

“Location” - South Asia’s Seaport Hub

By

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For certain, one of the ports that most mariners have visited at one time or another. Right at the tip of the Malaysian Peninsula, the Island State of **Singapore**.

Location, Location, Location! Known as one of the “**Jewels of Asia**”, **Singapore** has always taken full advantage of its superb geographical location to become one of the most important “**Hub Ports**” of the Asian region. Situated on the Singapore Straits, at the most strategic point on one of the world’s major trade routes, with the South China Sea to the east, and Malacca Straits and Indian Ocean to the west, it was only a matter of time before it became the major transshipment hub, of south Asia.

Singapore’s, maritime trading activities on the northern banks of the Singapore River had existed from the late 13th century, when a port settlement was established by a sultan from Palembang, known as Seri Teri Buana. During those times, Singapore was known as **Temasek** and was one of many port cities that had sprung up along the Strait of Malacca.

Changes and liberalization to China’s maritime trade policy saw many Chinese ships calling at Southeast Asian countries, to source goods and cargoes for their growing home markets. Besides acquiring and exporting products from nearby regions such as South Johor and the Riau Archipelago, Singapore also dispensed goods landed by ships from China, Southeast Asia, and India, to the neighboring regions.

Upon the arrival of Stamford Raffles in Singapore in 1819, his main aim was to establish a trading post for the **British East India Company**. Realizing the geographical importance of Singapore, one of his first tasks was to commission a survey vessel to carry out a hydrographic survey of the port and surrounding waters. This survey resulted in the first chart of the Singapore Harbor being issued by the East India Company in 1820. To officiate and oversee the then new marine facilities, Raffles appointed a Harbor Master. His role was to establish and maintain records of cargo imports and exports, take charge of

overseas mail as well as to create a registry of ships, their cargo and passengers, arriving at and departing from the expanding port.

Following the development and significance the Singapore Strait as the principal shipping route between the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, Raffles authorized more surveys to be conducted which led to a series of admiralty charts being produced over subsequent years. In 1851, the first lighthouse in Singapore, **Horsburgh Lighthouse** – named after hydrographer James Horsburgh – began operations on the small offshore island, Pedra Branca, which is little more than a minute rocky islet, at the Eastern end of the Singapore Straits. This was an ideal location for such a light house, as it was an excellent navigation reference point for ships tracking both east and west, along the Straits.

In keeping with his plans to develop Singapore as a notable and significant seaport, he established Singapore as a free port, where fees such as those paid to the local administration, harbor, port, and dock were waived and not collected. Ships from all over the world could trade freely at Singapore with custom duties imposed only on very few selected and high revenue items, such as tobacco, opium, alcohol, and petroleum. This far-sighted policy, coupled with Singapore's strategic geographical location – lying directly along the sea route between India and China, was therefore easily accessible to ships and trading Junks alike, from around the region and afar. The natural deep-water harbor attracted numerous vessels to call, and within five years of its establishment, Singapore's port had become a major regional entrepot.

Towards the mid-1800s, steamships requiring coal to fuel their boiler furnaces, were calling at the port for bunkering. Coal was brought in for storage in the warehouses on the Singapore River and then transported to the steamships by lighters when they arrived, which created further congestion at the already-overcrowded river anchorages. A deep-water coaling berth was required, and New Harbor (today's Keppel Harbor) was the optimal choice. This was endorsed by a survey conducted by government surveyor John Turnbull Thomson in 1849.

In 1852, a wharf was opened by the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company, of London, at the New Harbor. This wharf was the preferred choice for ocean going steamships, while the Singapore River continued to be used by ships engaged in the coastal shipping trades. Cargo to be transferred to another ship waiting at Boat Quay or New Harbor would be transported overland. The transshipment of cargoes was rapidly turning Singapore into a "transshipment hub" as originally envisaged by Raffles.

It was not long thereafter, before additional wharves, warehouses and coal stores were opening around New Harbor. Shipping traffic increased quickly with the greater availability of wharves and more shipping companies inaugurating regular steamship services through the port of Singapore. Many steamship companies established their own offices in Singapore, to facilitate their ever-increasing demand for additional resources required by surging shipping commerce. The first dry dock was built by Patent Slip & Dock Company, and the second, Victoria Dock, was opened by the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company. Consequently, shipping traffic increased quickly with the greater availability of wharves and more shipping companies introduced regular steamship and liner services through the port of Singapore

With the introduction of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, a ship's transit time between Southeast Asia and Europe, and vice-versa, was significantly reduced, by about one-third, since it was no longer necessary to go around the African continent, via the Cape of Good Hope.



(Unknown Origin)

Image of Victoria Dock Singapore about 1890

The second half of the 1800s, therefore, saw a steep climb in the number of steamships calling at Singapore for repairs, refueling and the loading and unloading of duty-free cargo. To increase the rate of cargo handling, mechanical installations such as steam cranes and steam winches were employed in 1874 to replace the hitherto manual methods used in the loading and unloading of cargo, while land reclamation started at Telok Ayer in 1879 to provide additional land for the construction of new roads running between Keppel Harbor and the Singapore River. This legacy of reclamation in Singapore exists to this day, in the quest for more land for the Island State.



(Unknown Origin)

Singapore River as seen in 1972. Still, few remnants of its Raffles' era remain.



Singapore's Riverside as seen in the mid-2000s, now a major tourist attraction and center for eateries and Pubs.

(Unknown Origin)

The new thoroughfares helped to reduce the congestion along existing roads, because of the increased volume of cargoes need to be transported to inland Singapore. Meanwhile, both Patent Slip & Dock and Tanjong Pagar Dock companies expanded their respective number of docks and wharves until 1899 when they amalgamated. Control over the dock and wharf businesses then came under the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company until 1905, when control transferred to the Straits Settlements government.

Following this acquisition, the Singapore Harbor Board was formed, to control and expand the facilities of the port. By 1932, the Port of Singapore under the administration of the Harbor Board was made up of the wharves at the Singapore River, Telok Ayer Basin and Keppel Harbor as well as inshore anchorages. They quickly made improvements and upgrades to the facilities such as replacing the wooden wharf frontages with concrete ones, and rubber and timber fendering.

Coinciding with this, the 1930s also saw the construction of oil storage and distribution facilities on the islands of **Pulau Bukom** and **Pulau Sebarok** (southwest of Singapore), in addition to new ship-repair facilities in Sembawang, which is in the northern sector of Singapore bounded by the Straits of Johor. During the pre-WW2 years Singapore continued to go from strength to strength and was considered the "**Bastion of the Empire**", under British colonial rule, until the Japanese invaded and occupied Singapore in early 1942

Port facilities were badly damaged by the Japanese bombings, leading up to occupation. In addition, machinery and equipment at the dockyards subsequently fell into a state of serious disrepair because no maintenance of the port and its facilities was carried out during the occupation period (1942–45). At the conclusion of hostilities, and return to colonial rule, the Harbor Board was thus faced with the difficult task of rebuilding and restoring the damaged port infrastructure before passenger and cargo services could resume. Thus, once port facilities had been progressively restored, the shipping tonnage began to climb and hit a total of 82.9 million net register tonnage (NRT) in 1963, a four-fold increase from 1947 when the total tonnage registered was 20.4 million NRT. In 1964, the Singapore Harbor Board was replaced by the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA). Port developments in the 1960s and '70s were coupled and associated with the rapid industrialization that was underway during those times in Singapore, as part of the legacy of modern Singapore's founding father Lee Kwan Yu, and successive governments .



The mainspring of the Jurong industrialization project was Jurong Port, opened in 1965 to handle bulk cargo used by the industries located in the Jurong Industrial Estate. The PSA also took over and converted the former British Naval Base Store Basin into Sembawang Wharves in 1971. By 1974, Pasir Panjang Wharves had begun operations and was in full swing.

(Unknown Origin)

Above, Singapore's main dockside in the 1960s before the development of alternative facilities had been completed. This is the approximate location of today's **Brani Container Terminal** (photographed below) circa early mid-2000s. The causeway in the lower portion of the frame, leads to **Sentosa Island**



(Unknown Origin)

By the late '60s, the PSA invested millions of dollars to build Southeast Asia's first container terminal at a time when demand was not clear, and containerization still in its infancy, as no shipping companies at that time would commit to building container vessels that engage in the route between Europe and Southeast Asia. The Tanjong Pagar Container Terminal opened in 1972 with three container berths, and welcomed the first container vessel, M.V. Nihon, on 24 June 1972. Container shipping was initially slow to develop, but during the 1980s, container volume mounted dramatically, and more container berths had to be rapidly built to cope with the huge demand for container wharfage. With the rise in container shipping, computerization was adopted to serve the needs of the vessels that called at the ports as well

as other associated businesses and shipping traffic aspects. All of which added to the port's renowned efficiency and profitability.

Expansion of the various port facilities and amplification of capabilities continued in the '90s. These included the addition of berths at the new **Brani Terminal**, redevelopment of facilities at Tanjong Pagar Terminal, and increased capacity at Jurong Port to handle the growing volume of bulk cargo. In 1996, the PSA's port regulatory functions were taken over by the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore, while PSA was corporatized in 1997 and became known as PSA Corporation Limited. The company still manages and operates the port today, except for Jurong port.

Singapore is now identified by many international shipping companies as a major port of call, hence it attracts many ships to the port. To meet the changing needs of the shipping industry, two new Pasir Panjang Container Terminals equipped with the latest technology were opened in 2000. Phases 3 and 4 of the Pasir Panjang Terminal developments were launched in 2012, with the PSA investing heavily in the latest port technology such as unmanned cranes and automated container storage yards. That same year, an official decision was made to consolidate all the existing container terminals into one mega port in Tuas. The Tuas Port project, which is being rolled out in stages, marks a new phase in the development of the Port of Singapore.

In August 2017, the Tanjong Pagar terminal, one of Singapore's oldest terminals, ceased operations and relocated to newer facilities at Pasir Panjang, where it is expected to operate until the lease at Pasir Panjang runs out in 2040. With the closure of the Tanjong Pagar terminal, the Port of Singapore now comprises terminals at **Keppel, Brani, Pasir Panjang, Sembawang** and **Jurong**, and enjoys the Kudos of being, one of the most modern and efficient Container Ports in the World – most certainly within Asia. It is now a far cry from the port many of us veteran seafarers recall from the 1950-70s, but it still retains the magic, excitement, and charm, we all experienced during our seagoing days.



(Unknown Origin)

Taken about 1984, Western Anchorage Singapore, looking towards Sultan Shoal. Showing the old Blue Funnel Line vessel "**Centaur**" following her sale. **Pulau Bukom** and **Pulau Sebarok** oil installations can be seen in the background



(Unknown Origin)

A Singapore location which I am sure all of us will recall, as it was around 1960-80s, **Clifford Pier**. Where many of us had our first, or last, **“Tiger”** - depending on which direction we were going at the time. The pier has now been meticulously restored, with many new facilities, and has become another major tourist attraction.

End

References: PSA archives and pictorial history, J. Tan, various archival historical articles, , various sources in the Public Domain from which some additional information has been gathered.

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