

“...A Most Valuable Acquisition” – Penang & the East Indiamen: The Interaction of Ships and a City, 1786-1833.

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean region’s history has been studied in terms of trade, migrations, cross-cultural transmissions, and port-hinterland connections. Unfortunately, scholars have had little to say about Asian ports and their relationship with the ships and crews that visited them. For the ships of the East India Company, however, we possess a vast, largely untouched archive of logbooks covering the period 1601-1833, which sheds light on how these vessels navigated the routes to and from the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. The logbooks of the politically complex post-1760 period are, ironically, perhaps the least well-known part of this archive. However, these logbooks, used in conjunction with official records of the colonial state and private documents, reveal the changing fortunes of seaborne trade and port cities of the colonial period. For Penang, Malaysia, deliberately established as a hub for the East India Company’s trade, maritime history is central to understanding the development of the colony and vice versa. Nordin Hussin’s recent study has laid out much of the most pertinent evidence regarding trade and society in early colonial Penang. This essay seeks to develop this colony’s maritime history by examining how East Indiamen and their crews interacted with Penang from the period immediately preceding the establishment of the settlement until 1833, when the Company’s Maritime Service was dissolved.

The interaction of ships with port cities has political, logistic and economic, navigational, and socio-cultural dimensions, each of which has global, regional, and local aspects, which can be divided further into significant sub-topics. The idea of ship-port interaction is not simplistic. To better comprehend how the dimensions of maritime interaction changed in the Penang region between the 1760s and the 1830s, this essay will consider chronological stages separated by watershed developments. Penang’s pre-colonial period, from 1760 to 1786, encompassed an era of reconnaissance by European powers and growing awareness of the potential of the island and its region. The early colonial period, 1786 to 1801, included the establishment of a British-Indian colony on Pulo Penang, the rise of George Town, the expansion of the city’s trade network, and the first surveys of the harbour. Between 1801 and 1812, efforts to develop Penang into a plantation colony and naval base returned mixed results, and capping a decade of disappointing struggle, much of the city burned down. A fourth stage is discernable in the period 1812-1833, as Penang recovered, only to be challenged by the rise of Singapore and its own changing political and socio-economic role vis-à-vis the larger British Empire. Thus, four dimensions of ship-port interaction can be traced across four periods of Penang’s early history.

The Pre-Colonial Period

Sailors have navigated the Straits of Melaka and its neighboring passages and seas since prehistoric times. The Straits were an important conduit for cross-cultural transmission in ancient and medieval times, and in the early modern age they lay at the centre of the Anglo-

Dutch conflict over the concept of freedom of navigation. During the first English voyage to the 'East Indies,' in 1592, James Lancaster's vessel sheltered for a few months off Pulo Penang, at the northern end of the Straits of Melaka, within sight of the western coast of the Malay Peninsula. In the following decades, however, the Dutch drove the English from South East Asia almost entirely, pursuing a violent course of limited conquest and monopolization through maritime patrols and the establishment of strategic fortified bases. With the occupation of Melaka by the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), English ships usually avoided the Straits, sailing to China by way of the Straits of Sunda, the Java Sea, the Straits of Banka, and the South China Sea. Indeed, before 1760, English ships were rarely seen in the Straits of Melaka, although England's direct trade with China had begun in 1713.

During the period 1760-1786 important political changes altered East India Trade routes. The VOC's power waned in the late 17th century, although Dutch weakness was not fully appreciated until the late 1750s, when the British easily ousted a VOC expedition from Bengal. The East India Company, meanwhile, emerged victorious after its wars with the French in India – conflicts which spread right across the Indian Ocean, even to the waters of the Archipelago of South East Asia. These conflicts were due, in part, to a shift in the center of Company commercial operations from the western coast of India to the Bay of Bengal. A significant part of the Company's ascendancy in the 1750s was its acquisition of Bengal, a wealthy Indian province which produced goods of interest to the Chinese. A subsequent British military expedition from India to Manila, employing a number of East Indiamen as troop transports, galvanized the Company's reassertion of a British presence in the Spice Islands, and India-based 'country traders' began to penetrate the region in increasing numbers in the early 1760s. The wars with the French, meanwhile, had revealed the military weakness of the East India Company's economically inefficient and burdensome outpost of Bencoolen, on the west coast of Sumatra. The French capture of Fort Marlborough gave impetus to the search for an alternative site for a factory, or trading station, in the East Indies – one more convenient, vis-à-vis the China Trade, than Bencoolen had been. During this same period, however, the East India Company nearly foundered under the weight of its debts, with the mounting costs of interminable wars devouring the revenues and commercial profits reaped from the Company's Indian territories. The China Trade, however, was profitable and open to expansion. Not unreasonably, the Company looked to the China Trade for its commercial salvation, provided the security of the ships bound to and from China somehow could be assured.

After the fall of Pondicherry in 1762, the French focused on the development of Mauritius, Bourbon, and their other island colonies in the western Indian Ocean. When war resumed in the Indian Seas in 1778, these islands became bases for French privateers and for Admiral Suffren's fleet. However, the trade winds of the Indian Ocean dictated the use of the northeastern corner of the Bay of Bengal as a place of refuge for warships during the interval between the southwest and northeast monsoons. Admiral Suffren's squadron hovered in or near the Straits of Melaka, lying in wait for British vessels returning from China – a strategy that might have reaped greater rewards had the Company not been aware of this danger beforehand. With its own eyes on the northeast Bay of Bengal, the East India Company had begun a series of hydrographic surveys in the 1770s, in conjunction with land surveys in India, although the results of these chart-making efforts would not be published until after the war with France, in the mid-1780s. The strategic advantages of the Straits thus were not lost on the East India Company.

In South East Asia, small maritime or semi-maritime states like Acheh, Kedah, and Riau on the Straits of Melaka were pressured on the one hand by the VOC and on the other by

expansive regional powers such as Pegu and Siam. Aceh was the most independent of these minor powers, although prone to political upheaval; the rulers of Aceh, furthermore, were not inclined to favor one set of European traders over another, and had little to fear from local enemies or even the Dutch. Riau was a prosperous and fairly powerful kingdom situated at the southern end of the Straits of Melaka – strong enough to challenge the VOC militarily and even to attack Melaka, but not strong enough to prevail. Indeed, the defeat and occupation of Riau by the Dutch caused a crisis along the Straits. Kedah, however, was a vassal state, uncomfortably yoked to Siam, and interested in a defensive pact with the East India Company. In the mid-1780s, the Muslim ruler of Kedah entered into negotiations with Francis Light, representative of a firm of “country traders” based in Madras, in India. After considering several likely locations for a trading post, Light settled upon Pulo Penang, arranging its cession by the ruler of Kedah in return for an annual payment and rather vague promises regarding mutual defense. Light and others corresponded with the East India Company, persuading the Government of India to take on the political and financial risk of accepting the cession of Penang in 1786.

The Company’s decision to colonize Penang made sense in connection with logistic and economic considerations. Early on in the Company’s history, ships often plied the coasts of India, for months, gathering cargoes of cloth and pepper to trade for tea in China. Some ships made two trips to China during the course of a single ‘East India’ voyage, sailing back and forth through the Straits of Melaka. However, such itineraries resulted in overall voyages that might last three years or longer. By the 1770s, the cost of operating larger East Indiamen was so great that the enormous ships simply could not support a desultory coasting trade: they instead sailed between hubs where other, smaller vessels had amassed cargoes that could be loaded readily. While some ships sailed on to China after taking on Indian goods at Bombay, Madras, or Calcutta, others went to China ‘direct’ – an especially long haul that usually required a stop, for provisions, at costly Dutch settlements like Cape Town or Batavia. The latter port, furthermore, had a well-deserved reputation as a graveyard for ships’ crews, to the extent that all English seamen feared the ‘Batavia fever.’ Logistically, it made sense for the Company to have its own port, ideally in the Straits of Melaka, where British ships could take on provisions, ride out the monsoons in safety, or obtain repairs quickly, at a reasonable cost. If a port could be found that also could serve as a cargo collection and distribution hub, so much the better. Francis Light and others were of the opinion that Penang might serve these purposes, especially if the new colony was not over-burdened with taxes and regulations. ‘Free port’ status, Light hoped, would trump both the VOC monopoly and the royal commercial prerogatives of the rulers of Aceh and Kedah.

Pulo Penang was less well suited to the plans of Francis Light and the Company from a navigational standpoint, and this may be why the island and its harbour had not been developed to any appreciable extent previously. It was not easy to find the narrow channel that gave access to Penang’s inner harbour, through the sand banks. An examination of early modern charts of the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Melaka reveals the limitations of European cartographic knowledge of the region prior to the 1750s. Even the Dutch, despite having a base at Melaka, did not possess accurate coasting charts of the area. The proper mapping of the Straits of Melaka and its approaches began after the mid-18th century, coinciding with the development of accurate chronometers, which transformed hydrography from artful guesswork into a scientific activity. Moreover, after the 1760s, Indian Ocean charts began to be made by men who actually had sailed the Eastern Seas. Even so, there was a tendency for map-makers to reproduce their predecessors’ mistakes, and even in 1786 what were considered to be the most accurate charts of

the day contained serious errors. Consequently, although the East India Company required the use of expensive chronometers aboard its ships, and the accurate, daily reckoning and reporting of latitude and longitude, few commanders of Indiamen relied upon these instruments or on their charts east of the Nicobar or Andaman Islands. Written sailing directions and ‘a good lookout’ were more reliable.

The passage of East Indiamen through the Straits of Melaka depended on a complex timetable. With only a few exceptions, prior to 1793 the Company sent out ships from London between late November and June, the best months for sailing down the English Channel to the Atlantic. Ships dropped down the Thames from London and took on cargo and passengers at Gravesend, Portsmouth, or – on rare occasions – at some other port. From the mouth of the Channel, the ships braved the stormy Bay of Biscay and took their departure into the open Atlantic from Cape Finesterre. A few ships, each season, called at Madeira for wine, although most touched at the Canary Islands. From the Canaries, the route to India required “westing” nearly as far as the coast of Brazil, where Trade Winds were to be found that would sweep ships quickly into the high southern latitudes. The itinerary of every vessel was governed by its Charter Party, which specifically laid out the ship’s route, the cargoes to be taken aboard, and the limits of the commander’s discretion. At or near 40° S, captains of Indiamen set an eastward course, propelled by prevailing winds at a rate of up to 200 miles per day. Whether they were bound first for India or South East Asia determined when commanders ordered a change of course. Typically, India-bound ships arrived four to six months after leaving England – between March at the earliest and December at the latest. Voyages of less than six months, however, were the norm in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Captains were financially liable for unnecessary delays, and a sense of anxiety weaves through the orderly routine of the ships’ log books. Crews were pushed to their utmost to squeeze every possible mile out of a day’s sailing. Ships bound for the “Coast and Bay” – that is, Madras and Bengal – usually reached the Coromandel Coast by March, with a short time in which to land and take on cargo before the turning of the monsoon in October.

The window of opportunity for landing and loading cargoes was remarkably small. Madras was an open road, and all stores, cargo, and passengers were transferred by masula boat, through three lines of heavy, breaking surf, at the harbour master’s discretion. Moreover, after a long period at sea, ships needed to take on fresh supplies and strike down their masts and rigging, which were laboriously repaired or replaced and put back together again in order to assure that the vessel would be seaworthy when she resumed her voyage. Ships usually spent at least two weeks, often more, at Madras. The voyage from Madras to the anchorage at Kedgerree, at the mouth of the Hooghly, usually occupied another week or two. At Kedgerree, there was no surf, but there was a dramatic tide, and cargo and passengers had to be sent up or down the river to Calcutta by barge. All sorts of delays occurred at Bengal, furthermore, that could prolong a ship’s stay. A ship whose lading was not ready was likely to be trapped at Kedgerree or Saugor by the monsoon, during which it was nearly impossible to beat out to sea again until September, when the confused weather between the monsoons sometimes allowed an escape. However, until the northeast monsoon died away, it was foolhardy to sail toward the west from Bengal, although it was possible – as Thomas Forrest demonstrated – to sail eastward to the Straits of Melaka, running under the shelter of long chains of off-shore islands.

In the years just prior to the acquisition of Penang by the East India Company, the navigation of the Bay of Bengal was put on a more scientific footing by a series of hydrographic surveys, the exploration of the Nicobar and Andaman Islands, and the careful description of the

Straits of Melaka by Alexander Dalrymple and others. More importantly, between 1763 and 1786, British agents visited various locations in the Straits and their approaches, including Pulo Penang, gathering navigational information, including accurate soundings of the harbour. A few East Indiamen also had called at Kedah and Aceh, although neither port became part of a regular itinerary. Consequently, by the time the Company agreed to send Francis Light to take possession of Penang, the authorities in Bengal had a clearer idea of the island's maritime potential, and were assured that its harbour could host Indiamen of the largest size. This latter detail was of the utmost importance, as the Company had sanctioned the construction of larger ships – up to 1,200 tons and more – for the China Trade. Only a few select harbours were capable of handling ships of this size effectively.

Pulo Penang belonged to the kingdom of Kedah, a tributary of Siam, and there is evidence that the island had been largely depopulated some years prior to being colonized, but there were – according to British records – existing Malay and Chinese communities in 1786. The Malays were said to be fishermen, the Chinese gardeners, but one or both of these communities also engaged in mining. Mariners called at the island, which had a reputation as a watering place, and although there was no major market, Tamil traders may have bartered there for betel nut. However, the Penang colony did not spring so quickly into existence in 1786 *ex nihilo*. Indian and Chinese traders already were established at the nearby ports of Kedah, Aceh, Riau, and Junk Ceylon (modern-day Phuket). Furthermore, Indian, Chinese, and Malay traders had played a role in the commercial life of Melaka under Portuguese and Dutch rule. British country traders lobbying for the establishment of Penang felt that Indian, Chinese, and Malay merchants longed for a free port: if the Company would allow such an anomaly – despite its monopoly interests – then it stood a chance of drawing into its orbit much of the trade of maritime South East Asia, especially now that Riau was in the hands of the VOC.

Significantly, as the country traders argued for the acquisition of Penang – or some other strategic post – they stressed the importance of local connections and knowledge. The credibility of Thomas Forrest and Francis Light rested on their grasp of indigenous cultures and languages, to say nothing of their insight into geographies and histories unknown to most Europeans. Although the country traders had in mind the evolution of a port that would become a hub of the Company's trade, they envisioned that port serving a complimentary network of private European and indigenous commercial networks. Even before Penang was founded, the would-be city was imagined as a multi-cultural entrepôt, much like Asian ports of the pre-colonial age, attracting the trade of India, South East Asia, and China, and linking all of these with the long-distance trade of Britain. This vision, based on existing patterns of commerce in the region, would guide the socio-cultural development of Penang after 1786.

The Early Colonial Period, 1786-1801

Francis Light took possession of what he called Prince of Wales's Island – Penang – on 11 August 1786, during the brief interval between the end of the American Revolution and the outbreak of the wars against Revolutionary France. Thomas Forrest had described the eastern shores of the Bay of Bengal as a wilderness – a new “America” – in one of his letters to the Government of India. South East Asia was envisioned as a virtually untouched field in which Britain could recover the losses suffered due to the independence of the American colonies. In India, meanwhile, there was peace after a long period of war, and hope of economic recovery. Britain still labored under the debt incurred during the American debacle, but Prime Minister

Pitt's policies were addressing the problem and setting a course for solvency. Penang thus came into being at a time in which the East India Company and the Crown were keen to limit expenditures, but also eager to take advantage of opportunities to extend British influence at the expense of the Dutch and French if they could do so without running the risk of war.

Penang, however, did not enjoy many years of peace. In 1790, the Third Anglo-Mysore War began in South India, precipitating a political and fiscal crisis in India; almost immediately, this conflict was followed by the outbreak of a world-wide war with France, in 1793, which once more brought French privateers and warships to the Straits of Melaka. In 1795, when the French overran Holland, the Company secured the VOC outposts on the coasts of India and Ceylon, as well as many of the smaller Dutch-held islands of maritime South East Asia. Penang thus became a staging post for far-flung conquests, as well as for a proposed attack against the Spanish Philippines in 1797, which was recalled at the last moment. By this time, however, the nature of the war in the "Eastern Seas" had changed: with the regular French and Dutch fleets destroyed or driven into protected harbours, the Royal Navy and the Company's Maritime Service faced an enemy consisting mainly of privateers. Still, the privateers were not numerous or successful enough to thwart British expansion, and with the final fall of Mysore in 1799, the French lost access to friendly ports on the South Asian mainland.

During the years 1786-1805, the local government of Penang was ranked as a 'Residency' by the Governor-General in Council in India, with Francis Light holding the title of Superintendent. Light's small staff included a storekeeper, a clerk, a beach-master, a Malay 'writer,' and the commander of the small sepoy escort. According to Light, although the island's Indian settlers, or 'Chulias,' were accustomed to the Company's government in India, the other inhabitants of Penang were not used to such an administration – or to the tax burden necessary to support a full-fledged colonial state. Light's policy, therefore, was to govern as little as possible, imposing the most minimal revenue demand. Indeed, early on, Light's regime gave out so many tax-free land grants that the authorities in Calcutta had to warn him to set aside a few acres of property for public purposes. Most of Light's grants were given to a handful of European settlers, including Light's business partner, James Scott, so one senses that the Superintendent's argument regarding fear of taxation was simply a neat cover for the transfer of much of the island into the hands of a closely-knit network of country traders.

Privatization prevailed even to the extent that the Company had to rent godowns, having none of its own. Light's supposedly libertarian approach to government was supported by John Macpherson, acting Governor-General, but the anti-taxation policy was highly problematic. In 1796, realizing its mistake, the Government of India demanded that a registry of landholdings be prepared, and fair taxes imposed, but in practice it was impossible to alter the system without alienating the leading figures of Penang society. The slender resources of the state were derived from the opium and liquor tax farms, and from levies on shops and land transfers, with additional funds being raised by selling what little valuable land remained.

Raising almost no revenues of its own, Penang's administration relied on subsidies from Bengal, but in the early years these, too, were meager. The growing town suffered from lack of infrastructure – poor drainage, difficulty obtaining drinking water, and streets that were muddy quagmires during the rains. In 1789, however, Light alleviated the situation somewhat by obtaining permission to employ convicts transported from India. With the aid of convict labor, many aspects of George Town were improved, bridges were constructed, and Fort Cornwallis – hitherto little more than a stockade – was rebuilt with brick-faced walls and bomb-proofed shelters. From the beginning, the fort had been criticized as being poorly-located and untenable,

but it was completed nonetheless: in fact, no fortification or garrison the Company was prepared to provide Penang could have saved the colony from a determined assault by one of its European rivals. Yet, Fort Cornwallis was strong enough – and visible enough – to deter would-be indigenous enemies, and that, ultimately, was its primary purpose.

Francis Light died in 1794 and was succeeded, eventually, by Major MacDonald, a British Army officer who noted, in testy reports, the undue influence wielded by James Scott over every aspect of public life in Penang. MacDonald clashed with the country traders at Penang, but also built a customs house, a prison, and a hospital. He straightened the streets of George Town and had the city and surrounding country properly surveyed. MacDonald also tried to wrestle with the colony's legal limbo, which had arisen in connection with a murder case of 1793, the authorities in India having determined that none of the authorities at Penang were empowered to try British subjects legally. A commission empanelled to report on this problem, in fact, insisted that would-be settlers were shying away from Penang because the city lacked a functioning court system. MacDonald's administration, however, came to an end in 1798, and he was replaced by Sir George Leith, who sported the title of Lieutenant-Governor under the Bengal Presidency. The significant achievements of Leith, prior to 1801, were the acquisition of the mainland territory of Province Wellesley from Kedah, securing the eastern shore of the harbour, and the establishment of a Committee of Assessors, laying the foundation for a proper civil government. However, European country traders, with an interest in low taxation, dominated the Committee, using their influence to continue Light's unsustainable policies under the guise of a seemingly responsible government.

Penang's reputation as a 'free trade' port attracted a large number of settlers, as did the idea of 'protection' under the British flag, although this was largely an illusion of safety given the condition of the fort. Indeed, rather than test the fort, Light preferred to take the offensive, launching preemptive strikes against threatening forces on the mainland. Many of the colony's Asian settlers relocated from Kedah, to the dismay of the Sultan, who marched on Penang in 1790-1791 after the Company proved unwilling to support him militarily. Ultimately, Sultan Abdullah was forced to sign a new treaty, considerably eroding rights he thought he had preserved under the first treaty ceding Penang. Meanwhile, the Sultan's covert efforts to sow dissension among the Chinese inhabitants of Penang failed to bring about the desired results, although the discovery of the conspiracy alerted British officials to the need to monitor Chinese community institutions more closely.

Light and his expedition from India had not been camped on Pulo Penang for more than a fortnight, in 1786, before the first East Indiamen appeared, bringing stores for the new settlement. Eager to establish the colony's reputation as a provisioning station, Light offered token supplies of fruit, vegetables, and livestock to the few ships which found their way into the little-known, virtually uncharted harbour. The first of these were the *Valentine*, *Sullivan*, and *Vansittart*, all present on the day that Light officially took possession of the island. Indeed, Light waited for these ships in order to present a more dramatic spectacle to Malay observers. However, as more Company ships sailed through the Straits of Melaka, Light was forced to admit that the settlement was not yet sufficiently set up to offer timely repairs to damaged vessels. These, as in years past, had to limp onward to China and make repairs at Whampoa. For the time being, although they did repair a small, country trade vessel, Light's workmen were busy clearing away the jungle and putting up shelters in preparation for the monsoon rains. Captain Lewin, commanding the *Vansittart*, departed from Penang in haste, declining even to join Francis Light for dinner. He recorded the cession of the island tersely in his ship's journal,

perhaps frustrated that he had wasted several days trying to beat his way into the harbour, only to witness a rather pathetic, hardscrabble piece of political theatre. Nonetheless, his ships' guns joined in the firing of the ceremonial salute.

With regard to the economic and logistical aspects of the interaction of ships with Penang, surely the timing of the settlement's establishment was pivotal. In 1788, Lord Cathcart's embassy to China had reached Banka, and might have been more successful than the subsequent embassy of Lord Macartney had the would-be ambassador not died en route. The achievements of the British embassy to China were limited, but the effort marked a turning-point for the Company's trade with the Far East, in particular a more aggressive and competitive stance vis-à-vis the Dutch and other rivals. The volume of trade with China was increasing, and more ships – much larger ships – were assigned to routes passing through the Archipelago. The outbreak and spread of the war with France, meanwhile, drove most of Europe's trade with Asia into British hands by the end of the 18th century, offering new scope for country traders in the 'Eastern Seas.' Thus, international affairs assured Penang an increasing volume of trade – indeed, of maritime traffic of all kinds. In 1793, George Town received 177 visits by 'significant' ships, but by 1800 the number of ships' visits had risen to 2,173. Many visits, of course, were repeat appearances by country traders' vessels plying a regional trade, but, nevertheless, the statistics reflect an increasing velocity of commercial transactions.

At first, Penang drew supplies from the gardens on the island itself, but as Francis Light's inventory of shipping indicates, the harbour soon attracted numerous vessels – country traders, Indian and Chinese junks, and Malay *prahus*. Most of the *prahus* came from Kedah and other places close by, and it was these little ships, primarily, which brought food supplies to from farming areas on the mainland. The early shipping records for Penang indicate that a pre-existing network of inter-Asian trade was transplanted to the new colony, providing instant access to far-flung distribution points and markets. Pulo Penang itself was in no position to provide the quantity of stores required by visiting East Indiamen, especially when several ships passed down the Straits of Melaka during the course of a week or two. By mobilizing a regional trade network, Penang coped with its role as a "place of refreshment." The cession of Province Wellesley solved many problems associated with provisioning, bringing under direct British control a number of farming villages easily connected with George Town's markets by boat. Furthermore, the agreement with the ruler of Kedah assured the free flow of trade between his territories and the Penang colony. Unfortunately, the records which I have been able to consult do not explain how Indiamen were provisioned at Penang although given the absence of Company-owned godowns and the settlement's minimal administration, we can infer that provisioning was arranged with private contractors by the ships' pursers. A source from 1830 suggests that provisioning, even at that late date, was an ad-hoc affair, with fruit and vegetables being offered even by harbor boatmen, who sailed small craft out to meet approaching ships.

During the colony's early days, Light offered the services of skilled workmen to ships in need of repairs, but there was no proper shipyard. Because the harbour was deep enough, close to shore, for ships to 'heave down' using large jungle trees that grew right at the water's edge, the need for a dry dock and a careening-barge were not keenly felt. The smoothness of the water in the harbour also facilitated repairs. Even so, 'sprung' masts and broken futtock plates were the most common kinds of damage ships sought to repair in port, and despite the glowing reports penned by Scott, Light, and others, the timber of Pulo Penang was not well-suited for mast-making. The island also lacked the 'crooked timber' required by English shipbuilding methods of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Large, single pieces of curved wood were used, in

particular, to support the lower part of the hull of a large ship. The nearest source of such wood, however, was in Burma – which, ironically, was actually closer to Calcutta. However, it would be some years before the authorities in India and London realized that the original claims regarding Penang’s forests and the island’s ship-building potential were baseless exaggerations.

By 1790, Penang became an official provisioning port for the East Indies Squadron. The East Indies Station, meanwhile, was divided into two separate squadrons – one based at Bombay, the other at Penang. The division of the East Indies Station, however, was not arbitrary or ‘political,’ as suggested by Cyril Parkinson and others. There were sound geographical and strategic reasons for an articulated command in seas governed by a monsoonal climate during the Age of Sail. Penang, furthermore, had a reputation as a healthy station, offering excellent food and water, and – at least in theory – the resources necessary for organizing and maintaining an efficient shipyard. In the earliest days of the colony, the shortage of labor, both skilled and unskilled, was thought to be the real difficulty preventing the settlement from achieving the Company’s goals. Light’s importation of convict laborers from India and slaves from Bencoolen helped to solve the unskilled labor shortage, but although George Town grew at an almost exponential rate, few skilled workers were attracted to the colony.

Given that early colonial Penang was dependent on maritime trade for its existence, it is remarkable how slowly the local administration responded to problems associated with navigation. In sailing through the Straits of Melaka, captains of East Indiamen relied on visual cues, keeping a lookout for the distinctive islands and hills that marked each stage of the passage; they also took soundings continuously, as the navigable channel of the Straits lay toward the coast of Malaya, and was quite narrow. Apart from the difficulties of keeping within the main channel, ships’ crews also worried about sudden calms and squalls, especially near the coast of Kedah and Pulo Penang. Pirates were a nearly constant threat, as were European privateers after the outbreak of war in 1793. One can easily see why many commanders of East Indiamen preferred not to add to an already tedious journey additional days spent working in and out of the inner harbour of George Town. Since most Indiamen took on water and supplies in India, furthermore, few captains could justify the delay occasioned by calling at Penang. Before 1793, China-bound East Indiamen usually called at Penang only when ordered to do so in their sailing instructions; they were far more likely to visit the port on their return journey, as many ships sailed directly from Penang to England, with only one brief stop-over at Saint Helena. On 29 September 1799, two East Indiamen grounded on a well-known but poorly charted and unmarked mud bank, off the southern point of Penang, and their crews labored for five days to extricate them, using kedge anchors to warp the vessels out to sea at high tide. There is evidence, however, that some Bombay-based private traders had begun to use Penang as a transfer point by 1800, positioning Indian and even Chinese exports routed through India at Prince of Wales’s Island for shipment to England.

The Governor-in-Council in Bengal charged Francis Light with taking immediate steps to survey both the island and the harbour so that the authorities in Calcutta could better make up their minds whether or not to invest further in Penang. When Light failed to produce a chart of the anchorage at Penang swiftly enough to satisfy his superiors, an initial survey of the harbour was made by Captain Kyd, an engineer sent from Bengal, in 1787, and aided by Lieutenant Archibald Blair, a young but experienced surveying officer of the Bombay Marine. Indeed, the Company remained undecided about the new colony as late as 1792, when official opinion briefly swung in favor of developing a settlement on the Andaman Islands. This may explain why Light wrote glowing reports about Penang on the one hand, while at the same time he

dragged his heels with regard to the surveys. Both Kyd and Blair, meanwhile, already had a stake in the colonization of the Andamans when they surveyed Penang, and this may have colored their reports to the Government of India. Ultimately, the fate of the Penang colony was sealed by the outbreak of a new war with France.

After 1793, the British needed a permanent base in the Straits of Melaka at which convoys bound to and from China could be collected and coordinated with their Royal Navy escorts, and with its protected harbour, Penang was well suited for such a strategic role. Thus, by the time Home Popham surveyed the harbour and published his charts and sailing instructions, East Indiamen were being ordered to call at Penang to rendezvous with their convoys – hence the urgent need for published sailing instructions. One early source, in fact, mentions twelve large ships entering and exiting the harbour at once. However, before Popham laid out buoys to mark the channel, there were no aids to navigation, nor did the Penang administration maintain a regular pilot. Commanders of East Indiamen were required to make private arrangements for pilotage, usually hiring a country trade captain with local knowledge.

Laurie and Whittle's maps of Penang, c. 1798 – based on Popham's surveys – tell us a great deal about the socio-cultural structure of George Town during the years 1791-1792. The settlement stood on a point of land projecting toward the mainland, with Fort Cornwallis on the point itself, 'protecting' the harbour. The sepoy lines and the bungalows of the leading European officers lined the north shore of the point, while the town extended along the south shore. Within the town were several different quarters – the Chinese area along China Street and the Indian area along 'Chulier Street,' near the masjid; a small Christian neighborhood alongside the beach; and a 'Malay Town' on the fringes of the settlement. The main area of the town was approximately 300 yards long and 200 yards wide, suggesting some congestion given the size of the population.

The diversity of early Penang is attested in the official records of the colony, which include estimates of the size of George Town's population. As the communities residing on the island grew, however, they also became more complex. We know the least about the Malay population, although it was sizeable and rapidly increasing. Because they worked more closely with the British, we are better-informed about the Chulia Indians and the Chinese. The former, Tamil Muslims for the most part, maintained direct ties with the Coromandel Coast, exemplified by the construction of the 'Nagore' dargah, one of a network of 'branch' dargahs dedicated to a Sufi saint buried in Nagore, in Tamil Nadu. Dargahs belonging to this saint's spiritual association were to be found in Sri Lanka and at other places in South East Asia. The Penang shrine was built around 1800, and was sponsored by the East India Company with a generous grant of land. At around the same time, Hindus among the colony's Indians may have established the Murugan temple on Penang Hill, then known as 'Gun Hill.' In 1801, the Company set land aside for a temple in George Town itself, but this shrine – now dedicated to the South Indian Goddess Mariamman, was not constructed until 1833.

The Chinese, meanwhile, also organized themselves around cultural institutions connected with lineage and religion, which, like those of their Indian neighbors, were imported into the colony fully-formed. In 1790, just four years after the establishment of the settlement, a Cantonese secret society known as the Ghee Hin was recruiting members, and it would be followed, during subsequent periods, by Hakka and Hokkien secret societies. By 1800, however, the Chinese also were building temples – the provincial factions joining hands to patronize the temple of Ma Chor Po, in China Street, dedicated to the patron goddess of seafarers. The connection between the Straits Chinese and their homeland was far more tenuous than that of the

Indians, who often lived at Penang only temporarily, frequently returning to India to visit their families. Koh Lay Huan, reputedly an exile from China and the first Kapitan China appointed by Light, played a very prominent role in Penang's early history, and even was said to have introduced pepper cultivation to the island. Both the early Indian and Chinese settlers, however, intermarried with the Malay population, generating important new hybrid communities such as the Peranakan Jawi and the Baba Nonya, or 'Straits Chinese.'

A significant feature of early Penang society, for all communities except the Malays, was the absence of women. Although there was reluctance on the part of some British administrators to import slave labor, as had been done at Bencoolen in Sumatra, a blind eye was turned to human trafficking for the purposes of both concubinage and labor. Testimony by country traders from the early 19th century would have us believe that Penang was hardly a slave market, but that the town nevertheless was supplied with a steady trickle of women from the peninsula, Sumatra, and Bali, who became by purchase the subordinate sexual partners of European and Asian traders, or the denizens of the brothels frequented by the almost entirely male and bachelor Chinese population. Indeed, a thriving sub-culture of prostitution, opium dens, and gambling halls arose in George Town early on, precipitating law and order problems, especially when East Indiamen were in port, sending 'liberty men' ashore. The reality of the labor situation, however, is revealed by census figures for 1801, which indicate 723 slave-owners and approximately 1,200 enslaved individuals. The number of slaves would increase considerably, and be augmented by a large number of indentured workers.

During the early colonial period, Penang grew quickly, as if conjured into being. In 1801, a diverse and expanding town of several thousand people stood on what had been sand hillocks, woods, and marshland in 1786. This transformation was due partly to Francis Light's policies, which promoted accelerated settlement, but those policies revolved around a modular approach to development – the gathering of elements that already had worked in other contexts around the Indian Ocean. Penang did not have to market itself in order to attract shipping, like other ports. The Company simply ordered large vessels to call at the colony, much as the VOC required its ships to visit Cape Town whether they needed to or not. Initially, there was little to attract Indiamen to Penang, apart from water and provisions which could be had at other ports with less effort and expense. Indeed, although there were some paddy fields on Pulo Penang, the town imported rice, and the flow of food supplies, especially from Kedah, often became a bargaining chip in the on-going political struggle between the British at Penang and the Sultan. However, once East Indiamen began to arrive – especially to form wartime convoys – their presence changed Penang, suggesting ways of firmly cementing the relationship between the China fleet and the city. Meanwhile, Light had tried to assemble all the port city 'modules' that might rapidly transform his colony into a major hub of regional and international trade. By 1801, all these disparate groups who had rallied around the East Indiamen were forming communal identities and a larger, complex and dynamic community.

The Period of Schemes & Failures, 1801-1812

The administration of Lieutenant-Governor George Leith (1799-1803) marked a new turn in Penang's history. Napoleon's bid to occupy Egypt and foment resistance in India ended in dismal failure; the French armies were ousted from the Levant, Tipu Sultan and the Marathas destroyed or subdued in India, and many of the outlying territories of the Dutch East Indies occupied. The Battle of Trafalgar, however, did not have the sea-change effect in the Indian

Ocean that often is imagined: true, more British warships were freed for convoy duty and cruising in the Eastern Seas, but French privateers remained active right across the Indian Ocean and the seas of Southeast Asia, operating from bases at Mauritius and Bourbon which were difficult to blockade or attack. Moreover, the Royal Navy's battle fleet was old and decaying. Facing a chronic shortage of native timber, Britain's shipyards could not keep up with annual losses, while the French possessed the resources, will, and treasure to rebuild their shattered squadrons. The British Admiralty was racing against the clock: somehow, by drawing upon colonial resources, more British frigates would have to be launched before the French recovered from the catastrophic losses they had suffered at the Nile and Trafalgar. Needless to say, the constraints that affected the Royal Navy also were felt by the East India Company, which sent out an increasing number of smaller ships, keeping older ships in service much longer, and reserving its largest vessels for the China Trade. The construction of a 300-ton vessel at Penang, during Leith's governorship, however, strongly suggested that Penang might be transformed into a prime shipyard for both King and Company.

Leith and several other officials connected with Penang sang the praises of the colony so alluringly that the Admiralty, the Board of Control, and the Government of India agreed to fund a scheme to build a major naval station on Jerajah Island, just off the southern shore. Meanwhile, Lieutenant-Governor Robert Farquhar took charge of Pulo Penang and pushed forward long-overdue improvements, including the expansion of a road network to open up the interior of the island for the extension of plantations. In the absence of new sources of revenue, however, Farquhar's administration incurred serious debts, and relied on unpaid convict labor to finish its public works projects. Given Henry Dundas's dual role as Secretary of the Navy and President of the Board of Control – and Governor-General Wellesley's close ties with Dundas, his patron – the approval of the plan to build a naval base at Penang, and the colony's elevation to the status of a separate Presidency, should not surprise us. It is too cynical, however, to attribute Philip Dundas's appointment as Governor to sheer nepotism. Governor Dundas had served as chief of the naval station at Bombay, and thus was probably the most experienced person in British India to take over the task of developing shipyards at Penang. In the interest of easy communication between the Navy and the local government, Penang had to be elevated to the status of a Presidency, but it was never meant to be on the same footing as the regional governments of India.

Dundas and his entourage swept into office in 1805, shocked by the disarray they found: in a series of angry reports directed to the Governor-General in Calcutta, Farquhar was castigated for lavishing enormous sums on harbour improvements that were never carried out, or left half-completed. Dundas's regime had to start over from scratch, picking up in many ways where the early surveys of Kyd and Popham had left off. If Farquhar had squandered public funds on construction efforts, however, Dundas presided over a brief period during which the administration of Penang was bloated with unnecessary layers of bureaucracy. As has been noted, however, the premature death of most of these men at the hands of tropical diseases – including Philip Dundas himself – solved this particular fiscal problem without requiring a rancorous process of retrenchment and dismissal. It is clear from a perusal of the records, however, that Dundas's short tenure saw a significant improvement in the procedures of the Penang government, which now included multiple layers of oversight and corrective processes that had been lacking earlier.

With respect to economic development and logistics, Penang was well on its way to becoming a plantation colony when it was elevated to the rank of a separate Presidency.

Following the British occupation of Amboyna, thousands of pepper plants, as well as nutmeg, cinnamon, and clove trees were transplanted to Penang and distributed among would-be planters. By 1805, the island was producing 2,000 tons of pepper, a valuable commodity which could be bartered for tea at Canton. According to a rather late, anecdotal source, one East Indiaman's commander even feigned a broken spar in order to alter course and call at Penang, without penalty, for the purposes of private trade. Such disregard for official sailing instructions was officially not tolerated, although it may not have been uncommon. Indiamen required constant repairs, making it easy to provide a plausible cover for private trading. There is some evidence, however, that many Indiamen avoided Penang and the Straits of Melaka, while French warships and privateers menaced the Eastern Seas once more between 1806 and 1809. In the famous battle of Pulo Aor, not far from Penang, a fleet of unescorted China ships narrowly escaped capture by a French squadron, in 1804, fighting their way through to safety 'disguised' as British warships. In this context, the spice plantations of Penang enjoyed a meteorically brief boom, but their 'bust' has been greatly exaggerated. Even eight years after the so-called collapse of 1810, Penang produced enough pepper, nutmeg, mace, and cloves to supply the entire British home market, earning some \$114,200 a year. However, this sum was divided among thirty planters, and much of the produce was shipped not to Europe, but to China.

Regarding logistics, there had been many improvements. Lieutenant-Governor Farquhar's most important achievement was the construction of an aqueduct from the waterfall at the foot of Penang Hill to the beach, north of Fort Cornwallis, where a tank was constructed, with ceramic and metal pipes enabling ships to fill their casks – for a small fee – conveniently close to the water's edge. Gone were the days of hauling water from springs in the interior by wagon or on the backs of bullocks. One observer, however, noted that as the aqueduct was mostly uncovered, and in some cases pierced by decayed tree roots, the water was often less 'pure' than many claimed. Prior to the completion of the aqueduct, HMS *Caroline*, ordered to Penang in 1804 to gather a convoy of China ships, had preferred to water at Madras, despite the inconvenience of notoriously brackish water and an open road. She also took on six months' provisions there, as well, probably to save the added expense of provisioning at Penang. In 1806, moreover, the Company was relieved of the financial burden of paying for the storage of the Navy's supplies in rented godowns, although the warehouses at Penang remained private property. The burden was not inconsiderable, as the Navy's agent had charged one shilling per cask per month for storage. A shipyard also was built, after many delays and cost overruns, but the attempt to construct a frigate at Penang was a humiliating experience. The required timber was unavailable on the island and had to be imported from hundreds of miles away, making the vessel considerably more expensive than it would have been had it been constructed in India. To make matters worse, HMS *Malacca*, as the ship was christened, provided only seven years' service before she had to be scrapped – this at a time when wooden warships were expected to last for decades. Soon after the launching of this ship, the nascent marine yard at Penang was broken up and its stores and personnel assigned to Trincomalee on the east coast of Ceylon.

In 1810-1811, the harbour at Penang served as the rendezvous point for Lord Minto's fleet during the invasion of Java. With the whole of the Dutch East Indies in British hands, however, Penang's usefulness as a naval base and victualling station dwindled, although thousands of troops continued to pass through the colony en route to new assignments. Simultaneously, the London market was flooded – temporarily – with spices, and between 1810 and 1814 Penang's imports and exports declined by approximately 32 percent. Country trade vessels, however, still frequented Penang for repairs and provisions – such as the Bombay-bound

Ernaad, venturing across to the colony to obtain supplies en route from Bengal during the October inter-monsoon period. For Bombay-based country ships, Penang had become important not only as a provisioning base, but also as a secondary market. To compound the interlocking dilemmas of failed marine yard and spice plantations, however, much of George Town – still under *attap* thatch roofs in 1812 – burned down in a conflagration contained, only with difficulty, due to the timely assistance offered by crewmen of the warships and East Indiamen moored off shore. Governor William Petrie and his Council, gratefully voted to distribute an award of \$800 among these seamen-turned-firemen.

A census conducted in 1810 revealed the population of Penang to be 13,885, of whom 5,604 were ‘Chulia’ Indians, 5,088 Chinese, and 2,069 Malays. These, however, were only the permanent residents of George Town. Considerably more people lived in outlying settlements on the island, and there was a large ‘itinerant’ population composed of soldiers, camp followers, mariners, and convicts, whose numbers were variously estimated. Thus, at the end of the second period of George Town’s colonial development, the settlement remained very much an ‘Indian’ city, with South Asians forming half of the population and Chinese laborers, at least temporarily, leaving the island in considerable numbers due to the temporary fall in the value of spices. This out-flow of Chinese settlers may have something to do with the rise of the Hokkien faction, along with their Peranakan allies, who came to dominate the Chinese community in much the same way that Tamils dominated the Indian community.

The East India Company’s dreams of turning Penang into a self-sufficient community supported by plantation agriculture had come to nothing by 1812, but the failure of the Presidency, the plantations, and the shipyard did not bring about the dissolution of the colony or end its relationship with East Indiamen and other ships. Indeed, events stole a march on Penang, in the years to come, and it is likely that even if Jerajah had been developed into a naval base, changes in the strategic situation would have led the Royal Navy to make other, more efficient arrangements. As for building an agrarian colony that could pay its own way, this too probably was a doomed effort: only the mercantilist system could have sustained the kind of ‘spice island’ economy upon which the projected plantation system rested. The Company’s monopoly, however, was under political pressure, which increased with the outbreak of the War of 1812. In the years that followed, it became impossible for the Company to maintain its exclusive rights in the face of a growing ‘free trade’ lobby. The old monopoly was seen as an unnecessary relic of a bygone era, and the Company, once so powerful, found itself forced to accept the end of mercantilism and the triumph of ‘gentlemanly capitalism.’ Needless to say, these fundamental changes that affected Penang also impacted the Company’s Maritime Service.

The Period of Challenges & Changes, 1812-1833

Throughout its history, Penang has displayed a remarkable resilience alongside the continuity of its diverse cultural milieu and its multi-faceted maritime heritage. After the great fire that razed much of the town in 1812, hard-hit Chulia Street was rapidly rebuilt, with ceramic tile roofs gradually replacing the old thatch coverings. All across the island there was a flurry of new construction that substantially changed the appearance of George Town and the outlying plantations, to say nothing of the terraces of Penang Hill, soon dotted with bungalows. The new Governor’s mansion, Suffolk House, with its classic, late Georgian facades, already had set the tone for the colony’s gentrification. All of this attention to external image was perhaps an appropriate beginning for this stage of the colony’s development, in which Penang sought – and

eventually found – a new, more permanent identity. Even another great fire, in 1814, which mainly impacted the Chinese enclave, could not arrest these new developments.

By 1812, Bourbon and Mauritius were in British hands and the Napoleonic Empire was collapsing; British interests in the Indian Ocean and South East Asia, therefore, no longer hinged upon the demands of war, but rather on the evolving political and economic realities of the post-war world. At Penang, the Directors and the authorities in India exacted severe budget cuts, trying to reduce an annual deficit of £81,448. The Dutch, exhausted by heavy losses during the Napoleonic Wars, did not reoccupy their South East Asian possessions immediately; however, when they finally returned between 1816 and 1818, they left no doubt in the minds of British administrators that they fully intended to reestablish their regional hegemony. Neither the Crown nor the East India Company wished to see a resurgent Dutch monopoly over the trade of the Eastern Seas. To thwart the designs of the Dutch, and to secure a base closer to the direct track of the Company's China-bound shipping, Thomas Raffles – a former official of the Penang administration – negotiated the cession of Singapore in 1819. In its early years, Singapore developed along the same lines as Penang, albeit at the direct financial expense of the latter colony, especially during its formative stage. During the same year, Raffles also intervened successfully in an intermittent civil war at Aceh, bringing that port under British influence, if not under direct Company rule.

The establishment of Singapore and the intervention at Aceh were followed by military and diplomatic demonstrations of force in the region around Penang. A Siamese incursion into Kedah, in the early 1820s, occasioned a formal embassy, led by John Crawfurd, which sought to establish better relations between the Siamese monarchy and the East India Company. The First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) followed close on the heels of the embassy to Siam, and in this prolonged and unusually costly conflict, Penang played an important role as a forward base for naval operations and the evacuation of sick and wounded men. While all these affairs were transpiring, the Royal Navy and the Bombay Marine took the offensive against Malay pirates, who had become more numerous in the Straits of Melaka due to the rising volume of trade and the concurrent breakdown of local kingdoms – a highly combustible combination. Attacks on alleged pirate fleets and havens, and increasing influence over the sultanates of the western Malayan coast, indicated a forceful but informal extension of British imperial control over the region.

The period 1812-1833 saw the gradual diminution of the mercantilist system of the East India Company, including the dissolution of the Maritime Service. As the Company's monopoly came under increasing political pressure, Singapore enjoyed a unique status, being an almost completely free port under the aegis of the Company's exclusive rights. Not surprisingly, Singapore's growth was more dramatic than Penang's had been, but although many predicted the complete destruction of Penang, this was not to be. True, the centre of gravity of British interests in South East Asia shifted to the southern end of the Straits of Melaka, but Penang retained a share of its former trade and adjusted well to the challenge posed by Singapore, becoming the hub of its own regional trade network rather than the unsuccessful rival of Raffles' new colony.

The country trade of South East Asia flourished after 1812, but was volatile due to chaotic post-war market crashes that impacted much of the world. These market adjustments paralleled a global cholera epidemic, lasting several years, which devastated consumer confidence, disrupting trade with its alarms and quarantines. In India, meanwhile, colonial military fiscalism, drought, and high tariffs on Indian manufactures took a huge toll on the subcontinent's once thriving, pre-colonial economy, while in China ecological and political

crises opened opportunities for foreign encroachment and economic expansion. In 1819, the average number of ships arriving at Penang in any given month was about twenty – mostly small vessels, but usually a few larger ones as well, and Purcell informs us that these arrivals naturally determined the timing and flow of work at the mercantile houses.

The opium trade, in particular, became more important after 1812 on the global, regional, and local tiers of commercial life, although opium was not included in the cargoes carried up to Canton by East Indiamen. At Penang, however, many country traders and Asian merchant houses, owed a substantial part of their fortune to opium. Even so, new investments, such as tin-mining in northern Malaya, offered fresh outlets for the employment of capital, and few country traders staked their fortunes on just one commodity. With respect to opium, it was officially reported that this trade was confined to the ‘Eastern Islands,’ and India-based country traders typically recorded the destinations of their ships as Penang and ‘Eastward,’ but Anne Bulley suspects that many vessels also sailed to China, unofficially, which only required a short diversion from their stated itinerary.

There is some confusion and disagreement regarding Penang’s trade after 1812. The most common assertion is that Penang was relegated to the status of sleepy tropical backwater after the founding of Singapore, but trade statistics do not support this argument. In 1820, \$3,549,691 worth of taxable trade passed through Penang, representing a substantial increase over the 1816-1818 period. A detailed analysis of this data suggests not a collapse of trade, but a re-organization in terms of commodities, shipping, and markets, including temporary adjustments in the wake of droughts and famines in India. Another view, also not supported by the evidence, is that Penang’s trade suffered because Company ships arrived there from India, fully-loaded, providing no cargo space for country traders eager to send goods on to China. According to Bulley, meanwhile, thousands of tons of privately-owned British shipping was calling at Canton annually by 1825 – a total of thirty-five ships appearing that year, averaging between 600 and 800 tons.

The testimony of British country traders before Parliament, however, indicates that most of them preferred to send goods to China aboard East Indiamen and did so, as the Company was better able to negotiate with the Chinese government than individual foreign merchants. Compared with the costs and risks of dealing directly with the authorities at Canton, freight costs aboard East Indiamen were acceptable, if not ideal. Furthermore, a single large ship continued to be sent from England directly to Penang, providing sufficient tonnage to carry the colony’s trade goods to China. London newspapers of the early 19th century typically carried advertisements posted by the owners of Penang-bound vessels, many of them private, all seeking passengers and cargoes. By this final period, therefore, a symbiotic relationship connected country trade vessels with China-bound East Indiamen, while the country traders themselves often were supplied by networks of indigenous shipping, which continued to ply the Eastern Seas.

With the restoration of peace in the Indian Ocean, the Bombay Marine once more turned its attention to hydrographic surveys, extending its work eastward to the straits and narrow seas of South East Asia. Some of this maritime surveying was underway even before the French were routed from Asian waters, but the pace of work accelerated – and became more relevant to commercial purposes – once the military crisis was over. Shipping routes were already quite different in 1812 than they had been in 1786 due to the establishment of the Australian penal colonies and the expansion of British influence into the South Pacific. Even before the end of the Napoleonic Wars, more shipping began to pass through the Indian Ocean bound to and from destinations beyond South East Asia. The oft-repeated tale of the young Maori woman and her

English husband, who were stranded at Melaka and Penang, dramatically illustrates the kinds of changes that were happening, as does the inclusion of chapters on Penang and the other Straits colonies in published journals of voyages to Australia.

During the period 1812-1833, East Indiamen operated in an increasingly complex maritime context which eventually included whaling vessels, sandalwood traders' schooners, and even immigrant ships. The appearance of these new kinds of ships, if only in transit, brought more passenger traffic to ports like Penang – places which, hitherto, had not received or entertained European visitors in large numbers. Most East Indiamen bound for China, after all, had carried only a handful of mostly male, mostly official passengers. The enlargement of the Penang administration and the British occupation of the Dutch settlements, however, meant that East Indiamen passing through the Straits of Melaka carried more passengers after 1811, including the wives and children of military officers and officials – a major source of income for ships' commanders with passage from Penang to England, as a 'table passenger,' costing as much as \$400. There is evidence, as well, that Indian merchants and clerks filled many of the cabins aboard eastward-bound Indiamen, which – in this era just before the arrival of the steamers – were not segregated, having little room in the roundhouse for such distinctions. The appearance of steam-powered ships in the Indian Ocean – usually in combination with traditional masts and sails – further altered shipping routes and schedules, especially since steam-powered vessels did not face any difficulties working in and out of Penang harbour. Indeed, Governor-General Bentinck is said to have arrived more or less unexpectedly at Penang aboard the first steamship to visit the colony, catching its inhabitants quite off guard.

An official pilot service – indispensable given the hydrography of Penang's harbour, with its narrow channel – was not organized until 1818. This was a simple addition to the Marine Department, but one thought to save the Company \$578 a month in private pilots' fees. Within the harbour, meanwhile, important improvements appearing during the period 1812-1833 included a covered stone jetty, frequently remarked-upon by visitors and featured in many early images of the George Town waterfront. Those who stepped ashore at the jetty, however, found that Penang – much like Madras – had no hotels suitable for genteel passengers. There were "low naval taverns," but ladies and gentlemen often had to rely upon – or, perhaps, impose upon – the hospitality of the island's officials, merchants, and planters. By the 1830s, houses and bungalows also were available, unfurnished, for \$10 to \$20 per month. Unless they had business to conduct at Penang, however, many sea captains tarried in the harbour only briefly, some granting their passengers only twenty-four hours' shore leave. Successive, published passengers' accounts of the island became guides, helping to construct a standard, thumbnail sketch of Penang and a predictable 'tourist's' experience of the settlement.

Rather ironically, the period that saw the so-called eclipse of Penang by Singapore coincided with an increase in the colony's population as Malay refugees poured into Province Wellesley. There was some migration of Chinese gardeners to Johore, from Pulo Penang, but overall the population on the mainland and the island continued to increase. George Town itself was a very different city, with proper government offices, a jail, hospitals, and other civic institutions, which included schools and churches. Saint George's Anglican church, still standing today, was erected in 1818 at what was then the edge of the built-up part of the city, providing at least a veneer of respectability for the local British community even if, as one traveler observed, the local padre was a mere time-server. In any event, Christian missionaries were active in Penang, if not wildly successful, and their decision to organize a Sailor's Home in conjunction with a Temperance Society sheds some light on local society, or at least upon

missionary perceptions. Most transitory observers, nevertheless, concluded that Penang suffered from the same problems – heavy drinking, gambling, prostitution, and drug addiction – that characterized other port cities throughout the world.

Despite its maritime vices, however, Penang had a reputation as an unusually healthy, pleasant station – a distinction somewhat at odds with the number of tombstones crowding the European cemetery. Early 19th century opinions regarding health and hygiene were grounded in feelings and aesthetics more than in science and statistics. European officers and civilians from India flocked to Penang with their sick leave tickets, attracted by the picturesque scenery and cool breezes of Penang Hill, with its steep wooded slopes and tumbling waterfalls. Considered to be one of the earliest ‘hill stations’ of the Raj, if not the earliest one, Penang Hill offered a convenient, less expensive sanatorium than the Cape of Good Hope, especially for Company servants posted to Bengal, only ten days away by ship. Many missionaries also came to Penang to recover from illnesses contracted in India, leaving opinionated but detailed accounts that are important for recovering this particular era of the colony’s social history.

As the European population increased, reaching 400 by 1818 and 789 by 1833, it also became divided along lines familiar to those who had spent time in India. The Governor and his staff formed a little society of their own, hierarchically arranged by rank and date of commission, and increasingly distinct, now, from the mercantile community. The lifestyle of this ruling clique essentially recreated – with local variations – the style of the official ‘sahibs’ of British India. Eurasians, comprising 5.6 percent of Penang’s population, were marginalized, although not to the same extent as in India; and, of course, military pensioners and working-class Europeans also lived on the fringes. Missionaries, however, probably enjoyed a more central role in Penang society than they did in the Presidency towns of India, and this may have had something to do with a determination, on the part of resident memsahibs, to end the free-wheeling habits of cultural eclecticism and openly-practiced concubinage that characterized the early period of settlement. Needless to say, steps taken to prevent intimate cross-cultural interaction – which included legal obstacles – further undermined the intermediate position of the once important Eurasian community. Commercial agents and sea captains, in fact, remained some of the only employers willing to hire people of mixed ethnicity as the new culture of Protestant rectitude and European exclusiveness exerted its influence over the public sphere. Finally, the size of the European community at Penang was much larger, in relation to the total population, than was the case in India, and this fact probably explains why the experience of colonialism on the island differed from the patterns of dominance, resistance, and accommodation seen in the Subcontinent.

Over the course of the period 1812-1833, events transpired that demonstrated that the East Indiamen ultimately did not require Penang in order to perform their duties; the conquest of the Dutch colonies and the founding of Singapore offered viable alternative ports closer to the most direct routes of the China Trade. However, as trade networks and the nature of shipping changed in South East Asia, Penang as a port became less dependent on East Indiamen. The formation of the Straits Settlements in 1826, and the eventual transfer of the capital to Singapore in 1832 were blows to Penang, but they were not fatal ones. No longer relying on the Company’s ships, or even on the China Trade, the colony adapted to a more dynamic, less monolithic socio-economic order, and even to changing political conditions. Ironically, however, it was only in this period, when the East Indiamen and Penang no longer needed each other, that the colony finally developed the infrastructure appropriate for a major trading hub.

Conclusion: Penang's Early Maritime History

Maritime history is much like military history: technologies and strategies of a previous age are pitted against present-day problems, throwing inefficiencies into sharp relief while generating impetus for innovation and rapid change. Penang was conceived in a context in which British power in the Indian Ocean region was seriously challenged, both militarily and commercially, by the French and the Dutch. Almost as soon as the colony was established, however, the relevant variables changed – the strategic situation, the nature of the Raj in India, the scope of the China Trade, and Britain's position in South East Asia. Penang never became the second “more central” Bombay envisioned by early proponents such as Thomas Forrest and James Scott, nor did it inexorably attract all the trade of the Malay world, as promised, but it nevertheless became the hub of a far-flung inter-Asian trade and an important transit point along global trade routes. The colony's fortunes were constantly changing, and thus the methodical coming and going of East Indiamen was played out, year after year, against a tumultuous backdrop of political, economic, and socio-cultural transformation.

It is less clear how contextual changes affected the day-to-day relationship between visiting ships and Penang. Ships' logbooks tell us a great deal, but they are technical and official journals and were not meant to convey all aspects of shipboard life, or of life in port. Anecdotal evidence derived from passengers' diaries and letters strongly suggests that more transpired aboard East Indiamen, and around them, than the commanders' logs indicate. John Turnbull Thomson, for instance, informed us that a few years after the formal dissolution of the Company's Maritime Service, East Indiamen still plied the Eastern Seas, making their way to Penang by choice, albeit now entirely under private ownership and control. Sailors still caroused on shore – and engaged in fisticuffs with the sepoys sent into George Town to arrest them – while their officers enjoyed local hospitality as they made their private trading arrangements. As in every preceding era of colonial Penang, the luxuries of local society – furniture, clothing, wine and beer, preserved foods, and so forth – were brought to the Straits of Melaka by East Indiamen, along with machinery, chains, anchors, firearms, surveying equipment, European medicines, and other practical imports. Almost none of this, however, is clearly stated in the records: we are left to infer these connections based on disparate, often tangential references, or on advertisements posted in newspapers.

This paper merely offers an outline of the interaction of ships with an Asian port city in a multi-level, multi-dimensional context; it cannot begin to present or discuss the available evidence in detail, and it is clear that considerably more work must be done on this subject. For the purposes of reconstructing maritime history, I have found, the Penang Records in the British Library are incomplete. Additional records, housed in the Singapore archives, are said to offer many missing puzzle pieces, while other information will come to light only as scholars explore the thousands of ships' log books retained by the British Library in greater breadth and depth. Hundreds of the latter records pertain to ships which called at Penang between 1786 and 1833, and a more complete survey of these materials is needed before a thorough maritime history of early Penang can be written.

It would be incorrect to say that East Indiamen shaped Penang, or vice versa, although the city was called into being, ostensibly, to serve the East India Company's fleet. In the end, both the Indiamen and Penang changed in relation to a complicated and shifting array of constraints, opportunities, and influences. If any lesson is to be derived from this study of the interaction of ships and a city, it is perhaps the realization that technologies, ports, and markets are at the mercy of large-scale, nearly uncontrollable forces – forces that can bring about

astonishing developments unanticipated even by well-informed contemporary observers with keen insight and extraordinary powers of prediction. Furthermore, although the essential nature of ship-port interaction remains constant – navigating in and out of harbours, loading and unloading cargo and passengers – changing technologies and procedures affect the milieu of these activities and the extent to which they can lead to other kinds of exchanges. In the modern age of long-distance shipping lines, with their computerized navigational aids, tight schedules and budgets, largely automated vessels and minimal crews, layovers in port are brief and shore leave increasingly rare. Some inkling of this utilitarian world-to-come was already apparent at Penang in the late 1820s, but there had been a time, only a few years before, when maritime commerce had been tuned to the winds and tides, when ships might lie in a harbour for a few hours or days, a few weeks, or even a few months, dependent on the availability of supplies, on the weather, and even on the vagaries of politics. Under these circumstances, a more profound interaction between ships and cities was possible. In the case of Penang, undoubtedly there are myriad details and stories that will emerge as this problem is explored.