

THE FIRST NEWSPAPER

Title: *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*
Year published: 1833–37
Publisher: Mission Press and Singapore Chronicle Press (Singapore)
Language: English
Type: Serial
Call no.: RRARE 079.5957 SCCR
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commercial information and news.¹

Singapore's first broadsheet was published on 1 January 1824,² five years after the British set up a trading post in Singapore. It was Francis James Bernard, the Assistant in the Police Department and son-in-law of Singapore's first Resident, William Farquhar, who made the original application to publish a commercial newspaper in July 1823.³

Bernard's idea for a newspaper was endorsed by John Crawford – Farquhar's successor as the British Resident – who believed the newspaper would "contribute to the utility and respectability" of Singapore.⁴

Bernard was appointed as the first editor of the *Singapore Chronicle* but resigned on 9 February 1824 after a quarrel with Crawford.⁵ In the initial two years of its existence, Crawford was the principal contributor to the newspaper, and under his supervision, the



Long before the advent of modern communications and transportation systems, merchants in 19th-century Singapore relied on the humble newspaper to track shipping arrivals and departures. As the movement of cargo, people and mail was key to the island's rise as a maritime port, the *Singapore Chronicle's* chief task was to disseminate

[Above right and below] *The Singapore Chronicle* – the city's first English newspaper – was first published on 1 January 1824, with Francis James Bernard as its first editor. However, the earliest issue in the National Library's possession is dated 3 January 1833. *Image source: National Library Board, Singapore.*



newspaper became a semi-official gazette.⁶

Commercial information aside, the newspaper also included official notifications, advertisements, editorial notes on local topics and events, news about other countries, articles or letters from correspondents, and listings of imports and exports. It also re-published news from the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* and the *Malacca Observer* as well as from other Bengal and English newspapers.⁷

Government notices typically appeared on the first column, at the top of the front page. For this dedicated space, the editor of the newspaper received a regular fixed subsidy of 60 Spanish dollars per month from the government until 1829, when the subsidy was withdrawn in order to save costs.⁸

The *Singapore Chronicle* was published once a fortnight on Thursdays. It was initially printed on a single sheet of rough, Chinese-made paper and folded once to make four quarto pages, each with three columns of type. The paper later expanded to five or six pages, and became a weekly paper in 1830.⁹

From mid-1826 onwards, a separate complementary single-sheet weekly paper,

Commercial Register and Advertiser, was published on Saturdays containing the list of imports and exports during the week, current prices of foreign markets, advertisements as well as shipping information. It was sold at half a Spanish dollar per month to subscribers and 25 cents per issue to non-subscribers.¹⁰

The *Singapore Chronicle* and the *Commercial Register and Advertiser* subsequently merged to form the *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*, with its first issue printed on 6 January 1831. Its annual subscription rate was 18 Spanish dollars; single copies were sold at 50 cents, while the optional *Commercial Register* cost an extra 25 cents.¹¹ From January 1835 onwards, the *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register* was printed on Saturdays.

Early editions of the newspaper were printed by the Mission Press. Later, the newspaper ran its own printing press, the Singapore Chronicle Press, located at 26 Commercial Square (present-day Raffles Place).¹²

The *Singapore Chronicle* was subject to a gagging act which was introduced in 1823 in response to certain critical articles that had been published in English-

language newspapers in India to embarrass the British government.¹³ The act required all newspapers in the British colonies to be licensed and submitted for vetting before publication. In addition, all articles that criticised the British East India Company, and government officials and policies were banned.¹⁴

As a result, in some issues, questionable paragraphs and articles were removed, leaving large blank spaces with a series of stars printed on them to indicate that content had been deliberately removed and that it was not due to a printing error.¹⁵

The *Singapore Chronicle* remained the only newspaper published in Singapore until 1835, when the gagging act was lifted and Singapore's second newspaper, *The Singapore Free Press*, was established.¹⁶ Unable to cope with the competition, the *Singapore Chronicle* ceased publication after 30 September 1837.¹⁷

Unfortunately, the National Library does not have the earlier issues of the *Singapore Chronicle*. The earliest issue found in the library's collection is dated 3 January 1833. However, a collaboration with The British Library has made issues from 1827 accessible in NewspaperSG. ♦Mazelan Anuar

Notes

- 1 Turnbull, C. M. (2009). *A history of modern Singapore 1819–2005* (p. 85). Singapore: NUS Press. Call no.: RSING 959.57 TUR-[HIS]
- 2 Tan, S. C. (1950, January 5). The first newspaper in the colony. *The Straits Times*, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 3 Gibson-Hill, C. A. (1953, July). *The Singapore Chronicle, 1824–37. Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Vol. 26, No. 1 (161), 175. Retrieved from JSTOR.
- 4 Gibson-Hill, Jul 1953, p. 175.
- 5 Gibson-Hill, Jul 1953, pp. 175–176.
- 6 Turnbull, 2009, p. 85.
- 7 *The Straits Times*, 5 Jan 1950, p. 6; Gibson-Hill, Jul 1953, pp. 178–179.
- 8 Gibson-Hill, Jul 1953, p. 178.
- 9 Gibson-Hill, Jul 1953, pp. 178, 187, 192.
- 10 Gibson-Hill, Jul 1953, p. 179.
- 11 Gibson-Hill, Jul 1953, p. 192.
- 12 Gibson-Hill, Jul 1953, p. 192.
- 13 Turnbull, C. M. (1972). *The Straits Settlements, 1826–67: Indian presidency to crown colony* (p. 130). London: Athlone Press. Call no.: RSING 959.57 TUR-[HIS]
- 14 Turnbull, C. M. (1995). *Dateline Singapore: 150 Years of The Straits Times* (p. 5). Singapore: Times Editions for Singapore Press Holdings. Call no.: RSING 079.5957 TUR
- 15 Buckley, C. B. (1984). *An anecdotal history of old times in Singapore, 1819–1867* (p. 154). Singapore: Oxford University Press. Call no.: RCL05 959.57 BUC
- 16 Seow, F. (1998). *The media enthralled: Singapore revisited* (p. 7). Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers. Call no.: RSING 323.44509595 SEO
- 17 *The Straits Times*, 5 Jan 1950, p. 6.