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Field Of Dreams



For over a century, the Padang has stood witness to milestones in Singapore's tumultuous history

By Joe Ng and Zurida Hassan

In a city where the urban landscape seems to morph as quickly as Harajuku fashions, the Padang ("field" in Malay)—located outside the Supreme Court building—has remained relatively unchanged since the early 1800s.

In fact, the Padang was where the founder of Singapore, Sir Stamford Raffles, together with British Commandant (and first Resident of Singapore) Major William Farquhar, met with Tengku Hussein (later the Sultan of Johor) and Temenggong Abdu'r Rahman—Chief of Singapore. It was Feb 6, 1819; the occasion? The signing of a treaty ceding Singapore to the British Empire.

Some 126 years later in 1945, the Padang was the scene of another handover. The Japanese Occupation had finally come to an end. As the formal surrender ceremony went on in the City Hall's chambers across the field, a victory parade was held on the green and the British flag was raised once again.


The Padang was also the setting for landmark events in the story of Singapore's independence. In 1959, the People's Action Party (PAP) was voted into Parliament and Lee Kuan Yew was sworn in as the first Prime Minister of Singapore. Four years later, PM Lee read the Proclamation of Malaysia—a document describing the

merger of Singapore and Malaysia—as the Royal Malaysian flag was raised over the Padang. Singapore was no longer a British colony.

But half a decade later, racial tensions were to boil over at the Padang, leading ultimately to Singapore's independence. On July 21, 1964, some 20,000 Muslims had gathered to prepare for a 7km march to commemorate the Prophet Mohammed's birthday. Malay extremists out to destabilize the PAP government whipped the crowd's fervor with inflammatory leaflets, and riots were sparked off in nearby Victoria Street when some Malay youths scuffled with the army. The casualties: 23 dead and 454 injured.

Just over a year later on Aug 9 1965, PM Lee once again stood on the steps of City Hall at the Padang—to announce that Singapore had been disowned by the Malaysian Federation and was now an independent country. Fittingly, Singapore's jubilant inaugural National Day Parade was held at the Padang a year later.

The city's National Day celebrations have since grown too big for the Padang and are now held at the National Stadium instead. These days, the Padang plays host to international sporting tournaments such as the Rugby Sevens Tournament and the International Cricket Sixes, while field hockey, lawn bowling and soccer are on the calendar throughout the year.

Last April, archeologists from the National Heritage Board unearthed many 14th century artifacts from the Padang. Chinese pottery, jars and coins from the Sung and Tang dynasties were found together with Javanese earthenware and Indian beads—indicating that her history goes back farther than thought. 

The National Heritage Board's Civic District Trail One lets you see the colonial buildings and monuments around the Padang. This 2.7km long trail starts at the Raffles Landing Site and ends at Old Parliament House (currently undergoing renovation). The walk takes about three hours. Pick up a free pocket guide from Raffles Hotel Museum (Raffles Hotel, 1 Beach Rd., 6299-6007) or the National Archives of Singapore (#03-02 MITA Building, 140 Hill St., 6338-0000) before you begin your walk.