

# Monument of Memory and More: The History of Victoria Street

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Site of Raffles National Library showing the British Council Hall, which was later demolished.



The Junior Library of the Raffles Library in the 1950s



The Raffles Library display in the Community Education Exhibition, 1957.

*"There are places I'll remember  
All my life though some have changed...  
...All these places have their moments  
With lovers and friends I still can recall  
Some are dead and some are living  
In my life I've loved them all"*

Lyric extracts of Lennon/McCartney's "The Beatles' IN MY LIFE"

In 1999, a StraitsTimes headlines, "National Library to go" announced that the familiar red-brick building along Stamford Road would soon make way for new developments. Despite much protest from the public who had grown to love the building, the library needed to move to a new site to keep up with the times, especially as information needs were expected to move by quantum leaps in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## History

Formally established in 1845, the Singapore Library carried fiction and non-fiction books and included a Reference section. In 1874, it became a government institution known as the Raffles Library and Museum, and was located at Stamford Road at what is today the National Museum's building. In 1955, it was separated from the National Museum, and eventually in 1960, the library moved into its own building next door.

In 1953, millionaire philanthropist Dr Lee Kong Chian, made a donation

of \$375,000 "towards the foundation of a public library with the condition that it house books in Asian languages that would be fully representative of the cultures of Singapore". The former St Andrew's School buildings occupied by the British Council was vacated, as the land was developed for the "Raffles Library".

The completion of the library building at Stamford Road was met with shocked reactions from architects and academics alike. They remarked that the architecture was "too severe", "intimidating", "forbidding", and "heavy looking". In a *Free Press* newspaper article dated 9 July 1960, entitled, "They gasp with horror at this 'monstrous monument'", William Lim, a representative of a new generation of local architects, described the \$2 million structure as "a complete and absolute failure of the architect to create the necessary atmosphere and delight." The PWD Architect clarified that the design was more contemporary in style but would consider improvements. On 12 November 1960, the new

building was officially opened by President Yusof Ishak, and the library was renamed the National Library of Singapore.

Despite the initial unfavourable comments about the "red-brick balustrade" building, it eventually endeared itself to the public, as it fulfilled not only the requirements of researchers but quickly became a popular hangout for generations of Singaporeans.

On 1 April 1997, the building was closed for ten months for extensive renovations and upgrading. When it reopened to the public on 16 January 1998, it offered a wider range of collections and services. Through the legal deposit (a regulation where publishers must deposit two copies of all Singaporean publications with the National Library Board at their own expense within four weeks of publication), publications on Singapore and by Singaporeans had increased. The newly renovated Reference Section could thus showcase a strong collection on

Let's not lose National Library too

T he National Library Board (NLB) has announced that it will demolish the National Library building on Victoria Street. The NLB says the building is too old and does not meet the needs of the 21st century. The NLB says the building is too small and does not have enough space for the collections. The NLB says the building is too expensive to maintain and does not have enough space for the collections. The NLB says the building is too old and does not meet the needs of the 21st century. The NLB says the building is too small and does not have enough space for the collections. The NLB says the building is too expensive to maintain and does not have enough space for the collections.

Do we have to see yet another landmark gone?

I t is with great sadness that I write this article. Singaporeans will soon be no more. It seems that every year the landmarks that make our city unique are being lost. The National Library is one of the landmarks that we should not lose. The National Library is a landmark that we should not lose. The National Library is a landmark that we should not lose. The National Library is a landmark that we should not lose. The National Library is a landmark that we should not lose. The National Library is a landmark that we should not lose. The National Library is a landmark that we should not lose. The National Library is a landmark that we should not lose. The National Library is a landmark that we should not lose. The National Library is a landmark that we should not lose.

Newspaper articles that expressed the public's unhappiness with the demolishing of the National Library.

Singapore. The famed Southeast Asia Room that had drawn many researchers to the National Library since it opened in 1964 was given free access to all. Yet, even with the renovations, it quickly became obvious that the space for the collections remained insufficient.

When the National Library Board was told that the building would be affected by a proposed traffic tunnel and must be relocated, there was a huge public outcry.

Strong sentiments appealed for the preservation of the building. Many recalled the treasured memories they had of the landmark building. A generation of Singaporeans had grown up borrowing books here, and consuming refreshments at the 'tin-shed' coffee shop. A member of public complained that the sacred building had to be "gouged out to make way for the opening of a traffic tunnel."

This distinct redbrick structure though initially condemned, stood at Stamford Road for 44 memorable years and served the needs of the people until 31 March 2004 when the National Library closed its doors. The building was demolished shortly after, and readers had to use the other branch libraries.

The New Victoria Site

On 4 June 2001, the Singapore Land Authority issued a 60 years lease No 24897, with land of a gross plot ratio of 5.2 in accordance with the plans approved by the competent authority under the Planning Act (Cap 232), for the development of the Nation's main Library Institution. The groundbreaking ceremony was held at this site on 30 October 2001.



Construction of the National Library as of August 2003.

The National Library is situated at 100 Victoria Street and is gradually becoming a landmark of the Bugis/Bras Basah area. Even as the National Library creates a new beginning at Victoria Street, it is appropriate to take a retrospective look at the history of Victoria Street.

History of the 'New Site'

The Victoria site is today part of the Singapore town land sub-division. The land area is bounded by Victoria Street, Middle Road, North Bridge Road and Bain Street, and was once a nutmeg plantation and a betel-nut plantation. By the instructions of Sir Stamford Raffles' 'Town Plan', land was leased by auction, and leases had tenure of 999 years.

Original Owner - Andrew Farquhar

A large portion of this land was formerly the private property of an enterprising merchant, Andrew Farquhar, the eldest son of the first Resident of Singapore, Colonel William Farquhar. In 1821, Andrew Farquhar aged 20, moved from Malacca to Singapore, and invested in properties. There is no record of when he actually bought the more than 2-acre site at the junction of North Bridge Road and Middle Road, opposite his father's property and residence at Beach Road, except that lease No. 503 was issued on 20 March 1828. In June 1824, he married Elizabeth Robinson, and with their three children, they moved to the Victoria site.

In 1827, Andrew Farquhar became first appointed Coroner in Singapore but in January 1829, on a visit to Jakarta, he became seriously ill and died. In December 1830, James Scott Clark, Administrator of Andrew Farquhar's estate sold the property to John Henry Moor, the Headmaster of the Raffles Institution. The property was probably acquired for investment, as he and his family stayed at the school. In January 1832, Elizabeth Farquhar remarried James Scott Clark, and in March 1834, J H Moor

**THE TRADERS**



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For further reading on English Traders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *The Traders: A Story of Britain's Southeast Asian Commercial Adventure* is an excellent source of material.

leased part of his property to her youngest son, Andrew Charles Robert Farquhar. Although the area was smaller, Farquhar's family was still able to stay there.

The Victoria site had a nutmeg plantation and Mrs Elizabeth Clark ran a boarding house there. Andrew C R Farquhar began as a clerk at Martin Dyce & Co and Little Cursetjee & Co. On a visit to Calcutta, India, he fell in love and got married there. In May 1854 he sold his property, and left Singapore for good. When Mrs Clark's second husband James passed on, she went to join her son in Calcutta, and in July 1867, died there.

**Joseph M Cazalas's Property**

John Henry Moor's other property at the Victoria site was leased in October 1832 to Joseph M Cazalas, the first mechanical engineer in Singapore, and a Eurasian. It remained a betal-nut plantation until 1866, when Cazalas changed the land use and operated a metal foundry at Middle Road.

Besides managing the foundry, J M Cazalas joined the Police in 1873 and served in the Voluntary Fire Brigade. In 1879 he mortgaged his property to Seah Eu Chin. Seah, a wealthy merchant, owned numerous nutmeg and gambier plantations. Cazalas remained at Middle Road until 1885 when he died and his family sold the property to a Chinese owner in the name of Ban Hap Kongsi.

**Properties of Charles Prince Holloway**

Also part of the Victoria site was Lease 262, (22.52m<sup>2</sup> / 242,400 sq ft) owned by the 40<sup>th</sup> Bengal Native Infantry Regiment. In April 1827, it was sold to another Eurasian, Charles Prince Holloway. As there was an access lane to his property, it was convenient to name the small road, Holloway Lane, after him. In 1846, C P Holloway was in the Deputy Registrar of Imports and Exports at the Trade Department, and in 1853, he was transferred to the Marine Department. In 1860 he moved to Prinsep Street but the name Holloway Lane remain unchanged until the land was cleared in the mid-1970s. On 23 October 1966, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew officiated at the opening of the "Kheng Ngai Lee Clan Association", possibly the only distinctive organisation in this little street.

**Gilbert Angus Bain's Properties**

In 1854, Charles Prince Holloway sold 5 subdivided land lots to Gilbert Angus Bain, a Eurasian from Lerwick, Shetland Islands. He came to Singapore in 1842,

and first worked as a clerk, but was later made a partner in several European-owned companies, as well as Hoo Ah Kay's Whampoa & Co. His younger brother Robert Bain worked in A L Johnston & Co. The Bain brothers were enterprising traders, especially Gilbert Angus Bain. He owned two large properties at Tanjong Pagar, one known as Bain's Hill. When the Tanjong Pagar Dockyard was constructed, he sold Bain's Hill, and then invested in a few other properties. His name is listed in quite a few land titles at the Singapore Land Authority.

When the Singapore Library was opened in January 1845, G A Bain, an avid reader was one of the 32 subscribing shareholders. As a shareholder, he paid \$30, and a monthly subscription of \$2.50. He and his brother Robert continued their membership in the Raffles Library and Museum.

Between 1844 and 1860, Gilbert and Robert Bain were Jurors of the Grand Jury, and on a few occasions were also the foremen or leaders of the Jury.

Gilbert Angus Bain died in Singapore on 24 March 1887, and left a family of seven sons and two daughters.



Holloway Lane in 1938. The library is standing on this piece of land today.

## St Joseph's Church

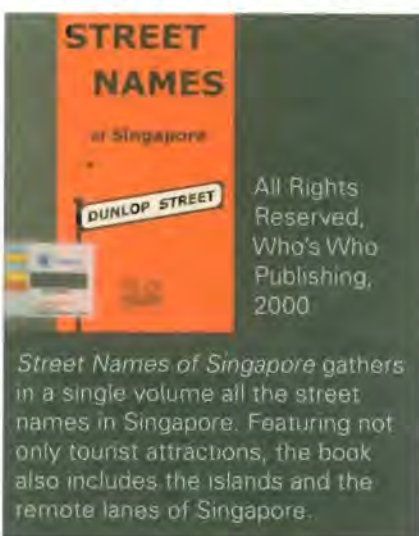
In 1822, the Portuguese Catholic priests obtained from Raffles land for a small church. In the 1850s, it was considered too small for the residents especially the Eurasians living at the European quarters. In 1906, the original church was demolished, the present Church of St Joseph was built in 1912 – a landmark that remains at the front of the main National Library entrance.

## Street Names

As seen in leases in which survey plans were attached, North Bridge Road and Middle Road were named in 1826 by Lieutenant Philip Jackson. George D Coleman's 1836 town plan and map retained these names.



Coleman used the name "Marbro Street"; for the street parallel to North Bridge Road whereas Jackson had earlier named it Rochor Street in his 1823 Town Plan. According to Dr John Bastin "Marbro" was an abbreviated term used in honour of the Duke of Marlborough. The name may have changed a few times in the 19<sup>th</sup>



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*Street Names of Singapore* gathers in a single volume all the street names in Singapore. Featuring not only tourist attractions, the book also includes the islands and the remote lanes of Singapore.

century, but in 1848, "Victoria Street" and the next street, "Queen Street" were named in honour of the much-loved Queen Victoria (1819-1901), to commemorate her 10<sup>th</sup> year reign as a British monarch.

It was common for the Municipality to use the name of the owner for streets that they owned or lived in. In 1860, Bain Street was named after the two abovementioned 'well-known' residents. Like Holloway Lane, Bain Street was connected to North Bridge Road and Victoria Street.

In 1887, the Collector of Land Revenue, Land Office, Mr HT Haughton mentioned that in accordance with Section 143 of the Municipal Ordinance, the Commissioners should introduce the dialect names of places in Singapore, as in many instances, these names historically reflected the character of the place. The names of both Bain Street and Holloway Lane in the Chinese Hokkien dialect were *Sek Kia Ni Loi Pai Twi Bin Hang* meaning "The lane opposite the Portuguese Church" (The term *Sek Kia Ni* is derived from the Malay word *Serani* meaning "Eurasian"). The two names in Tamil *Pakku Thoppu* meant "Betel-nut garden".

## Building Layout of the Vicinity

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with increasing immigrants settling in Singapore, the town expanded. Singapore's entrepot and change of land use resulted in intensive use of shophouses in the town. The old houses were gradually demolished and there were no more plantations.

In its place, shophouses of 2 to 3 storeys were built, the ground floor for shops and trades, and upper floors for residence. Roads were not affected by these developments, so their street names remained unchanged.

## Little Japan

Japanese migrants had been in Singapore since the late 1800s until the outbreak of war in 1941.



Most of the community settled along Middle Road and the streets adjoining it north and south, and their businesses and accommodation in shophouses extended to North Bridge Road and Victoria Street.

Japanese of different professions and trades existed here. But the main concentration of their presence was at Middle Road, with their 'town centre' being where the Library now stands today. Business activities in the area included a well-known textile store Echigoya & Co., import and export traders, shoes shops, photo studios, barbers, restaurants, bars, medical and dental clinics etc. Other institutions like the Japanese Elementary School, the Japanese Association, the Japanese Club and the Japanese Consulate, were just outside this area. The Middle Road area was called *Nihonjin machi* (or "Japanese town"). The Chinese or Europeans usually referred to it as "Little Japan" or "Little Tokyo".

Just before World War II, the Japanese left and returned to Japan.



## Post War Environment



Middle Road's camera shops



Empress Building

After the war and until the late 1980s, as land leases expired, the area of shophouses with its business and residential characteristics generally remained unchanged. Between North Bridge Road and Victoria Street, Middle Road was well-known for its shoe shops on one end, and camera shops on the other. Victoria Street was the place for furniture, especially cane-furniture and upholstery; North Bridge Road was the place for Chinese books (Popular Bookshop, Black Cat Book Co., and Youth Bookshop), stationery and record stores, goldsmiths and jewellers, photo studios, furniture shops and other retailers. At the junction of Victoria Street and Middle Road, stood the landmark Empress Hotel. Built in 1932, with a restaurant added later in the 1950, this typical Chinese hotel attracted visitors from neighbouring countries, particularly tourists from China. For years it was famed for its delightful and delectable "moon cakes".

Opposite the Empress Hotel was St Anthony's Canossian Convent School, and next to it, the then Catholic Portuguese Mission of St Joseph's Church, and on its left - St Anthony's Boys' School.

By the late 1980s, hundreds of buildings owned by private owners in these areas were acquired and demolished. On the National Library site were two roads, Holloway Lane and Lorong Sidin, which were expunged to make way for comprehensive redevelopment. In 1980, at Bain Street and North Bridge Road, the first inkling of modernity to the area was the Bras Basah Complex with two 25-storey blocks HDB flats.

## The National Library Today and Tomorrow



Victoria Street, 1950s



Victoria Street, 2005

A large 11.3 m<sup>2</sup> (121,679 sq ft) site at 100 Victoria Street, the 'new' National Library opened its doors to the public on 22 July 2005, and was officially opened on 12 November 2005, by the President of Singapore S R Nathan.

Housing a wealth of knowledge, the new National Library is a large complex with 16 levels of floor space, abundant with local and international information resources, plus the extensive Singapore and Southeast Asian Collections of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library.

In the years to come, this new Library, on the historical Victoria Street, will continue to be, as it did at Stamford Road, an important institution of education and entertainment, and also a 'Monument of Memory' for the generations to come!

### Further Reading:

*Memories and the National Library* edited by Kwok Kian Woon, Ho Weng Hin, Tan Kar Lin  
 Publisher: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000  
 RSING 027.5095957 BET

Published by the Singapore Heritage Society, this title is a compilation of articles and letters that appeared in the local press over the controversial decision by the government to demolish the National Library building at Stamford Road.

*An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore (1819 - 1867)* by Charles Burton Buckley

Publisher: Oxford University Press 1984  
 RSING 959.57 BUC-[HIS]

One of the principle sources for the study of the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Singapore, the comprehensive volume contain a wealth of information on all aspects of British administration and society in Singapore.

*Reminiscences of the Straits Settlements through Postcards*

Publisher: National Archives of Malaysia and National Archives of Singapore, (2005)  
 RSING 959.503 REM

Containing more than 100 postcards, the publication takes the reader back to life in the Straits Settlements during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A fascinating record of images, the book also includes supporting archival records include maps, building plans and documents.

*Urban Planning in Singapore: The Transformation of a City* by Johan Dale  
 Publisher: Oxford University Press, 1999  
 RSING 307.1216 DAL

The book details the process of urban planning in Singapore by tracing its early growth on the banks of the Singapore River to its present structure. Through a historical and descriptive analysis of changes in economic activity and population and the role of government, the book evaluates the forces that have shaped the Central Area.