

Singapore's Clarke Quay

What is a Quay, Anyway?

A quay (pronounced like key) is a stretch of river or harbor side where ships can dock and unload their goods. Typically, a quay is lined with warehouse and trading firms that handle the arriving shipments. On the Singapore River, there are three large quays, Boat, Robertson and Clarke Quay.

Shipments from large ships docking at Boat Quay, at the mouth of the river, were sent upstream to Clarke Quay via barge. There goods were transferred to warehouses and distributed throughout Singapore and the world beyond.

River trade is the very foundation of modern Singapore's commerce and dates back to its establishment as a British colony. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, referred to as "the Father of Singapore" set up a trading post at the mouth of the river around 1819.

Who Was Clarke?

Born in England, Clarke was a career military officer who served in Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania and Africa's Gold Coast over the course of his career. In 1873 he was appointed the 2nd Governor of the Straits Settlements, which included Singapore.

Clarke was instrumental in consolidating Singapore's position as the major port for the region. His name was given to the quay in honor of his contributions. Another notable achievement, Clarke, with support of both European and Chinese business leaders, enforced better treatment of manual laborers, or coolies. Clarke continued to serve in Asia and India, but his last post was in England, where he died in 1902.

Rapid Growth

Trade flourished throughout Singapore, making Clarke Quay, and indeed the Singapore River, extremely busy and prosperous. Businesses grew up along the banks of the river to support river workers and their families. As years passed, saw and rice mills, boatyards and sail makers and all manner of service providers took root along the river banks.

As business boomed, overcrowding and pollution began to take a toll. The existing infrastructure was no longer able to handle the volume of traffic on the river. The bridges were too low for passage of newer vessels and the river was not deep enough for modern demands.

Ruin of the River

As Singapore grew rapidly through the 1880s, the pollution of the river grew as well. Garbage, sewage and industrial waste all went into the river. With ever-increasing boat traffic, oil and wastewater from the vessels added to the problem.

These issues persisted well into the 20th century and eventually a new port was built in Pasir Panjang, in southwestern Singapore, to handle shipping in a modern and efficient facility. The river went quiet.

Reclaiming Clarke Quay

In the late 1970s the government undertook to clean up the Singapore River and preserve Clarke Quay. Today, new entertainment venues blend well with repurposed warehouses that are home to nightspots and eating venues. Boats on the river now house bars and pubs.

Clarke Quay thrives again, though Lt. Governor Clarke likely wouldn't recognize a thing.