a precursor to India's first war of independence, the Revolt of 1857. The Vellore Revolt of 1806 was the first large-scale uprising of Indian soldiers against the British East India Company. It took place within the Vellore Fort, which was built by chieftains of the Vijayanagara Kings and later controlled by the Bijapur Sultans, the Marathas, Nawabs of Arcot and finally the British, who held it until India's Independence. The fort also once housed the family and descendants of Tipu Sultan, after he was killed in the fall of Srirangapatnam.

This excerpt from Foreshadowing The Great Rebellion: The Vellore Revolt, 1806 by K A Manikumar, Professor of History, takes you into the fort itself. Why was it so prized? Who built it? What did it take to reclaim it?



A drawn Plan of Vellore, c. 1761 | militarymaps.rct.uk

Situated in a beautiful and most fertile valley, nearly surrounded by hills, and in some degree commanded by one called Sazarow, the Fort of Vellore is one of the prettiest and most perfect specimens of native masonry to be met with in the East.

– James Welsh, *Military Reminiscences*, Vol 2 (1830)

Lingama Nayaka, the son and successor of Chinna Bomma Nayaka, built the Vellore Fort. He was a feudatory of Krishnadeva Raya, the king of Vijayanagar, and a contemporary of Krishnappa Nayaka, a ruler at Senji. Lingama Nayaka raised the standard of revolt against Vijayanagar in 1603. In the ensuing battle, Lingama Nayaka had to surrender and relinquish his fiefdom. Venkata Raya and his queen took up residence 'in the marble palace of Lingama Nayaka adorned with gold and precious stones'. Vellore thus became the second royal residence of Venkata II, from around 1606. Hence the sobriquet, Raya Veluru (the Vellore Raja).

Concern for regional interests led to mutual antagonism and a civil war broke out amongst the three Nayak kingdoms of Senji, Thanjavur and [Madurai](#) between 1614 and 1617, ravaging the Tamil country and providing the sultans of Bijapur and Golconda the scope to expand their territories in south Carnatic. Legend has it that the reigning Hindu king, fearing danger from invaders, hid the idol of the presiding deity of the temple in Vellore Fort and it was never recovered. Thus the epithet, 'temple without God'.

The descendants of [Krishnadeva Raya](#) managed to retain the fort until 1677, when it passed into the hands of the Marathas. Shivaji held sway over it until his death in 1680 and the Marathas controlled the region up to 1686.

Thereafter, a Mughal army led by Aurangzeb's envoy Zulfikar Khan succeeded in capturing the fort. After devastating and plundering the region, he left behind his general, Daud Khan, as the nawab of Carnatic.

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Watercolour painting of the fort at Vellore by an unknown artist, c. 1784 | British Library

Daud Khan, who founded the modern Arcot, transferred the headquarters of the Carnatic subha from Senji to Arcot. Nawab Sadatulla Khan, on his nomination to the nawabi, gave the Vellore jaghir to his brother Murtaza Ali. Murtaza Ali successfully retained the fort against the continuous onslaughts of the East India Company's army until 1756.

That year, the nawab of Arcot, Mohammed Ali, in view of his personal animosity with the jagirdar (holder of a jaghir) or killadar (fort commandant) of Vellore, Murtaza Ali's son, stormed the fort accompanied by Clive and took possession of it. An English garrison, with the consent of the nawab, occupied the fort in 1761. Major John Call, who ably conducted the war against the killadar of Vellore, thought that Vellore, with its three hill forts, formed the strongest fortifications he had seen in India.

In 1768, Hyder attempted to storm the fort, but in vain. Therefore, to the English, Vellore was an impregnable fortress. In 1791, Cornwallis used it as the base for his military operation and marched on Bangalore. After the fall of [Srirangapatnam](#) and the death of Tipu Sultan, Vellore Fort was considered the safest place to keep his children, wives, relatives, servants

and 'adherents' in internment. They were all accommodated in special quarters built exclusively for them.



Vellore fort ramparts | Soham Banerjee

The Vellore Fort lay south of the Palar river and was almost 25 kilometres away from Arcot. To the north and east of the fort lay two adjacent pettais (village), one newly developed at the time, and the other well-established. A system of three forts, Sazarow, Guzarow and Mortaz Agur, built atop the surrounding hills, bordered the main pettai.

The first of these was large, strongly built and able to withstand assault. The second was slightly smaller, but harder to access, and the third had hardly any features of strategic importance. Together, they provided protection to the north, east and south sides of Vellore Fort with cannon fire. There were also ramparts and towers, a ditch and a hedge around each that offered further defence.

The fort of Vellore was a 'curious specimen of ancient Indian fortification with much foliage about the battlements', so wrote the major of the Madras Army and the author of *Adventures of an Arcot Rupee*, Charles F Kirby. To him, 'it looked as if constructed for a thousand years and been employed upon it under the prevailing rule of forced labour in the service of the sovereign'.

The outer wall was crowned with a row of upright stone slabs, uniformly rounded at the top. It was at a height of about 9 metres, built with small protruding watch towers at regular intervals. The space between this wall and a second line of bastions served as a wide defensive wall. The fort was approximately 1.5 kilometres in circumference, and entirely of stone, cemented with chunam (limestone). Blocks of granite, 3–4 feet thick and 18–20 feet in length, were first cut and then blasted by fire out of the solid rock and removed by hard labour.

Excerpted from 'Foreshadowing The Great Rebellion: The Vellore Revolt, 1806' by K A Manikumar (2021), published by Orient BlackSwan in 2021.

Read about the Vellore Mutiny [here](#).