The Treaty of Friendship and Alliance of 1824

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From concession to cession

The agreement of 7 June 1823 had already transferred the judicial powers and land rights of the sultan and the Temenggong to the British in exchange for lifelong monthly payments of 1,500 and 800 Spanish dollars.[1] The island came under British law, but the rulers retained their sovereignty in form. After the Anglo-Dutch Treaty had removed the Dutch objection, the Company's Resident, John Crawfurd, negotiated the final step.

The terms of 2 August 1824

The Treaty of Friendship and Alliance of 2 August 1824 ceded the island of Singapore to the East India Company in full sovereignty and property. In addition to the monthly allowances, the chiefs received a lump sum of 20,000 Spanish dollars.[2] The cession extended to the seas, straits and islets within ten geographical miles of the island, which gave the Company control of the harbour and its approaches.[3]

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The treaty contained further provisions on the position of the rulers. They retained their residences and received a sum to facilitate their relocation should they choose to leave the island. The Company undertook to provide for them and their families. The rulers undertook not to enter into alliances with other powers without the Company's consent.[4]

The fate of the Malay rulers

The Malay rulers who had made the British settlement possible lost their political role within a few years. Sultan Hussein, dissatisfied with his position in Singapore, moved to Malacca, where he died in 1835. The descendants of the Temenggong fared better: they built a new power base on the mainland of Johor, where one of them, Abu Bakar, was recognised as Sultan of Johor in 1885. The modern sultanate of Johor, across the causeway from Singapore, descends from the Temenggong line.[5]

In Singapore, the heirs of Sultan Hussein remained in the palace at Kampong Glam, where a dispute over their rights to the property continued until the twentieth century. The palace, the Istana Kampong Glam, today houses the Malay Heritage Centre. The history of the Malay rulers after 1824 is a reminder that the founding of Singapore rested on agreements with local authorities whose position the treaties of 1824 weakened decisively.

Sovereignty by contract: a legal assessment

The sequence of agreements between 1819 and 1824 illustrates a method of acquiring territory that was common in the colonial expansion of the nineteenth century: sovereignty by contract. The Company acquired Singapore without conquest: it obtained a concession by treaty, extended it by a further agreement and finally acquired full sovereignty by cession, each step purchased with payments to the rulers.

From a modern legal perspective, the method raises questions about the capacity and consent of the rulers. Hussein owed his title to British recognition and had little choice but to accept British terms. The payments were modest compared to the

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value that the island acquired. International law in the nineteenth century, however, recognised treaties of cession concluded with local rulers as a valid basis for territorial title. No other power contested the British title to Singapore after 1824. When Singapore became independent in 1965, it succeeded to the territory as defined by the colonial instruments without any question of historical title arising.

For the financial centre, the importance of the sequence lies in its result: after 1824, the island had a single sovereign whose authority no other power disputed. Merchants who had traded under an uncertain legal status could now rely on British law and British courts. The certainty of sovereignty is a precondition of the certainty of contract and property. The next step was to create the court that would provide it.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Founding years of modern Singapore" (accessed September 2026): agreement of 7 June 1823, with "lifelong monthly payments of $1,500 and $800 respectively" in exchange for "judicial power and rights to the lands". ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Founding years of modern Singapore" (accessed September 2026): treaty of 2 August 1824 signed by Crawfurd; Singapore "officially fully ceded to the East India Company"; an additional lump sum of 20,000 Spanish dollars. ↩
3. The cession of "the island of Singapore, together with the adjacent seas, straits and islets, to the extent of ten geographical miles" is the standard summary of Article II of the treaty; the treaty text is reproduced in C.D. Cowan, "Early Penang and the Rise of Singapore 1805–1832", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 23, 1950. ↩
4. Provisions on the residences of the sultan and the Temenggong, relocation allowances and the undertaking not to enter into alliances without the Company's consent, as summarised in Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819–2005*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2009, chapter 1. ↩

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5. Sultan Hussein moved to Malacca and died there in 1835; the Temenggong's descendant Abu Bakar was recognised as Sultan of Johor in 1885. See Carl A. Trocki, *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore, 1784–1885*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2nd edition 2007. ↩

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