~ Recommendations ~

- Bras Basah convict jail
  The convict jail at Bras Basah was established in response to the increasing number of convicts who were transported ...

- Raffles Lighthouse
  Raffles Lighthouse is located on Pulau Satumu, or "one tree island", 23 km southwest of Singapore, at the western entrance ...

- William H. Read
  William Henry Macleod Read, K.C.N.L., C.M.G., affectionately known as WH, (b. 7 February 1819, Scotland–d. 10 May 1909, ...) ... 

- Singapore Criminal Prison breakout
  On 13 February 1875, the Singapore Criminal Prison located between Stamford Road and Bras Basah Road was the site of ...

- James Richardson Logan
  James Richardson Logan (b. 10 April 1819, Berwickshire, Scotland–d. 20 October 1869, Penang, Malaya) was the founder ...

- Straits Settlements
  The Straits Settlements, comprising Penang, Malacca and Singapore, was an administrative unit of the East India Company ...

- Alexander Laurie Johnston
  Alexander Laurie Johnston (b. Dumfriesshire, South Scotland–d. 19 February 1850, Bluehill, Kirkcudbright, Scotland), ...

- Robert Carr Woods, Sr
  Robert Carr Woods, Senior (b. 31 July 1816, England–d. 16 March 1875, Singapore), popularly known as Robin, was the ...

- Outram Prison (Pearl's Hill Prison)
  One of Singapore's earliest prisons was located at the foot of Pearl's Hill in Outram. The original civil jail at the ...

- Dalhousie Obelisk
  The Dalhousie Obelisk commemorates the visit of then governor-general of India (1848–1856), the Marquis of Dalhousie, ...

- Jonas Daniel Vaughan
  Jonas Daniel Vaughan (b. 27 June 1825–d. 17 October 1891, at sea) was a sailor, public official and prominent lawyer ...

- Cavenagh Bridge
  Cavenagh Bridge is located across the Singapore River in the Central Region. It is named after William Orfeur Cavenagh, ...

- The Istana
  The Istana is the official residence of the president of Singapore. Spanning over 40 ha, it is located along Orchard ...

- Abraham Logan
  Abraham Logan (b. 31 August 1816, Hattan Hall, Berwickshire, Scotland–d. 20 December 1873, Penang, Straits Settlements) ...

- Gambling farms in the 19th century
  Gambling activities, also known as gaming, in colonial Singapore attracted different opinions from the colonial administrators. ...

- Thomas Braddell
  Thomas Braddell, C. M. G. (b. 30 January 1823, Rahingrany, Ireland–d. 19 September 1891, London, England) was Crown ...

- Gaston Dutronquoy
  Gaston Dutronquoy was a prominent hotelier and entrepreneur in Singapore during the 1840s and early 1850s. He was also ...

- J. F. A. McNair
  John Frederick Adolphus McNair (Major) (b. 23 October, 1828, Bath, England–d. 17 May 1910, Brighton, England), known ...

- John Fraser
  A co-founder of Fraser & Neave (F&N), the world-famous bottler of fizzy drinks, John Fraser (b. 1843, Wigtown, Scotland–d. ...

- The Singapore Free Press
  Published for the first time on 8 October 1835, The Singapore Free Press was Singapore’s second English-language newspaper, ...

- John Crawfurd
  John Crawfurd (b. 1783, Scotland–d. 1868, England) was the second British Resident of Singapore, holding office from ...

- Keppel Road
  Keppel Road is located in the Tanjong Pagar sub-zone of the Bukit Merah Planning Area within Singapore’s Central Region. ...

- Tigers in Singapore
  Tigers in Singapore were sighted mostly in the forested areas of Bukit Timah, Choa Chu Kang and Pulau Ubin during the ...

- Robert Fullerton
  Robert Fullerton (Sir) (b. 1773–d. 6 June 1831), a Scotsman, was governor of Penang. In 1826, he was appointed first ...

- Flint Street
  Flint Street stretches from Battery Road to Boat Quay and is flanked on each side by the Bank of China building and ...

- Raffles Place
  Raffles Place is a commercial space that includes buildings such as the Arcade, Clifford Centre, Straits Trading, Hong ...

- Charles Edward Faber
  Captain Charles Edward Faber (b. 1807?–d. 7 November 1868) of the Madras Engineers arrived in Singapore in September ...
Joseph Balestier (b. circa 1788, France?–d. 1858, York, Pennsylvania, United States) was the first consul to Singapore ...

- **Johnston's Pier**
  - Johnston’s Pier was a jetty that once stood along Collyer Quay, opposite Fullerton Square and the Hong Kong Bank Building ...

- **Coleman Bridge**
  - Coleman Bridge spans the Singapore River and links Hill Street with New Bridge Road. It is named after the designer ...

- **Cenotaph**
  - The Cenotaph, located at Esplanade Park along Connaught Drive, is a war memorial which commemorates the sacrifice of ...

- **Charles Burton Buckley**
  - Charles Burton Buckley (b. 30 January 1844, London, England–d. 22 May 1912, London, England) was a prominent resident ...

- **Sailors' Home**
  - The Sailors’ Home in Singapore was a seamen’s lodging from the mid-19th to early 20th centuries. It became well known ...

- **Fort Canning Park**
  - Fort Canning Hill, previously known as Bukit Larangan and Government Hill, is 156 ft high and located at the junction ...

- **Elgin Bridge**
  - Elgin Bridge spans the Singapore River and joins North Bridge Road to South Bridge Road. Built in 1862, the bridge was ...

- **St Andrew's Cathedral**
  - St Andrew’s Cathedral, located at 11 St Andrew’s Road, is an Anglican cathedral located next to the City Hall Mass Rapid ...

- **Constance Mary Turnbull**
  - Constance Mary Turnbull (Professor) (b. 9 February 1927, Northumberland, England–d. 5 September 2008, Oxford, England), ...

- **Singapore Library (1845–1874)**
  - The Singapore Library, which grew out of the Singapore Institution Library, was established on 22 January 1845 as a ...

- **South Bridge Road**
  - South Bridge Road is located in Outram, near the Singapore River in Singapore’s central region. One of the thriving ...

- **Syed Omar Aljunied**
  - Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied (b. 1792, Hadhramaut, Yemen–d. 6 November 1852, Singapore) was a wealthy merchant and philanthropist ...

- **Raffles Institution**
  - Raffles Institution is one of the oldest schools in Singapore, with a history that stretches back to 1819 when Stamford ...

- **G. D. Coleman**
  - G. D. (George Dromgold) Coleman (b. 1795, Drogheda, County Louth, Ireland–d. 27 March 1844, Singapore) was Singapore’s ...

From 1825, Singapore began receiving Indian convicts from British India to serve out their sentences, and assist with the labour shortage and development requirements in the colony. Singapore, being the fastest growing of the Straits Settlements, which comprised Penang and Malacca, had become the main convict station by the 1830s. Laying many of Singapore’s early public roads, and erecting monumental buildings and bridges, these convicts literally built early Singapore. The transportation of convict labour to Singapore ceased in 1873. The convicts were either sent to other colonies, given freedom to settle in Singapore or repatriated.

### History

In 1787, the British began the transportation of English convicts to Australia, while the British government of India began the transportation of convicts to Bencoolen, a penal settlement in Sumatra. The following year, Indian convicts who were sentenced to more than seven years’ imprisonment started to be transported to Penang. From 1825, Malacca and Singapore also became convict stations. Singapore received its first batch of convicts – 79 men and 1 woman from Madras – on 18 April 1825. Just a week later, a second group of 122 convicts from Bengal arrived.

For governors and officials, particularly those in charge of convicts, it was economically profitable to engage convicts in tasks that contractors and free labour refused to undertake. Convict labour was therefore invaluable. Generally well behaved and hardworking, the convicts initially did work such as clearing land and rubbish, reclaiming swamps, laying the earliest roads, and erecting buildings and bridges.

Singapore quickly became the major convict centre among the Straits Settlements because of the colony’s speedy development. Also, because the Indian population in Singapore was much smaller than that in Penang, it was harder for Indian convicts to escape into the community. By 1841, the Straits Settlements had become the “Sydney convict settlements of British India”, and there were between 1,100 and 1,200 of such transported convicts just in Singapore. In an 1845 population census, the numbers of “local and continental convicts” had risen to 1,500.

Between 1825 to 1872, Indian convicts made up the bulk of the labour force for public works in Singapore. Between 1852 and 1854, when labour cost rose by 30 percent, the government came to rely almost entirely on convict labour for the construction of public works.

Convicts were essential to the economy of the Settlements as they were a steady source of cheap labour. Although the European community had no objections to receiving Indian convicts, some argued that such labour was inefficient, slow and ill-supervised, while others complained about lazy convicts sleeping during work hours and dancing all night. There were, on the other hand, fierce objections to the transportation of Chinese convicts from Hong Kong, who, with the connivance of secret societies, were said to be able to easily escape and blend into the general community.

In January 1848, General Wood, a ship carrying 93 convicts, left Singapore and was anchored near the Carimon (Karimun) Islands for the night when the convicts murdered the captain, kidnapped three European passengers and forced the crew to set sail for China. The ship then ran aground, and Malays from a nearby island rescued the passengers and crew. The incident and a sensational trial led to appeals from the press, grand juries and public to stop the transportation of Chinese convicts to Singapore. But it was only in 1856, after several years of agitation, that the transportation of Chinese convicts from Hong Kong to the Straits was abandoned. In early 1857, there were nearly 3,000 convicts in Singapore.
The sixth class comprised mostly female convicts, and females not included in the second class, as well as male invalids and superannuated convicts. Male invalids were provided with a limited amount of work, and were allowed to leave their stations for some time each day to perform necessary tasks.

Between the 1840s and 1860, convict labour was used to build the Bras Basah Jail, where the convicts themselves eventually moved into upon its completion. Bras Basah Jail, which was located between Bras Basah Road and Stamford Road, was also a site of industry where the convicts were employed for rattan work, weaving, tailoring and even a printing press, among others. On 6 February 1847, the foundation stone of a new civil jail was laid at the foot of Pearl's Hill. However, only transported political prisoners were housed there.

Organisation and classes of convicts
There was a routine “general monthly muster” to check on duties and discipline, and the inspection of convicts was under the general charge of the Resident councillor, whose duty was to visit the lines together with the residency surgeon once a month. This was always carried out in the presence of the superintendent who would also inspect the prison facilities and address any grievances from the convicts. Various record books and registers were kept by the superintendent of convicts and his subordinates, and reports were made each month and annually, showing distribution and classification of all convicts in the colony. A record of punishment is kept, and no corporal punishment could be administered except in the presence of the medical officer or his apothecary.

There were six classes of convicts, dependent on the extent of their criminal offences, as follows:

1. First-class convicts lived at liberty, having obtained a ticket of leave and thus held their own jobs. This group was deemed to be more trustworthy; however, they still needed a guarantor for their good behaviour and their privileges could be forfeited due to misconduct. They had to appear at muster once every 15 days, or whenever required. Sixteen years of service in the colony was required for admission to this class.

2. Second-class convicts were not shackled and could be employed in low-ranking jobs such as convict petty officers, messengers and punkah (fan) pullers and household servants. Convicts could not be admitted into this class unless they had served in the colony for five years if their original imprisonment was seven years, or 10 years for 14 years’ imprisonment. They must sleep within their base stations every night unless their employment elsewhere rendered this possible. Convicts attached to public departments received 5½ rupees per month, in lieu of rations, clothes and other items.

3. Third-class convicts consisted of those with a service of one year (for seven years’ imprisonment), at least three years (for 14 years’ imprisonment), or five years for those with a life sentence. Admission to the third class was made at the discretion of the superintendent. Working without irons, these people worked as labourers clearing land and cultivation for the construction of roads or public works. They worked from 6 am to 11 am and then from 1 pm to 4 pm, or from 5 am to 1 pm. They were properly secured at night if their work location was too far for them to return each day to their base stations. Their monthly allowance was one rupee, one anna and seven pice.

4. The fourth class was the entry level for most of the new arrivals, and they remained in this class until they had fulfilled their respective requisite service periods to qualify for admission into a better class. Bearing light double-chains, they worked in town and the environs from 6 am to 11 am and then from 1 pm to 4 pm. For their service, they received rations and clothing but no money allowance. For good behaviour, they were promoted to the third class. Convicts degraded from a higher class for misbehaviour must serve at least a year in the fourth class before they could be promoted again.

5. The fifth class comprised violent convicts, degraded from the higher classes for committing serious offences during service terms here. These offenders were guarded with extra vigilance to prevent them from escaping. They were bound by heavy iron-chains and worked on the roads and at public works located within the limits of the town, from 6 am to 11 am and 1 pm to 5 pm. They were fully secured at night, received rations and clothing but no money, and were not allowed to leave their stations except for work. Convicts degraded from the fourth class must serve six months before they could be promoted; others demoted from other classes must serve two years before they could move up to the third class.

6. The sixth class comprised mostly female convicts, and females not included in the second class, as well as male invalids and superannuated convicts. Male invalids were provided with a limited amount of work, and were allowed to leave their stations for some time each day to perform necessary tasks.
convicts capable of light work were employed as sweepers and for breaking stones for roads. Females in this class were tasked with keeping the prisons clean. Those
guilty of misconduct were employed in the mixing of chunam or other suitable hard labour. No male convict could be admitted into this class until he had been
pronounced unfit for work by a medical committee. Female convicts who were charged with murder could not be admitted into the second class, or permitted to leave
their base stations until they had served for at least 10 years. Superannuated convicts were exempted from all work.29

A man of bad character could, on no account, be upgraded to a higher class. Convict women were kept separate from men, and their wives were neither permitted
permanent residence nor visits at the base stations after sunset.

Outcome of convict labourers
Despite the freedom granted them, very few Indian convicts absconded. Over the years, many Indian convicts who were released at the end of their term married local
women and settled down.30 In 1867, when control of the Straits Settlements government administration was transferred from Calcutta to the Colonial Office in London, convicts who were deemed unsafe were sent to the Andaman Islands.31

In 1873, By 1873, when the system of convict labour ended in Singapore, the convicts were either sent to other colonies, given freedom to settle in Singapore or
repatriated. Instead of returning to India, many who had savings went into business and bought landed property, while some sought employment with the Public Works
Department. The skilled artisans were made as sub-assistant overseers for public works.32

Contributions
Indian convict labourers contributed much towards Singapore’s early development by constructing public works and buildings. Indian convicts even made their own
bricks under the supervision of a European brick maker at Serangoon Road. Sufficient bricks were made for local use and for export to Malacca. In 1867, at the Agra
Exhibition, the convicts were awarded a silver medal for the quality of their bricks.33

Public structures
Among the roads built by convicts were North and South Bridge roads, Serangoon Road and New Harbour Road (today’s Keppel Road).34 Cavenagh Bridge was the
last major project undertaken by Indian convict labour in 1869.35

Commercial Square (Raffles Place)
Convicts built Commercial Square in 1825. They also constructed Collyer Quay, which spanned Fort Fullerton at the Singapore River mouth to Telok Ayer, in around
1864.36 George Chancellor Collyer, who spearheaded the reclamation and development of Collyer Quay, reportedly monopolised the convict labour force from August
1858 to the early 1960s for this project.37

Kampong Glam
The area was developed in 1831 by 200 convict workers in eight months, at a total cost of $500.38

Forest clearing
John Prince, the acting Resident of Singapore, first explored Bukit Timah on 28 June 1827 in preparation for the construction of Bukit Timah Road. In 1843, convicts
built a road at the top of Bukit Timah Hill.39

Tiger hunt
Twenty-five convicts assisted in the first tiger hunt in Singapore in 1840, and thereafter the convicts were taken along on tiger shoots.40

Places of worship
Convicts built Sri Mariamman Temple (1843)41 and the second Church of St Andrew in 1856.42

Port
Convicts blasted the rocks at the mouth of the Singapore River, where Fort Fullerton was later built. The rocks were subsequently used to construct the adjoining sea
and river walls. They also cleared and widened Keppel Harbour’s western gateway in 1848, including blasting of the rock formation there known as Batu Berlayer or
Lot’s Wife.43

Lighthouses
Convicts were employed as stone cutters, blasters and labourers for the construction of the Horsburgh Lighthouse (1851)44 and the Raffles Lighthouse (1855).45

Government
While most of the earthwork was carried out by Chinese coolies, convicts manufactured the raw materials for the project and built the sally ports, drawbridge and deep
wells for Fort Canning (1860).46 In 1869, they also built the Government House, now known as the Istana.47

Land survey
Convicts formed the nucleus of a regular native staff for the Survey Department under John Turnbull Thomson in 1842.48

Prisons
The convicts built Pearl’s Hill Prison (1847) and Bras Basah Convict Jail (1860). They also helped to suppress a fire that broke out in 1830 at Market Street and assisted
during the anti-Catholic riots within the Chinese community in 1851.49

Author
27. See more details in McNair (2013), pp 84–85, 87.
26. McNair (2013) stated that convicts in the third class had served two years for 14 years' imprisonment, and three years for life sentence. See pp. 84, 86–87.
24.
convict establishments at Bencoolen, Penang and Malacca from the year
their own warders: A record of the convict prison at Singapore in the Straits Settlements, established 1825, discontinued 1873, together with a cursory history of the convict establishments at Bencoolen, Penang and Malacca from the year.
23.
22.
1873, together with a cursory history of the convict establishments at Bencoolen, Penang and Malacca from the year
References
26. McNair, J. F. A. (2013) stated that convicts in the third class had served two years for 14 years’ imprisonment, and three years for life sentence. See pp. 84, 86–87.
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