

# Find Your Place in History: South East

The sea before

the forge | *Noelle Q. de Jesus*



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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.

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The Singapore Bicentennial marks the 200<sup>th</sup> 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.

# Find Your Place in History: South East

## The sea before the forge

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One look at today's map compared to one in the early 1900s reveals the tremendous change in this area over the century. The sandy coastline and muddy river banks have been extended through the long and drawn out process of a twenty-year reclamation project. For instance, three decades into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bedok Road was just a narrow avenue lined with coconut trees, while on higher ground, there was Simpang Bedok Village which looked upon the Singapore Straits.<sup>1</sup>



Image 1: View of the country side—Bedok with coconut trees, 1930–1950.  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

## Reclamation in the South East

In the 1960s, the government embarked on what would eventually be a 20-year process of land reclamation. This began in 1963 starting with the smaller area of East Coast Road, and then continued in 1966 with the East Coast Reclamation Scheme. It extended the limit of our land across the entire south east coastline. On the whole, the East Coast Reclamation Project created over 1,500 hectares of land at the cost of some 613 million Singapore dollars.

What was used to create this land? Soil and earth was taken directly from Siglap and Tampines, and what were once hills were flattened out, and more earth was excavated. The largest excavation was the Bedok Reservoir. Labourers loaded soil onto conveyor belts and transported it to a loading jetty, trucks and bulldozers compacted the reclaimed land into its present levels today.

The process of this reclamation was heart-aching for the Malay and Chinese fisher folk who could no longer fish. They had to seek other livelihoods and most took on work such as simple trade and retail. These challenging circumstances forced them to reinvent their livelihoods, and to determine what has come to be our present.

But let's go back to where it all started.

## Early tales of South East Singapore

By historical accounts, a good two or even three centuries before the British arrived, early Singapore was alive, peopled, and thriving. Some of these are not verifiable, including a Chinese chronicle from as far back as the 8<sup>th</sup> century that describes a Southeast Asian “island” kingdom at the extreme point of the

Malay peninsula: one said to have practised cannibalism and whose inhabitants had small tails.<sup>2</sup> It is possible that this was the Malay peninsula, and the island was Singapore. Later on, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Chinese text refers to an island called Longyamem or “Dragon Tooth Gate”, which has been interpreted and identified as a rock formation jutting out of the water, opposite what is now Fort Siloso on Sentosa.

By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, so says the *Sejarah Melayu*, Singapura was serving as a naval base for the Malacca Sultanate. The Portuguese wanted to build a fort here, and 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese source materials—indicating their exploration and surveillance of the land—included names of villages like Tanah Merah, Sungei Bedok and Tanjong Rhu. Far from being a sleepy fishing village, early Singapura was territory that was already in strategic play among competing groups. The Dutch, the Portuguese, the Acehnese and the Johor Malays engaged in naval skirmishes off Changi Point.<sup>3</sup> Around the year 1611, an early Singapore settlement on the coast was said to have been burned to the ground. Historians theorise that it is possible the area’s inhabitants were a target, and the fire a convenient method of conquest. It is unclear who the culprits of this dastardly deed were; perhaps it was the Portuguese or more likely, the Acehnese from Sumatra.

Among the earliest inhabitants of the villages in Bedok, Siglap and other villages along the east coast were the orang laut or “sea people”, who lived on the coast and fished and sailed in the waters around Singapura. In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the different groups of orang laut in Singapore included those from the Riau-Lingga archipelago such as the Orang Galang, Orang Gelam, Orang Seletar, Orang Biduanda Kallang and the Orang Selat.<sup>4</sup> The Orang Seletar made their homes by the mangroves of Seletar River, while the Orang Biduanda Kallang settled along the swampy green banks of Kallang River.



Image 2: Orang Laut boys from a Malay village, 1890s.

Photo: Lim Kheng Chye Collection. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

## Bedok

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A map by cartographer Manuel Godinho de Erédia (b. 1563–d. 1623) dated 1604<sup>5</sup> makes the earliest mention of Bedok as a specific area, making it well over four centuries old. There was a reference to Sune Bodo, known today as Sungei Bedok.

The origins of the name “Bedok” may be “Bedoh”, the Malay word for a wooden drum, used by Malay elders to call the community to morning prayers. Perhaps one day, before the light is out, you can stand by the Bedok Reservoir, feel the breeze of a cool morning on your skin and close your eyes. If you focus, you might even be able to hear the magical timbre of its sound. An account in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* in 1908 describes the mesmerizing drum as follows: “But beyond doubt the magical bedoh or tom-tom is in this class the most

bewilderingly interesting. I cannot describe the varying effects, only know I have never heard its like, and then pregnant of the unspeaking within, it refuses to give its music other than in the same order, whoever may handle the drum sticks.”<sup>6</sup>

Picture a sandy coast, east of the Singapore River, before East Coast Park came to be. A 1850 land grant refers to Kampong Bedok Laut or “Bedok Sea Village” in Malay, and this was on the eastern side of Bedok Road. The village on the other side of the Bedok Road was Kampong Bedok Darat or “Bedok Shore Village”. Oral history accounts give an insight into the ways of life then: a young fisherman from Johor Lama, Haji Abdul Salam, had started Kampong Bedok Darat, while a farmer from Java, Abdul Wahab, had started Kampong Bedok Laut.<sup>7</sup>

## Siglap

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The origin stories of Siglap likewise date back approximately 400 years. Several accounts in Malay tradition showcase Tok Lasam, of royal stock from the Indonesian archipelago:

“In one version, Tok Lasam was Raja Sufian, one of four Minangkabau princes who made their way across Sumatra and the Malacca Strait, visiting the Bugis settlements of Tanjong Rhu and Kampong Kallang in Singapore before founding Siglap in 1809. In another version, Tok Lasam’s arrival in Singapore was the result of a Dutch invasion of his homeland of Gowa in the 1660s.”<sup>8</sup>

Another clue to the history of Siglap is in its Malay meaning: siglap means “dark one” or “the darkness that conceals”, possibly in reference to the thick canopy of coconut trees in the area, or the solar eclipse that Tok Lasam encountered in Siglap. If the

latter, the founding of this fishing village would be 1821, which was the year of a solar eclipse.<sup>9</sup>

In a burial site along Jalan Sempadan, you will still find the graves of Tok Lasam and his wife.



Image 3: A view of village life in Siglap, 1890s.  
Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

There were four main kampongs in Siglap, the earliest existing since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, before they were destroyed in the 1980s. If you drive east along East Coast Road, you would first see Kampong Lim Choo. This was a settlement of Chinese migrants: the founders of this village were of the surname Lim and hailed from Chao'An in Guangdong, China. Its existence was first recorded in 1937. Apart from the Lims, there were Hainanese residents and a community of over a hundred Japanese fishermen during the pre-war years. There are uncorroborated suggestions, drawn from oral history accounts recorded after the Japanese

Occupation, that these were Japanese spies who had infiltrated Singapore to survey the coastline.

The second village you would pass would be Kampong Siglap, the largest of the fishing villages in this area. This was a Malay kampong flourishing with coconut palms. Further down the road towards the east would be Kampong Goh Choo, the smallest of the villages, comprising Hokkiens and Hainanese from Cheow Huan province in China. The last along this stretch would be Kampong Hajijah, with a mixed population of Malays and Chinese. The village had been renamed in honour of Madam Hajijah binte Jumat, who owned much of its land and built a mosque in nearby Kampong Siglap. The original name of the village was Kampong Bahru, or “new village” in Malay, suggesting it was an offshoot of an older kampong, possibly Kampong Siglap.<sup>10</sup>

## Chai Chee

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The Hokkien term Chai Chee means “vegetable market”. Kampong Chai Chee was named after a vegetable market for produce by farmers from surrounding areas including Bedok, Tanah Merah and Kembangan.

The first roadside stalls sprang up along the junction of the Peng Ann Road and Peng Ghee Road, attracting more vegetable hawkers and becoming a market. Drawn by the lively business, people started setting up their homes, giving shape to a predominantly Chinese kampong in the 1920s. Today’s Ping Yi Secondary School was Pin Ghee (Peng Ghee) Public School in 1930, funded by prominent residents such as Chen Weiming (a Chinese physician), Koh Teck Loon (a businessman) and Poh Soon (a trader).

Chai Chee’s market would come to include hawkers selling biscuits, cakes, traditional snacks, meat and fish, but it was renowned for its vegetables.

## Frankel

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The Frankel family owned a very large plantation, and Frankel Estate near the Siglap area is named after them. In 1923, when Albert Einstein stopped over in Singapore after returning from delivering lectures in Tokyo, he visited Frankel Estate. Struck by the beauty of the coconut palms in the Frankel plantation, he recorded this observation in his journal.

Most of the members of Frankel family left Singapore in 1920s and 1930s to settle in the United States, and the Loke family of Cathay Organisation acquired part of Frankel Estate to build Cathay-Keris Studio at 532D East Coast Road in 1953. This studio became one of two major filmmaking engines in Singapore, producing Singapore's first Chinese-language film, *The Lion City*.<sup>11</sup>

### The daily lives of fisher folk and farmers

Across these villages along that original east coast, Malay fishermen would set off before dawn, dropping both deep-sea and floating lines in areas with karang (“coral” in Malay), undersea rock formations or reefs, where fish are abundant. They would use small fish as bait to catch ikan parang (“wolf herring”) and sotong (“squid”) and ikan tenggiri (“mackerel”). Chinese fishermen would be out on their sampans, pushing their drift nets fixed on bamboo poles through the waters during low tide.



Image 4: Singapore's east coast showing a jetty built from wood and atap materials. A fisherman is seen casting his net into the sea, 1925.  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

## Moving from the centre to the east

A diversity of peoples and new business opportunities had entered with the port town that was established by the British. Under colonial administration, migrants from China and India came to make a living as sailors, fishermen, drivers, port workers and tradesmen. Although they might have landed in the city centre, some moved further out and settled upon sandy shores that were the original east coast. The Peranakans and Eurasians came after the Chinese and Indians. In this way, the communities in the east became mixed and less homogeneous.

To impose rule and order, the British colonial authorities began to regulate land ownership in the east of Singapore: in 1830, individuals were issued land grants for plantations in parcels of between 20 to 500 acres. The records of land grants give us an insight into the business activity and ethnic profile of wealthy individuals:

“[Among the Europeans] were Dr Robert Little (Singapore’s first coroner), Sir Jose D’Almeida (a Portuguese merchant), and John Armstrong (a trader). [...] Early Asian landowners in the area included Armogum Anamalai, a surveyor and architect, who bought part of Armstrong’s plantation from its subsequent owner, Matthew Little, in 1885. Much of this 20-acre plot was then purchased in 1917 by Moona Kadir Sultan, a cattle merchant who later built the well-known Karikal Mahal mansion.”<sup>12</sup>

## Singapore takes flight from the southeast

East Coast Road, which starts at Tanjong Katong and Mountbatten, was the thoroughfare from the east, since its construction in 1902. It extended into Upper East Coast Road after the Siglap Road junction, continuing as Bedok Road. From it stemmed the Katong area, the East’s rich and bustling hive of culture and activity.



Image 5: The Katong-Bedok bus service which would have been the main mode of transport for residents to travel out of Bedok during that time, 1952.

Photo: F W York Collection. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

While buses trundled along the coastal roads, the trolleybus system was in full swing. At one point, in the 1930s, it was one of the world's largest, with a combined network length of 40.17 kilometres and a fleet of 108 trolleybuses. In the south east, a new mode of transport would be introduced, which would surpass sea travel and eventually lessen our dependence on the sea.

It was one Governor, Sir Cecil Clementi, who in 1931 saw that sea travel was going to go the way the rickshaw did once the automobile arrived. He knew that Singapore needed a proper, fully functioning airport. Up to that date, planes were still landing at the old race course and on the marshy Balestier plains. After surveying the entire island closely in a plane, he hit upon the Kallang River Basin, despite the need for initial costly reclamation involving some 339 acres of tidal swamp. A temporary rail track was erected so around 200,000 tons of rock and earth could be brought from Bedok and the river basin could be smoothed over.

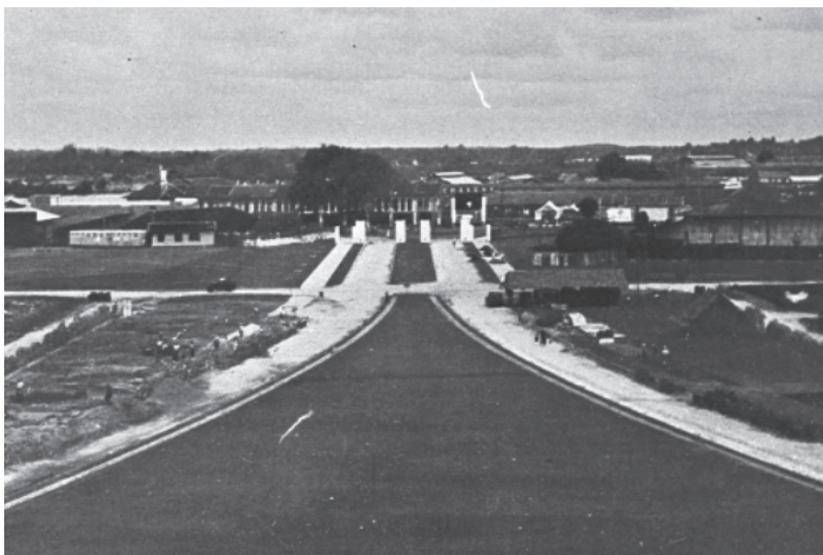


Image 6: View of Kallang Civil Airport main entrance, 1937.

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Kallang airport opened in 1937, closed during the Japanese occupation, and then opened again in 1947 before it was forced into early retirement in 1955 for its short runway unfit for the new Comet jets. Construction for Paya Lebar Airport had already begun in 1952, which required the destruction of 20,000 rubber and coconut trees to build the 2,400 meter runway. It was Singapore's commercial international airport from 1955 until 1981, when Changi Airport opened for operations. Paya Lebar Airport began its second life as a military airbase, while the old Kallang Airport became the site for a good number of political rallies, shortly before Singapore was allowed to self-govern in 1959.

This foray into aviation with the construction of three airports represents the core of modern Singapore: a re-engineering of her natural landform, and a reinvention of her relationship with the sea and environment.

## Endnotes

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## About the author

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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