

A River Ramble

The Evolution of the Singapore River

By Parvathy Venkateswaran



Boat Quay; 1956; photo by John Simmer

If you happened to take a walk along the Singapore River today, planning to find its source, it would prove to be quite difficult. You might think you could find the answer simply by following its winding path, a pleasant amble until you reached a quiet bend near the Kim Seng Bridge. From this point the river unceremoniously becomes the Alexandra Canal, which continues between concrete walls until it slips underground at Tanglin Road. The canal re-emerges near West Coast Park. However, this is not the natural beginning of the river. Over time and many rebuilding projects, the river's path has been changed and its origins have mostly been forgotten. Some maps indicate that it may have started flowing from Bukit Timah. Other historians cite a river that ran near the foothills of Bukit Larangan, now known as Fort Canning. With this in mind, you might begin to contemplate the river's history as you walk. Let's take a ramble through time and follow the river's present course right down to Boat Quay.

No matter the exact source, the Singapore River itself can be said to be the very beginning of Singapore, the

place where Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles first established a trading port and the reason early immigrants flocked to its swampy shores. A port of call for sailors from all over the world, it was a sorting house for all kinds of goods. In the 1830s George Benault described the activity at the riverside thus: "The river at the low point of the settlement always presents an animated scene, from the arrival and departure of native boats with fruits, vegetables and livestock as well as a number of 'sampans' plying for hire. At night the flickering lights of the numerous boats upon the river make an animated appearance."

In early days the river was filled with intense activity and excitement, according to Stephen Dobbs in his book *The Singapore River*. "The water was bristling with hundreds of small boats of all descriptions constantly pulling about selling fruit, provisions, birds, monkeys, shells and coral." Further on he writes, "Amoy Junks brought in earthenware, tiles, granite slabs, dragon's blood, paper umbrellas, vermicelli, dried fruits, joss sticks, joss paper, raw silk, all valued between 30,000 - 60,000 dollars."



Boat Quay; 2007; photo by Eddie Foo

After passing Kim Seng Bridge you will see that the river expands and becomes broader and deeper. It is now in its mature stage geographically speaking, flowing sedately, having gathered mud, bark, twigs and leaves along the way. You will also notice the remains of tiny mounds which have been raised to form embankments.

Historically speaking, trading activity achieved a hectic pace at this very place. The waters were constantly blanketed by the *twakows* and *tongkangs*, flat-bottomed lighter boats propelled by poles, oars or sails. These brightly painted vessels were brought from India and China and were used for the loading and unloading of the larger sea-going vessels anchored out in the harbour. The lighter men who piloted them ruled the river. With no families and a need to pass the time, the bachelor lighter men became skilled storytellers. By candlelight or kerosene lamp, they read extracts from the local Chinese newspapers and stories from Chinese classics. They dramatised the fable of the Monkey God at venues such as present-day Coleman Bridge or Chinatown Square and sometimes gave shadow-puppet performances on the southern banks of the river. During festivals the living quarters of the boatmen close to the river front would be spruced up with red banners.

Towards the end of your walk, near Clarke Quay, the river scales down in its expanse; its early tributaries have disappeared. Raffles played a large part in this. He believed that reclamation on the south bank would help organise the area along communal lines. He saw the river as a natural means of separating the various ethnic groups and the European town. Most of the native Malay population was moved to the southern bank, where a permanent embankment was built between the river on the south and the land behind it (where the Copthorne Hotel now stands). Huge amounts of landfill came from a handy hill – today’s Raffles Place. The northern side was reserved for government buildings with the European town running eastward (along the present-day Padang). Near the present-day Fullerton Hotel, the northern bank was once the only place suitable for the construction of buildings and landing platforms. However, one of the shores was some nine feet lower than the other, creating lakes at high tide and bogs at low tide. The work of embankment and reclamation was manual, completed with pick and shovel by Chinese, Indian and Malay labour, and it reshaped the course of the river in its lower reaches.

With the opening of the Suez Canal and the innovative use of containers for transporting goods, the river lost its star status. Shipping moved to other ports and waste spewed into the once mighty river. In the 1970s the old river was an eyesore, far from the ideal showpiece of a forward-looking



Coleman Bridge; photo by Eddie Foo



Clarke Quay; photo by Lynn Biondi

city. So in 1977 Singapore decided to clean up its river. Twenty-six thousand families were moved from along the riverbanks and resettled in public housing. Five thousand street hawkers were relocated to specially built food centres and some 2,800 businesses were re-housed in purpose-built estates. Sellers of charcoal burners, betel-nut, paddy, brandy, beer and glassware, boat-builders, keepers of ducks and pigs – everyone was caught up in the programme of environmental renewal.

All feeder creeks were filled in with downstream silt and mud or converted into drains. The cleanup and revitalisation continues to this day. A recent project by the Public Utilities Board transformed the stagnant, concrete-lined drain that was Alexandra Canal (beginning at Tanglin Road) into a public park planted with shade trees, lush wetland plants, decorative water cascades and children’s play areas.

With the cleanup, more than a century and a half of trading activity came to an end... or did it?

When you reach Boat Quay, you will find that tourist boats have taken the place of the *twakows* and *tongkangs*. Rows of former *godowns* (warehouses) have been innovatively converted into flourishing cafes, bars, boutiques and art galleries. There is even an amusement ride. This is a new kind of trade. Every day office workers, tourists and shoppers flock to the river’s shores to relax. The lights of the towering riverside buildings are reflected in the waters and the Singapore River remains a potent part of the city’s life, as it has throughout its history.



The Singapore waterfront today and the mouth of the river; photo by Eddie Foo

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