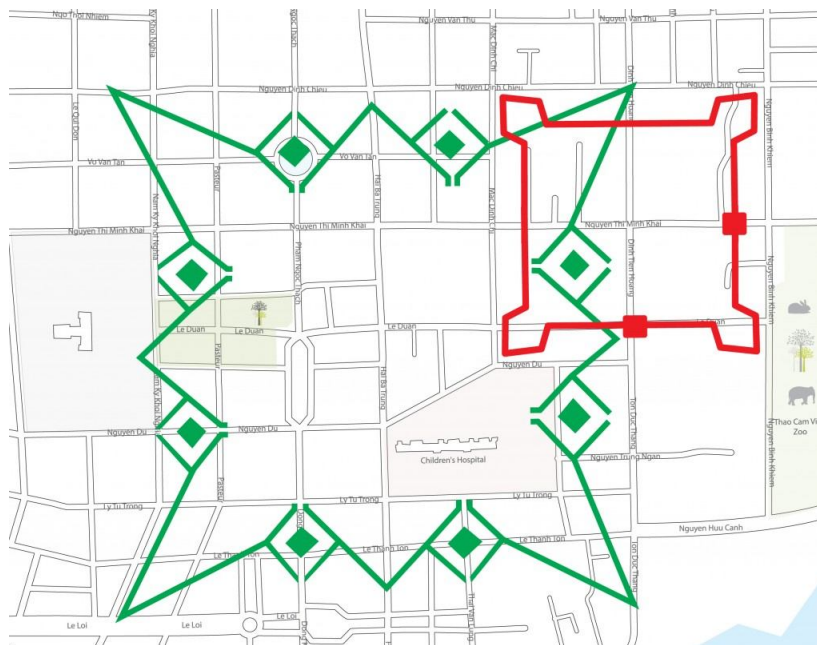




Forwarded by Nguyễn Thế Anh JJR 56

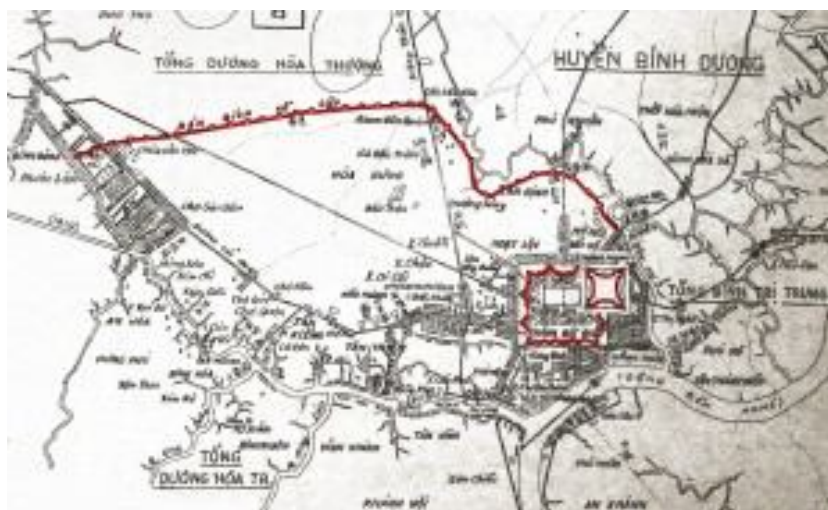
## The Citadels of Gia Dinh



The locations of the Gia Định Citadels of 1790 (in green) and 1837 (in red) superimposed on the modern street map

*Tourist guidebooks often remind us that Sài Gòn once had its own citadel. In fact, within the relatively short space of 70 years (1770-1840), this city saw the construction of three major fortifications by the ruling Nguyễn family.*

The earliest of these was the Lũy Bán Bích (or Bán Bích Cổ Lũy), built in 1772 by one of Lord Nguyễn Phúc Thuần's generals, Nguyễn Cửu Đàm, to protect the settlement from invading Siamese armies.



The location of the Lũy Bán Bích city walls of 1772

The Lũy Bán Bích was not a citadel but a fortified city wall, which stretched over 8.5km from the Binh Dương River in the Minh Hương settlement (Chợ Lớn) to the Thị Nghè creek in Bến Nghé (Sài Gòn). Though no traces of this structure have survived, it left a footprint in the configuration of several modern streets, including Lý Chính Thắng and Trần Quang Khải.

In his 30-year war against the Tây Sơn brothers, Nguyễn Phúc Thuần's nephew Lord Nguyễn Phúc Ánh turned first to Siam and later to France for military assistance. Thanks to funds raised in the late 1780s by his French ally

Pierre Pigneau de Béhaine (1741-1799), Bishop of Adran, he was able to modernise his armed forces and to engage the services of French military advisers to train them in the latest techniques of European warfare.



Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, later King Gia Long (1802-1820)

French military assistance also extended to the construction of several new fortifications. The largest of these was the first Gia Định Citadel, built in 1790 by a team of 30,000 labourers under the charge of French engineering corps mercenaries Olivier de Puymanel and Théodore Le Brun to serve as Nguyễn Phúc Ánh's temporary royal capital (*Gia Định Kinh*). Although built in accordance with the principles of Vauban military architecture, the polyhedron-shaped citadel's perceived similarity to an octagon and the fact that it had eight gates gained it the popular local name, Bát Quái ("Eight Trigrams") Citadel.

Located on a 1.2km x 1.2km site corresponding to the area between the modern Lê Thánh Tôn, Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu and Đinh Tiên Hoàng streets, the citadel was constructed from Biên Hòa granite, with 5m high walls and bastions surrounded by a deep moat. It was dominated on its southern side by a large flag tower and the main Cần Nguyên southern gate stood in the vicinity of today's Đồng Khởi/Lý Tự Trọng street junction, where surviving sections of bastion wall were unearthed during construction work in 1926. The citadel was connected with the royal wharf on the Sài Gòn river by what is now Đồng Khởi street.



This 1793 map depicts the first Gia Định Citadel (1790) and the eastern end of the earlier Lũy Bán Bích city walls (1772)

At its centre (close to the modern Lê Duẩn/Hai Bà Trưng street junction) was the King's Palace, flanked on its left by the Prince's Palace. Immediately behind it was the Queen's Palace, and in front of it was a large parade ground and armoury. Other buildings included an army barracks, a hospital, a wagon workshop, an arsenal, a forge and three gunpowder stores. The citadel was the focal point of a highway network known as the Thiên Lý road, which led west to the Mekong Delta, north west to Cambodia and north east to Huế and Thăng Long (Hà Nội).

His newly-upgraded forces and fortifications gave Nguyễn Phúc Ánh a qualitative military edge, contributing in no small way to his final victory over the Tây Sơn and facilitating his accession to the throne in 1802 as the first Nguyễn dynasty king, Gia Long (1802-1820). He subsequently chose Huế as his royal capital, but Gia Định remained a settlement of great strategic importance and during the first three decades of Nguyễn dynasty rule it was afforded a significant measure of political and economic autonomy under a series of royal Viceroys, the best known being Marshal Lê Văn Duyệt (1763-1832). However, this autonomy subsequently attracted the wrath of Gia Long's successor Minh Mạng (1820-1841), who after Duyệt's death in 1832 set about restoring central government control, pointedly downgrading Gia Định to the status of a mere provincial capital.



Minh Mạng's 1837 Gia Định Citadel was captured in 1859 by the French

Later, in a symbolic act designed to discourage any further separatist tendencies after the failed southern uprising of 1832-1835, Minh Mạng had his father's great royal citadel of 1790 demolished and replaced by a considerably smaller one. This "Phoenix Citadel" of 1837 stood in the area now bordered by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Nguyễn Du, Mạc Đĩnh Chi and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm streets. It, too, was built in accordance with Vauban principles, though in the shape of a square with 5m high walls and four corner bastions, surrounded by a 3m deep moat. Although no traces of this second Gia Định Citadel have survived, an almost identical structure – the Điện Hải Citadel – may still be seen today in Đà Nẵng.

The Phoenix Citadel survived for just 22 years; following the conquest of 1859, the French razed it to the ground and in 1870-1873 they built a Caserne de l'infanterie (infantry barracks) over its front section. Despite the demise of Minh Mạng's citadel, the French continued to call the area "Citadelle" throughout the colonial period.



In 1870-1873 the French built a Caserne de l'infanterie (infantry barracks) over the ruins of the 1837 Citadel



The Caserne de l'infanterie originally contained rows of handsome iron-framed colonial barracks buildings, identical to those which may still be seen today at the nearby Children's Hospital 2 (the former Grall Hospital).

Following the Japanese coup of March 1945, they were used briefly to intern French troops. Then in 1956, South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm renamed the Caserne de l'infanterie as the Thành Cộng Hòa (Republic Citadel) and turned it into the headquarters of his elite Presidential Guard. Consequently the compound suffered serious damage during the coup of November 1963 which deposed him.



*The front gate of the barracks in the aftermath of the November 1963 coup*

After the coup, the remaining military installations were moved out of the old barracks compound and an extension to Đinh Tiên Hoàng street was driven right through the middle of it.

By 1967 Sài Gòn University had taken up residence in the southwest section, while the American Armed Forces Radio Television Service (AFRTS) and the locally-run Việt Nam Television (Truyền hình Việt Nam, forerunner of Hồ Chí Minh City Television, HTV) occupied much of the northeast section. Today the former barracks site is shared between the Hồ Chí Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities and HTV.

Despite all of this redevelopment, it's still possible today to identify the buildings which frame the entrance to Đinh Tiên Hoàng street on the Lê Duẩn junction as those which originally stood either side of the main gate of the 1873 Caserne de l'infanterie – buildings which constitute our last link with the lost royal citadels of Gia Định.



One of the old Caserne de l'infanterie buildings of 1873

*Tim Doling is the author of the forthcoming book of walking tours entitled Exploring Hồ Chí Minh City (Nhà Xuất Bản Thế Giới, Hà Nội, 2014) and also conducts 4-hour Heritage Tours of Historic Saigon and Cholon*