Find Your Place in History: Central

Giants and forgotten gems | Noelle Q. de Jesus
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About the Singapore Bicentennial e-book series

Take a quick dive into the different time periods in Singapore history, the stories and legacies of our different communities. Discover lesser-known histories of people, places and events. Each nugget offers a unique glimpse into the layered lives and histories of our people, going into topics as diverse as natural history, architecture and religious practices.

About the Singapore Bicentennial

The Singapore Bicentennial marks the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the British in Singapore, a turning point in our history. But our story starts way before that.

Travelling back in time to 700 years ago, the Singapore Bicentennial is an occasion for us to reflect on our extensive and textured history: how we have evolved, from a place with a geographically strategic location, into Singaporeans with a unique DNA.

This commemoration features a huge cast of contributors, as well as the regional and global developments that have shaped our lives and identities.
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Giants and forgotten gems

The district of Central Singapore encompasses the mature and manicured estates of Ang Mo Kio and Toa Payoh; the deep green suburban Bishan; the characterful and colourful areas that are Jalan Besar, Kolam Ayer, Whampoa, Potong Pasir and Central Serangoon; downtown Kreta Ayer and Kampong Glam, and the pulsing business centre of Tanjong Pagar.

📍 Ang Mo Kio, Toa Payoh and Bishan

The area of present-day Ang Mo Kio was mostly secondary forest, adjacent to the “jade hills” known as Peck San. A report that dates back to 1849, written by one J.T. Thomson, a government surveyor, actually mentions “Amokiah”, noting that the land contained sandstone. Throughout the 19th century, the area now known as Ang Mo Kio was largely uninhabited. Old maps label it the Ang Mo Kio Forest Reserve, for it was largely forest and plantation estates.
Toa Payoh, spelt “Toah Pyoh” in a map dating back to 1842, was mostly swamp and forest. In the 19th century, land was steadily acquired and cleared for the plantation of crops, mostly pepper and gambier. A report conducted by the Municipal Committee indicates 15 clearings across the area, counting 355,000 gambier trees, 38,800 pepper vines and 2,190 nutmeg trees.¹

In the 1870s, Peck San would become the site of a Chinese cemetery set up by Cantonese and Hakkas from Guangdong, China—Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng; “Peck San Theng” means “pavilions on the jade hills”. The pavilions refer to the shelters constructed for visitors paying respect to their ancestors. The living set up their homes around the cemetery, providing services for the dead—the small cluster of caretakers, gravediggers, and peddlers marked
the beginnings of Kampong San Theng, a village that continued until the 1980s when the authorities relocated its residents and developed the estate into Bishan Town.²


Singapore River and Kallang Basin

Business and community life thrived on another scale by the shore, at the very edge of Central Singapore, clustering around the vibrant hubs of Commercial Square at the mouth of the Singapore River, and Kampung Gelam next to the Kallang Basin. In 1822, Commercial Square was designated as the focal point for banks, trading houses and related offices. It became a hive of financial activity in the ensuing years. These transactions drove the loading and unloading of goods on the south side
of Commercial Square, which developed into an entire stretch of warehouses with jetties before subsequent land reclamation exercises.

Eastwards of the Singapore River, Sultan Hussein’s court at Kampung Gelam brought in the Bugis, the Javanese, as well as other Malay traders from Palembang, Riau and the Peninsular. The constant business traffic attracted Indian and Chinese merchants as well, and led to the rapid growth of an Arab Quarter, within which were homes and business establishments.

In this way, trade flowing through the Singapore, Rochor and Kallang rivers nourished the spread of settlements to adjoining areas such as Kreta Ayer to the river’s west and Kampung Gelam to the river’s east.
The metamorphosis of the sprawling mass of land, from largely agricultural tracts into the business, residential and lifestyle districts they are today is also the tale of the dynamic and inspiring people who came into their destiny as settlers of the land.

They were instrumental in shaping the development of the central areas, supporting a nascent citizenry as they built integral parts of the city. They built not only their own lives but the lives of many families, transforming these spots into centres that would enable the community and their livelihoods for generations.

Alongside many unacknowledged individuals, the efforts of five community leaders are remarkable. When Stamford Raffles sailed into the Singapore harbour in 1819, one of them was on the same ship—the Indiana. Three of them were already active contributors to the social and economic life of Singapore.

**Grounds for the people’s spirit, faith and continuing health**

Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied (b. 1792–d. 6 November 1852) channelled part of his wealth and property to the development of early Singapore. With plenty of land at his family’s disposal, he donated land for the construction of one of Singapore’s first mosques, Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka in present-day Keng Cheow Street. Credit also goes to him for rehabilitating the Benggali Mosque on Bencoolen Street in 1845: the original structure was an “attap” palm hut structure erected between 1825 and 1828. He was also the donor of real estate for the construction of St Andrew’s Cathedral.

Apart from providing a place for their spiritual needs, Syed Omar also contributed to the physical wellbeing of the settler communities. In 1844, he gave land for the building of a pauper’s hospital, which would later become Tan Tock Seng hospital.
And shortly before his own death, he donated the cemetery in the area lying between Victoria Street and Rochor Canal to the Muslim community, establishing an endowment for its continued maintenance.

Image 4: Muslim cemetery at Jalan Kubor, off Victoria Street, 1962. Photograph taken by Wong Ken Foo (K F Wong). Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The Jalan Kubor Cemetery is now the oldest known Muslim cemetery in Singapore, housing the graves of members of the royal family since the time of Sultan Hussein.

A little more than a century after Syed Omar’s arrival in Singapore, the Aljunied family built an Arabic language school for the study of the Quran. The school was founded by Syed Omar’s grandson in 1927, and remains open as Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, solidifying the Aljunied legacy of philanthropy. Omar Road was named in recognition of that legacy and Syed Omar’s contribution to key sections of Central Singapore.
Old Singapore was beset by a number of social problems owing to the lack of infrastructure, water resource management and sewage processing. Diseases like malaria, tuberculosis and dysentery were rampant, and the sick, dying and dead were not properly taken care of. The poor had no medical facilities and frequently had to depend on the philanthropy of wealthy benevolent businessmen.

This is why Tan Tock Seng (b. 1798–d. 24 February 1850) paid for the burial expenses for poor Chinese who could not afford to bury their family and relations.

Tock Seng had started off as a humble vegetable seller, before becoming a small trader with his own store around what is now known as Boat Quay. He then moved into property, and through a joint venture with one J.H. Whitehead of Shaw, Whitehead and Co., amassed acres of key real estate, including a massive area by the railway station near Tanjong Pagar, blocks of shophouses, and a 14-acre fruit plantation. With shrewd acumen, he became an incredibly wealthy businessman, and began assiduously to give back to the community, and generously.

In 1844, he donated the sum of $5,000 to construct the pauper’s hospital on Pearl’s Hill, the harbinger of what is now Tan Tock Seng Hospital. An interesting footnote to the history of the hospital: when construction was completed in 1846, the government requisitioned the building for use as a temporary prison. In its place, an attap shed was built at the foot of Pearl’s Hill to house patients. The hospital building was not operational even after the prison inmates were transferred to the newly built prison behind Pearl’s Hill in 1847. Thus, the attap shed continued its humble existence until 1849 when it was destroyed during a storm. Under those circumstances, the government bureaucracy had no choice but to relocate the patients to the hospital building.
Like Syed Omar, Tock Seng was aware of the needs of the community, especially those without means. He recognised they could better cope with the pressures of life if they had a sanctuary for their spiritual and social life, and founded the Thian Hock Keng Temple, the first and oldest temple of the Hokkien community, which still stands on Telok Ayer Street.

**Land for business and the community**

Seah Eu Chin (b. 1805–d. 23 September 1883), an immigrant clerk and accountant, saw a ready demand in Britain’s tanning and dyeing industry for two indigenous crops: pepper plants, as well as a wild climbing shrub whose extracts are essential to dyeing and tanning, and which made his name and fortune. Both were important to the regional economy in the 19th century and Seah Eu Chin purchased a large tract of land between River Valley Road and Bukit Timah, which he cleared for the plantation of
these two crops. He earned the nickname “King of Gambier” as the first to cultivate it on such a large scale.

The landscape of 19th century Singapore was shaped by the acumen and activity of businessmen such as Seah Eu Chin. By the late 1840s, there were some 600 gambier and pepper plantations, and Seah Eu Chin owned a number of these in Thomson, Sembawang and Mandai, as well as a trading house employing 6,000 Chinese labourers. His business expanded to include tea and cotton, and his success made him one of the wealthiest men in the local Chinese community. He had made important connections with local businessmen and trading merchants, and soon, he found himself heading his own trading firm on Kling Street, or what is now known as Chulia Street.

Simultaneous with his work in business, Seah Eu Chin was instrumental in organising the Chinese community, gathering 13 Teochew clans and founding a social welfare organisation known as Ngee Ann Kongsi to support them. Ngee Ann Kongsi built Yue Hai Ching Temple for the Teochew community, and also acquired cemeteries, including the Tai Shan Ting cemetery, which is where Ngee Ann City shopping centre now stands.
Image 6: Seah Eu Chin, dated between 1860 to 1883.
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.
Sri Mariamman Temple, the oldest Hindu temple in Singapore, has been standing on its South Bridge Road site since 1827.

This temple was built on the back of Naraina Pillai’s fortune and hard work. One of the first Tamil settlers in Singapore, Pillai had come to Singapore on the same ship as Stamford Raffles. Starting out as a chief clerk at the treasury, he switched to an entrepreneurial track, founded the first brick kiln and became the first Indian building contractor in Singapore.\(^4\)

Pillai’s altruism was all the more remarkable given the business setback he had had to survive. When he turned his attention to cotton goods, establishing the largest bazaar at Cross Street, his success was razed to the ground by a fire in 1822. Pillai was able to secure credit from the British and land from Raffles to rebuild his business.
Another historical and public landmark that can be traced to the contribution of an individual is the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

Hoo Ah Kay (b. approx 1816–d. 27 March 1880) was an avid gardener, and a leading member of the Agri-Horticultural Society. It was he who assisted in the negotiations with the British colonial government for the development of the Botanic Gardens in 1859, and was likely also involved in appointing Lawrence Niven as the manager of the Gardens tasked with the landscaping of the grounds. Hoo Ah Kay had a vision of these gardens as a sanctuary and recreational space for immigrants of all races.

This is the Hoo Ah Kay whom more would know as Whampoa, the owner of Whampoa House, his famous residence at Serangoon Road which was eventually demolished in 1968. In fact, predating the Botanic Gardens, Whampoa House was home to the lavish Whampoa Gardens or Nam Sang Fa Un in Cantonese.

The hidden figures of Singapore

The transformation of Singapore that happened during the lives of these five individuals set the foundation for Singapore’s development. Their compatriots, nameless and faceless to us now, also had a stake and a role in the transformation of this island: living together, forging relationships, working and tilling the land. These are the men and women who have built their lives on these shores, struggled, married, raised families, worshipped, practised their work and their craft, and died. We can recover some of their traces in the imprint their work have left in and on our places and landmarks.
Endnotes


Noelle Q. de Jesus moved from the Philippines to Singapore in 2000 and has lived here with her husband and children since then. She is the author of *Blood Collected Stories* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015) which won the 2016 Next Generation Indie Book Award for Short Story (Fiction), and *Cursed And Other Stories* (Penguin Random House SEA, 2019). Her work has been published throughout Southeast Asia and in literary journals in the United States, including *Puerto del Sol, Mud Season Review* and *Witness*. She is a Singapore permanent resident and a freelance copywriter and editor. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Bowling Green State University and has worked as sub- and features editor for women’s magazines at both SPH Magazines and MediaCorp Publishing.
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