Stamford Raffles and William Farquhar

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Raffles: clerk, governor, founder

Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles was born on 5 July 1781 on board the ship *Ann* off Port Morant, Jamaica, and entered the service of the East India Company in London as a clerk in 1795, at the age of fourteen.[1] In 1805 he was sent to Penang as assistant secretary to the new government of the settlement.[2] In Penang he learned Malay, studied the history and politics of the Malay world and built relationships with the Governor-General in Calcutta, Lord Minto, which opened the way to his later career.

Raffles belonged to a type that the Company produced in the early nineteenth century: the scholar-administrator, who combined practical government with an intense interest in the languages, history and natural history of the region. He collected manuscripts, plants and animals, wrote a history of Java and later founded the Zoological Society of London.[3] His knowledge of the Malay tradition gave him a sense of the historical significance of Singapura, the fourteenth-century port described in the previous chapter, and contributed to his choice of the island.

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Java and the lessons of administration

From 1811 to 1816, Raffles served as Lieutenant-Governor of Java, which the British had taken from the Dutch and French during the Napoleonic Wars.[4] In Java he attempted far-reaching reforms: the replacement of forced deliveries by a land tax, the reduction of the power of local aristocracies and the promotion of free trade. The reforms were ambitious but financially unsuccessful. His administration ended with criticism from Calcutta and London.[5]

The Java experience shaped his conception of Singapore in two ways. It strengthened his conviction that Dutch monopolies suppressed the trade of the archipelago and that free trade would release its potential. It also taught him the limits of territorial government by a trading company, whose directors measured every administration by its costs. Singapore, as he conceived it, would avoid both problems: a port without monopolies, and a settlement without the burden of governing a large territory.

After the return of Java to the Dutch, Raffles was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen, a minor Company post on the west coast of Sumatra, where he arrived in March 1818.[6] From Bencoolen he lobbied Calcutta for an active policy against Dutch expansion. It was on a visit to Calcutta in 1818 that he obtained the mandate for the expedition that led to Singapore.

Farquhar: the Resident who knew Malacca

The second founder of Singapore was William Farquhar, an officer of the Company's Madras army who had served for fifteen years as the chief administrator of Malacca. He had been promoted to captain in 1803 and was formally appointed Resident and Commandant of Malacca in December 1813, a post he held until the Dutch returned in September 1818.[7] Farquhar knew the Malay chiefs of the region, spoke Malay and had close relations with the merchant communities of Malacca, many of whom would follow him to Singapore.

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Farquhar accompanied Raffles on the expedition of 1819. After the signing of the treaty he became the first Resident and Commandant of Singapore. He hoisted the British flag on the hill that the Malays called Bukit Larangan, the site of the fourteenth-century court.[8] Raffles left the island a few days after the treaty and returned only twice, for a few weeks in 1819 and for eight months in 1822 and 1823. For most of the first four years, Farquhar governed the settlement alone.

Two conceptions of a settlement

The relationship between the two men became one of the defining conflicts of early Singapore. Farquhar, working with minimal resources and without instructions for many situations, governed pragmatically. Needing revenue, he found it in licences for gambling and in the sale of opium and alcohol. He allowed merchants to build where they found space, including on land that Raffles had reserved, and tolerated the slave trade, which was still practised in the region.[9] In May 1820 he established the settlement's first police force.[10]

Raffles held a more ambitious and more orderly conception. When he returned in October 1822, he found a town that had grown without a plan and a government whose revenue came in large part from vices he wished to suppress. He dismissed Farquhar, who was officially removed on 1 May 1823 and succeeded by John Crawfurd.[11] Raffles banned slavery and gambling, prohibited the carrying of weapons and issued regulations for the town.[12]

The conflict between Raffles and Farquhar is more than a personal quarrel. It shows two approaches to the government of a commercial settlement that recur in Singapore's history. The first is pragmatic and revenue-driven: it accepts the economy as it finds it and taxes what can be taxed. The second is planning-driven: it seeks to shape the economy and society according to a design. The modern Singaporean state has been described as a combination of both, pragmatic in its economic choices and deliberate in its planning. The early conflict prefigures this combination.

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Notes

1. Wikipedia, “Stamford Raffles” (accessed September 2026): born on 5 July 1781 “on board the ship Ann, off the coast of Port Morant, Jamaica”; clerk with the East India Company in London from 1795, at the age of fourteen. ↩
2. Wikipedia, “Stamford Raffles” (accessed September 2026): sent to Penang in 1805 as assistant secretary under Governor Philip Dundas. ↩
3. Wikipedia, “Stamford Raffles” (accessed September 2026): founder in 1825 and first president (elected April 1826) of the Zoological Society of London. ↩
4. Wikipedia, “Stamford Raffles” (accessed September 2026): Lieutenant-Governor of Java from 1811 to 1816. ↩
5. On Raffles’ administration in Java, the land-rent system and the financial difficulties that led to his recall, see C.E. Wurtzburg, *Raffles of the Eastern Isles*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1954, and the account in Wikipedia, “Stamford Raffles”. ↩
6. Wikipedia, “Stamford Raffles” (accessed September 2026): arrived in Bencoolen on 19 March 1818 and was officially appointed Lieutenant-Governor on 22 March. ↩
7. Wikipedia, “William Farquhar” (accessed September 2026): Resident of Malacca from 1803 to 1818, formally appointed Resident and Commandant in December 1813, until the Dutch returned in September 1818. ↩
8. Wikipedia, “William Farquhar” (accessed September 2026): he “drew up the first gun and set up the post to hoist the Union Jack flag” on Bukit Larangan. ↩
9. Wikipedia, “Founding years of modern Singapore” (accessed September 2026): Farquhar resorted to “selling licenses for gambling and the sale of opium” and tolerated “the slave trade” to generate revenue. ↩

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10. Wikipedia, “William Farquhar” (accessed September 2026): established Singapore’s first police force in May 1820, led by his son-in-law Francis Bernard. ↩

11. Wikipedia, “William Farquhar” (accessed September 2026): officially dismissed on 1 May 1823 and succeeded by John Crawfurd; Farquhar subsequently contested his dismissal. ↩

12. Wikipedia, “Founding years of modern Singapore” (accessed September 2026): Raffles “banned slavery, closed all gambling dens, prohibited the carrying of weapons”. ↩

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