



Between Salem and Aceh: Pepper and the City Seal

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The original c1839
sketch of the Seal by
George Peabody.

Image Source:
Peabody Essex Museum

There is a city called Salem, located in Massachusetts, United States. On the city's seal appears a Latin phrase: *Divitis Indiae usque ad ultimum sinum*. A loose translation of this phrase is "to the farthest port of the rich East." In addition to this inscription, the center of the seal depicts a man wearing a tunic, his head covered with a turban, with a ship and a coconut tree in the background. The figure of the man on the seal is said to represent a merchant's son from Aceh. This raises questions for many people: how could people from Aceh be connected to the city of Salem, which lies thousands of miles away?

The sailing ship Friendship, May 26, 1830.

Captain Charles Moses Endicott ordered the crew of the *Friendship* to depart immediately from the harbor of Salem. The ship would then sail toward ports on the island of Sumatra. One of the ports they were required to visit was Kuala Batee, located on the west coast of Aceh, Sumatra. The purpose of this journey was to purchase pepper. After nearly four months of sailing across seas and oceans and passing through straits, the *Friendship* arrived at the port of Kuala Batee (formerly written as Quallah Battoo) on September 22, 1830.

Ships from Salem were first recorded entering Acehnese waters in 1620. However, these vessels were not permitted to dock, let alone purchase pepper, at ports controlled by the Aceh Sultanate. After the death of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607–1636), foreign ships gradually began to receive permission to dock and trade for pepper in Aceh. New agreements were established during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Thani.

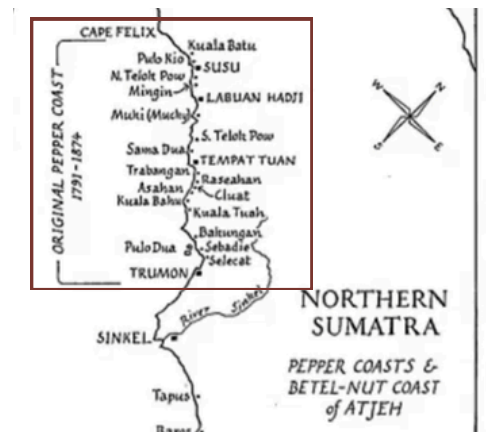


Captain Jonathan Carnes by William Verstille

Image Source:
Peabody Essex Museum

The *Friendship* was not the first ship from Salem to visit ports along the west coast of Aceh to purchase pepper. A sailing vessel named *Rajah*, commanded by Captain Jonathan Carnes, was the first Salem ship successfully to stop at Kuala Batee and buy pepper in 1797. The *Rajah* returned to Salem eighteen months later. The pepper it carried was sold with a net profit of nearly 700 percent. The enormous profit gained by Captain Jonathan Carnes sparked the desire of many other captains to sail to Aceh. For months Carnes kept secret the location where he had obtained the pepper, until merchants and ship captains in Salem eventually discovered its origin. From that point onward, ships from Salem began to traverse the oceans to reach the west coast of Aceh.

Ships from Salem subsequently docked at ports along Aceh's west coast such as Meukek, Susoh, and Pulau Kayu. Between 1799 and 1846, records show that 179 ships sailed from Salem to Aceh. Millions of pounds of pepper arrived in Salem and other American ports, much of which was then shipped directly to Europe rather than consumed domestically.

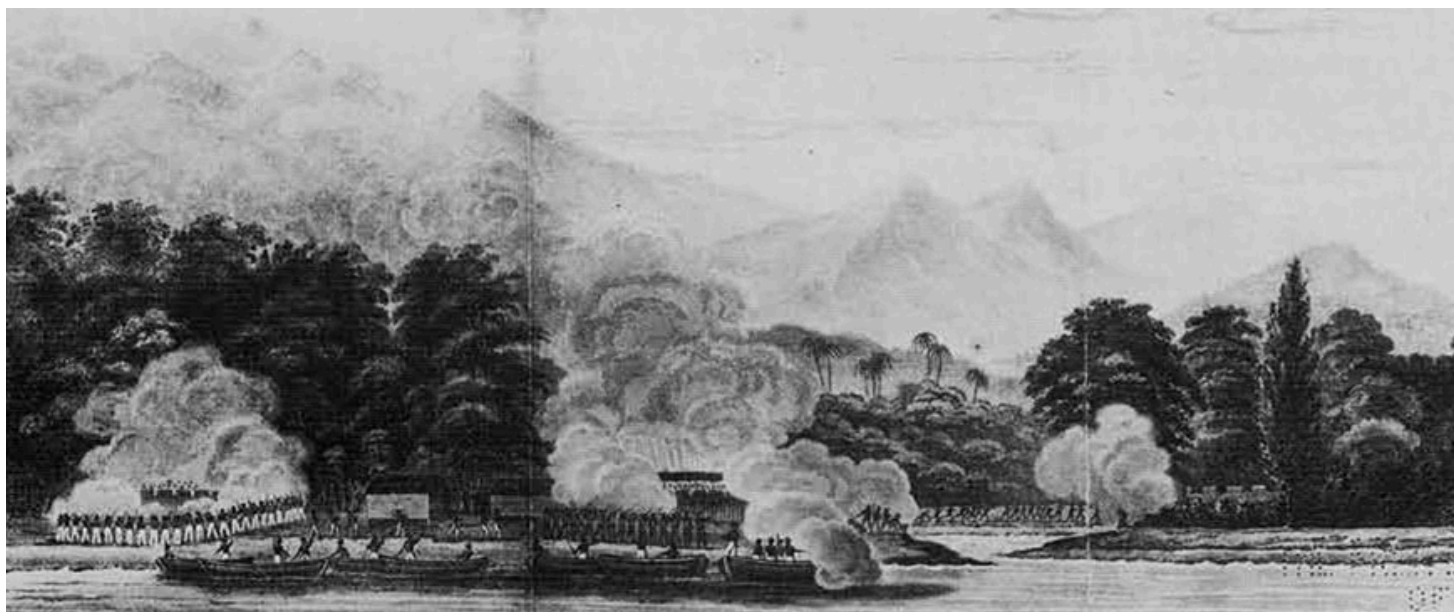


The voyages to obtain pepper from Aceh were in fact extremely dangerous. In addition to facing storms and pirates at sea, attacks sometimes occurred on land when buyers attempted to purchase pepper. Ship captains were occasionally captured and held for ransom. Yet for many captains, these risks were acceptable, because the rewards from such voyages were far greater. Pepper had become a lucrative commodity capable of generating immense profits. However, the fate of the *Friendship* was something that ships from Salem had never experienced before.

A group of local inhabitants attacked the *Friendship* and looted its cargo. According to a report written by a journalist from *Deli Courant*—the first Dutch-language newspaper owned by a Dutchman in Medan—in its December 16, 1832 edition, the incident began when local residents believed they had been cheated by traders from Salem regarding the weighing of the pepper purchased and the method of payment.

During the attack on the *Friendship*, a local leader named Adam, often addressed as Po Adam, played an important role. The title “Po” refers to the respectful form of address meaning “father.” Po Adam helped the crew of the *Friendship* drive away the attackers. Because he spoke English, he also acted as a mediator and translator during the incident. However, Po Adam later became an enemy in the eyes of the local population. He was seen as an ally and accomplice of foreign traders, particularly merchants from the United States. His house was burned down, and he was labeled a traitor.

A year later, a retaliatory attack was launched against Kuala Batee—specifically on February 5, 1832. United States President Andrew Jackson (1829–1837) sent military forces aboard the frigate *Potomac* under the command of Captain Downes. Kuala Batee was attacked extensively. Hundreds of local inhabitants were killed, including women and children, while the United States forces suffered only two deaths and several wounded.



Action of Quallah Battoo

Image Source: Penn Museum

This incident received public criticism in Salem. Nevertheless, President Andrew Jackson believed the attack led by Captain Downes was justified. In navigation maps used by American ships at the time, the island of Sumatra was depicted as belonging to the Dutch—except for Aceh. As a result, the American government, sailors, and merchants were almost entirely unconnected to the Dutch East Indies administration in their commercial dealings in Sumatra. After the attack by the *Potomac*, the pepper trade between Kuala Batee and other ports along Aceh’s west coast resumed with increased intensity with American merchants.

In 1839, the city government of Salem decided to create a city seal depicting a man wearing a tunic and loose trousers, with a turban on his head. The man holds an umbrella in his hand. The seal also features a large sailing ship and a palm tree. In many historical accounts describing the figure on the seal, he is believed to represent Po Adam.

The seal can be interpreted as a symbol of reciprocal relations and appreciation for the prosperity that Salem gained through the pepper trade with distant lands in the East. Kuala Batee thus marks a historically significant place in the pepper trade that once became a major source of income for the city of Salem. In essence, trade is about relationships between people—between merchants and buyers—and therefore it seems fitting that a human figure, represented by Po Adam, was placed at the center of the seal.

The ship Rajah may symbolize the means of transport that successfully carried pepper back to Salem, allowing merchants to accumulate extraordinary profits and contributing to the growth and development of the city. Meanwhile, the palm tree represents the tropical regions from which the pepper originated. Together these elements form a complete depiction of a city's history—of the many individuals whose roles shaped the economic growth of Salem and sustained the life of the city itself.

For many people in Aceh, the city seal represents a form of honesty and appreciation for the role of lands far from the United States. It stands as an acknowledgment and an important historical record that a country such as the United States—particularly Salem—once gained enormous profit from the pepper trade originating from lands thousands of miles away. These profits helped Salem grow and develop into one of the largest suppliers of pepper in the United States in its time. Greetings from Aceh.



***Co-founder of Sophie's Sunset Library,
an independent library in Banda Aceh.**