



# The birth of Kuala Lumpur

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Kuala Lumpur's special charm has lured many over the centuries in search of wealth and success. The city has seen a phenomenal transformation from a rural backwater to a cosmopolitan centre equal to the best in the world, writes SONIA RAMACHANDRAN



Kuala Lumpur in the 1800s saw the sprouting of wooden buildings to meet the needs of the growing population.

A MEMBER of the Selangor royalty was making history when he landed on the banks of the Sungai Klang one day in 1857.

With 87 Chinese workers in tow, Raja Abdullah Raja Jaafar landed on the banks of the Sungai Klang adjacent to its convergence with Sungai Lumpur (now known as Sungai Gombak).

He established a mine not too far away from the place which was later named Kuala Lumpur.

A short distance away was Ampang where Raja Abdullah opened another mine.

Soon people of all races flocked to the two places for opportunities that tin provided.

Raja Abdullah would not have realised that he was setting in motion a sequence of events that would eventually result in a cosmopolitan city.

For him that day 150 years ago, it was just a routine search for an elusive metal called tin that was bringing in the money for those fortunate enough to hit a rich vein.

Generations of city folk would have to thank Raja Abdullah for establishing a tin

mine that fuelled development and eventually placed Malaysia on the world map.

According to Prof Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's School of History, Politics and Strategic Studies, another person instrumental in developing Kuala Lumpur was Sutan Puasa.

Sutan went into partnership with two industrious Chinese — Hiu Siew and Ah Szé — to develop infrastructure in the small community in the making.

He said they built wooden houses for living and residential purposes which were quickly taken up.

Hiu later became Kuala Lumpur's first "Kapitan Cina", followed by Liau Ngim Kong in 1862 and Yap Ah Loy in 1868.

"Then came the Klang War caused by the rift between Raja Mahadi Raja Sulaiman and Raja Abdullah.

"Raja Mahadi was upset with the appointment of Raja Abdullah as the *penguasa* of the Klang Valley as his father, Raja Sulaiman, had earlier administered the area.

"This rift came to a head in 1867 when Raja Abdullah

pawned the area to a Singapore syndicate to collect toll along the Sungai Klang.

"Raja Mahadi refused to pay the toll and challenged Raja Abdullah, resulting in the Klang War," said Nik Anuar.

In 1873, Tunku Kudin, the son-in-law of Sultan Abdul Samad of Selangor, managed to win Kuala Lumpur back.

The price of the war was high, said Nik Anuar, with mines turned into swamps, and equipment and houses destroyed.

He said that a census taken in 1878 showed there were only 2,000 people in Kuala Lumpur compared to 10,000 in 1870.

This was followed by Selangor falling under British control following the Kuala Langkat agreement between the sultan and the British representative in February 1874.

Nik Anuar said a British resident was then appointed to advise the sultan on all matters, except those relating to religion and culture.

The first British resident was J.G. Davidson, followed by Bloomfield Douglas in 1879 who decided to make Kuala Lumpur the capital of Selangor.



Professor Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud

The next Selangor resident was Frank Swettenham who was appointed in 1884.

He said Swettenham was one of those responsible for building the railway line from Kuala Lumpur to Bukit Kuda, (near Klang) which was ready in 1886.

With the swift growth of Kuala Lumpur, added Nik Anuar, came the first bank in 1888 — the Chartered Bank.

The economic prosperity of Kuala Lumpur also saw the number of Europeans swiftly rising and the setting up of so-

cial haunts for them.

This was when the current Dataran Merdeka, which was used by Chinese farmers, became the venue for the setting up of the Selangor Club.

Nik Anuar said a popular social haunt for the Europeans was the Lake Club in Taman Tasik Perdana which opened in 1890.

With Kuala Lumpur's growth, said Nik Anuar, there was a need to set up an administrative board and in 1890, the state executive council meeting passed the Conservancy Act which established the Sanitary Board.

He said the board was housed in two rented shoplots in Batu Road.

Its responsibilities included town planning, ensuring cleanliness, good roads and supply of water and lighting.

It also issued liquor licences, collected taxes and set up public toilets.

In 1891, the board laid out rules that required any new construction in town to obtain its prior approval.

"Initially, the board faced problems constructing public buildings due to a shortage of material.

"This prompted the state government to set up a factory to produce the material for this purpose," said Nik Anuar.

Under the board's management, Kuala Lumpur thrived.

Among buildings built between 1895 and 1910 included the Chartered Bank (1891), Victoria Institution (1891), St Mary's Church (1895), Royal Selangor Club (1890), Masjid Jamek (1909) and Central Post Office building (1901).

He added that one of the major projects in 1900 was the Malay Agricultural Settlement on government reserve land on the fringe of Kuala Lumpur, later known as Kampung Baru.

Although Kuala Lumpur was a thriving city in the early 20th century, Nik Anuar said its development was not structured.

"The *Malay Mail* in 1901 had criticised it and urged for steps to be taken to improve the city, especially the business district which was considered an eyesore," he said.

Following criticism from the people themselves, the state government decided to appoint a town planner, Charles C. Reade, from New Zealand,