



RICHARD HALE retired from a long career in international commercial banking in 1995. Remaining in Singapore he then added “research into Singapore’s mercantile history in the 19th century” to his existing interests of ornithology and philately and this is the first published result. Further articles and books are in preparation in anticipation of the probable celebration of Singapore’s modern bicentenary in February 2019.



The Balestier family were the first Americans to take up residence in Singapore when they arrived in 1834 from Philadelphia. Although the name Balestier today remains as a road and district, the full story of the family has not been told until now. And what a story it is.

Joseph Balestier, aged 45, had secured an appointment as US Consul and sailed out to the East with his wife Maria and their teenage son Revere. On landing they were shocked to find Singapore closed to American shipping, with few if any opportunities for earning commissions from the supplying of ships, which Joseph had been banking on for his income. The outlook was grim. But they persevered.

A powerful, vivid picture of life emerges, in particular from a newly discovered trove of letters written by Maria to her relatives in America. These letters give us a priceless first-hand view of the family’s daily life, the sometimes absurd customs of Singapore society, the growth of the settlement, the mercantile activity of the port and the colourful characters brought in its wake, as well as the dangers constantly hanging over their heads – tigers, pirates, floods, malaria.

Also covered in detail here are Joseph’s foray into sugar cane planting – at the location that has come to bear his name – and his subsequent travels as US Presidential Envoy to various Southeast Asian states.

Combining rigorous historical research with superb narrative skill, author R. E. Hale brings to life the fascinating story of this pioneering family.

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THE FIRST AMERICAN RESIDENTS of SINGAPORE

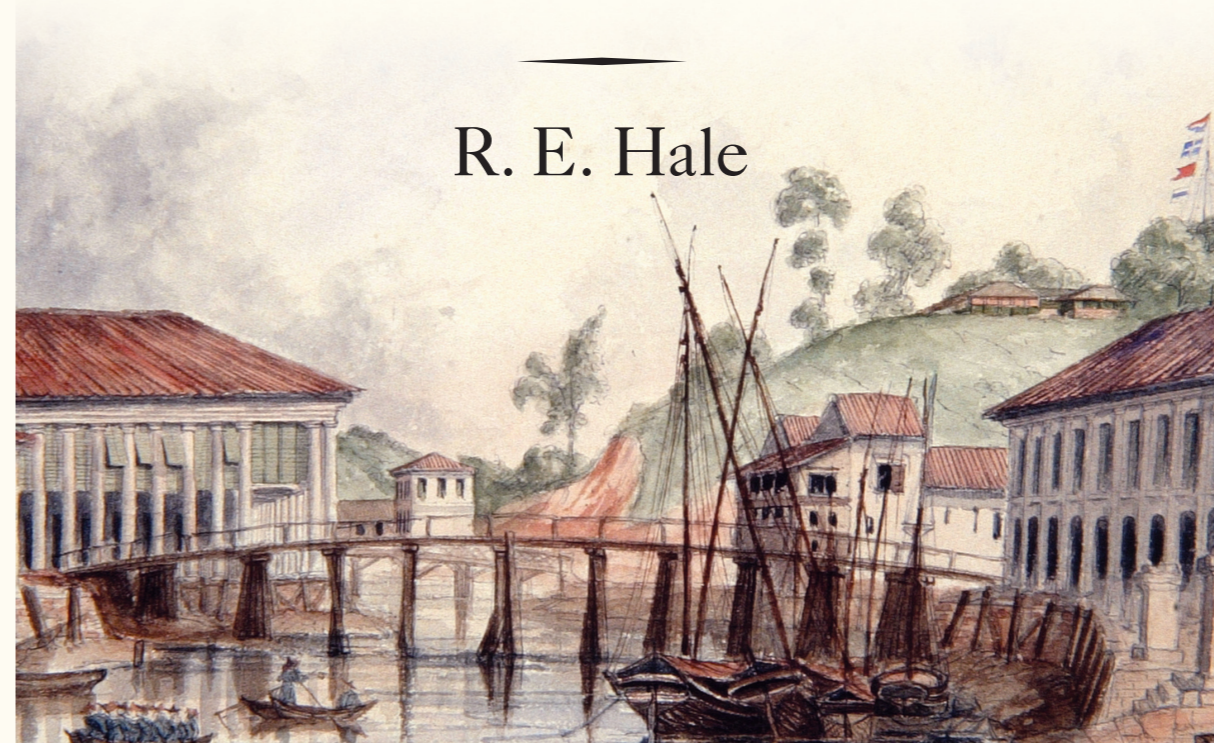
R. E. Hale



THE BALESTIERS

THE FIRST AMERICAN
RESIDENTS *of* SINGAPORE

R. E. Hale



FRONT COVER

Bridge over the Singapore River, next to which the Balestiers first took lodgings on their arrival in Singapore, May 1834.

Detail of *The Old Bridge, Singapore (since removed)*, 1842, by Charles Dyce, National University of Singapore Museum Collection

BACK COVER

Flags of the United States (in 1834) and the British East India Company.

For Review only

THE
BALESTIERS

THE FIRST AMERICAN
RESIDENTS *of* SINGAPORE

R. E. Hale

For Review only

To

F C Y K

With love

For Review only

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PREFACE

The names of many of the European pioneers in Singapore in the first half of the 19th century are well known to many of us. Sir Stamford Raffles is of course the prime example, and learned books have been written about his career, exhibitions of his letters held and various opinions of his actions, often with hindsight and the moral stance of the 21st century, published.

Rather less is available on Bonham, Ord, Cavenagh, Church, Butterworth, Crawford and Farquhar although some of these are familiar street names. They suffer from being the visible side of imperialism and a reluctance to view such times as being anything other than a grinding down of the natives. Most of these natives were, of course, under no obligation to migrate to Singapore and in the main treated the minute European population as irrelevant to their daily lives. Chinese were dedicated to earning enough to retire years later to China, where they could marry and carry on the family line. Officials with names such as Coleman, Oxley and Montgomerie are also known, and a biography of Coleman and his work in architecture and town planning came out many years ago.

About Army officers – British, from India and posted to Singapore, Penang and Malacca – still less is known or cared. Major Faber of the Madras Engineers had a mount named after him to the total puzzlement of all who knew him and had heard his famous response to criticism of his new bridge over the Singapore River. This bridge was too low for fully loaded *twacows*, or barges, to pass under at high tide so he proposed dredging the river bottom to make it deeper.

There is sadly even less recorded about the Chinese merchants, many of whom initially came from Malacca, and this is true in both the Chinese and the English language. Indians who were not released convicts were few, and details of even those whose names are known do not exist. Of Malays, few if any records exist except for Raffles' teacher, Munshi Abdullah.

The last category is that of the foreign Caucasian merchants who set up in Singapore between 1820 and 1850. Few of their names remain in our consciousness today. Of the 106 male “Europeans” in the 1835 census (out of a total male population of 22,755) Guthrie, d’Almeida, Shaw, Boustead, Syme, Jack, Johnston, McMicking, Spottiswoode, Connolly, Fraser, Behn and Little may strike some chord but little more. Of their correspondence which may still exist much would be business related, although some private letters may be preserved in archives unrecognised.

It was therefore with great interest that I came across, through Mrs Dorothy Templeton in America, the existence of a substantial, if incomplete, file of personal letters written by Mrs Maria Balestier from Singapore between 1834 and her death in 1847 describing to her sister and sister-in-law in Massachusetts the daily life led by her husband, son and herself. The existence of these letters appears to have been unknown in Singapore until now. Her first-hand comments on individuals and ways of life are invaluable. She also highlights the – to her and us – absurd social requirements of British expatriate society, which mirrored those current in India, under the sway of the Honourable East India Company, which owned Singapore at the time. As Sherard Osborn stated, society in the 1830s was divided into four distinct castes, first the civilians of the Company, second the military, third the first-class merchants and last the second-class merchants. Despite small numbers the expatriates were exclusive in their coteries.

The various strands of Joseph Balestier’s life in Singapore as Consul, merchant and plantation developer proved difficult to disentangle sufficiently to provide the reader with a coherent narrative. I therefore found it best to divide the story into three parts. The first covers the consular, business, domestic and social sides of the Balestiers’ life until Maria’s death in 1847. The second covers the parallel development of Joseph Balestier’s sugar cane plantation until his breakdown and bankruptcy in 1848. The third is an account of his later travels as Plenipotentiary of the United States President to Southeast Asia, until his retirement, remarriage and death in 1858.

I am grateful to many people, without whose help and interest this biography would never have been completed. One of the earliest is Alan Crandon in Massachusetts, who, through friends, put me in touch with Mrs Dorothy Templeton, who in turn located the series of letters on which this book is mainly based and who transcribed some of the earliest, as well as locating much other information. Ms Clutterbuck-Cook of the Massachusetts Historical Society kindly allowed me to quote from these letters, which have been in their keeping for many years. Others from North America who helped are Michel Houde and Robert Cook. Ann Pickett in Australia, who shares my interest in early Singapore residents, produced helpful information, and Manfred Schwenke did his best to find some in German records.

I thank Ms Alexis Fosler, who read an early version of the manuscript and insisted I find a publisher. Without her encouragement the manuscript would probably have remained in my computer. Here in Singapore my thanks go to Tan Teng Teng, Justin Lau, my helpful and tactful editor, and his colleagues at Marshall Cavendish, staff at the National University of Singapore Museum, at the National Library and at the Singapore Heritage Board. Ms Judith Fergin of the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore was kind enough to give encouragement but Joseph Balestier, who had his ups and downs, was perhaps not an entirely suitable template for some of today’s businessmen. As St Francis Xavier wrote in 1545, “There is very rich merchandise which the traders regard of little account. It is called a man’s conscience and so little it is estimated in these parts, that all the merchants believe they will go bankrupt if they invest in it.” Joseph Balestier invested in it and he did.

TIMELINE

- 1785 July 14 Birth of Maria Revere.
- 1788 Birth of Joseph Balestier.
- 1814 May 8 They marry, in Boston.
- 1819 May 15 Revere, their son, born.
- 1830 Joseph's West Indies sugar business fails.
- 1833 Oct 11 Appointed United States Consul at Rhio.
- Dec 24 Joseph, Maria and Revere sail from Philadelphia.
- 1834 May 23 Arrival at Singapore announced.
- 1835 Jul 25 Joseph petitions for a grant of land for a plantation.
- 1837 Jun 14 Appointment as Consul announced in Singapore.
- 1838 Feb 1 American ships may load cargoes of produce for China.
- 1838 Sep 1 First advertisement for Joseph's Singapore sugar appears in the *Singapore Free Press*.
- 1840 Oct 31 The Balestiers move to the house on the plantation.
- 1844 Mar 2 Death of Revere, aged 24.
- 1846 Sep 1 Foreign consuls attend Governor's presentation of a sword to the Temenggong at Government Hill.
- 1847 Aug 22 Death of Maria, aged 62.
- 1848 Mar 15 Notice of sheriff's sale of Joseph's goods and assets.
- 1848 May 8 Joseph sails en route to USA.
- 1849 Aug 16 Appointed Presidential Envoy to negotiate treaties with countries in Southeast Asia.
- 1850 Feb At Danang, Cochin China.
- 1850 Mar/Apr At Bangkok, Siam.
- 1850 Jun At Brunei.
- 1850 Jul–Oct At Hong Kong, Macao and Canton.
- 1850 Oct–Nov At Singapore.
- 1850 Dec Arrives Batavia, Java.
- 1851 May Learns his mission is terminated.
- 1851 Sep Arrives New York.
- 1852 Mar 9 Marries Caroline Fitzhugh.
- 1858 Nov 12 Dies at York, Pennsylvania, aged 70.

BALESTIER AND REVERE

FAMILY MEMBERS

Mrs Maria Balestier was the daughter of Paul Revere (baptised 1.1.1735; died 10.5.1818), who married twice and had many children. In 1820 of the seven children born to his second wife, Rachel Walker, only four were still alive:

Joseph Warren Revere (30.4.1777–12.10.1868), who married Mary Robbins on 16th April 1821. They had eight children.

Harriett Revere (20.7.1782–28.6.1860), who never married but is said at some time to have run a dame school.

Maria Revere (14.7.1785–22.8.1847), who married Joseph Balestier.

John Revere (27.3.1787–30.4.1847), who attended Harvard and qualified as a doctor of medicine. He married Lydia Le Baron Goodwin (22.12.1785–18.1.1854) on 16.9.1805. There were four children of the marriage, of whom in 1820 only two were alive: Helen Louise Revere (22.2.1809–15.8.1885) and Joseph Warren Revere (17.5.1812–20.4.1880).

The Balestiers are not so well recorded:

Joseph Balestier (c.1788–12.11.1858) married Maria Revere on 8th May 1814. They had one son, Revere (15.5.1819–2.3.1844).

Joseph Nerée Balestier (c.1814–15.9.1888), a half-brother, said to have been born to the third wife of Joseph's father.

William T. Balestier (c.1812–5.7.1856), a half-brother.

Augustus Balestier, resident at Guayama, Puerto Rico; drowned 1835.

John B. Balestier, resident partly Guayama, partly New York; drowned 1835.

MARIA AND JOSEPH BALESTIER

New York, August 16th 1833. Mr Ballestier [sic] who will hand you this letter is desirous of being appointed Consul at La Guayra [in Venezuela] ... Having been called to investigate his affairs, he having been an unfortunate debtor to the U.S., I am happy to have it in my power to say that he is a gentleman of firm integrity and much honor.

SO WROTE James A. Hamilton to the Secretary of State, Louis McLane, when Joseph Balestier was seeking an overseas post as US Consul. He wrote another letter three days later in similar terms to the Vice President, Martin Van Buren, referring to Balestier as “formerly an extensive merchant in this city [New York] but who has been unfortunate in business”, but Van Buren had already on the 16th sent McLane his own recommendation.¹

Hamilton, a son of one of the founding fathers of the United States, Alexander Hamilton, was a well-connected lawyer in New York City. At the beginning of Andrew Jackson’s first term as President, in 1829, he was appointed Acting Secretary of State for a short time and when Van Buren took over, Hamilton was named by President Jackson to be US Attorney for the Southern District of New York (New York City), where he served until he resigned in 1833. After this Hamilton continued to correspond with and advise both President Jackson and Vice President (later President) Van Buren on matters of state.

Hamilton was the federal attorney in charge of the case when Joseph Balestier was tried in the early 1830s in the Southern District of New York’s Federal Court. This venue was appropriate since Balestier’s creditors included the US Government.

But who was Joseph Balestier? His origins are lost in the mists of time and, judging by the information he himself gave in 1827, he was not sure of the date of his birth. His tombstone states that he died on 12th November 1858 aged 70, so we may assume it was in 1788. One source claims a family tradition he was born in France and that he and his father emigrated to Martinique after the French Revolution.² This seems unlikely given the internal fighting in that colony, the failed British invasion of June 1793 and the successful invasion of February 1794. It was not until after the Treaty of Amiens that the colony was passed back to French control in September 1802.

On the other hand Balestier himself gave his origin as “United States” in several official documents, although his father was later based in Martinique, where his third wife gave birth to Joseph Nerée Balestier in about 1814. The existence of two Joseph Balestiers, half-brothers albeit born 26 years apart, makes the researcher’s task more difficult.

A letter from Joseph dated 14th January 1811 proposes marriage to the 25-year-old Miss Maria Revere, Boston. There is no indication from whence it was written except that it must have been in the United States, but it may be supposed that having known her for some years, Joseph must have, before going abroad, been living in or near Boston. It reads:

Dear Maria

I embrace this opportunity of addressing one so superlatively excellent, and as such chances are very rare, I embrace it with avidity, putting full reliance in your goodness to bear with one so unworthy, yet so sincere. I have dear Girl been for a long while an ardent lover, but as my situation in life was not very affluent, I have as long smothered the flame, which I found would (without some relief) eventually consume me.

I left this country in the deepest dejection, having previously made up my mind never to return without I was in a situation that I could with propriety offer my heart, hand and affluence to one so worthy as your dear self.

Thank God the time has arrived. I have returned in affluence and have no wish to gratify but to possess you as my WIFE; deign therefore to hear the sincere prayer of an ardent and affectionate lover and seal his everlasting felicity with your compliance to his request; a refusal would be means of effecting the final destruction of the most sincere and ardent of all lovers that ever were or ever can be,
J B

Where he had been, or for how long, we cannot say, but he evidently felt that, at the age of 23, he had earned enough to ask for her hand. She did not say yes at once, or if she did he had to bide his time in patience as he applied for a passport in November the same year, implying overseas travel. They did not marry until 8th May 1814, in Boston, and the delay could have been partly caused by the death of Maria’s mother and of her much older half-brother in 1813.

Maria was the granddaughter of Apollos Rivoire, a gold and silversmith who had arrived from Guernsey in the Channel Islands as a teenager in 1715 and later changed his name to Paul Revere. He married in 1729, and his eldest surviving son, also named Paul, was born in 1734.

Young Paul learned his trade from his father, who died in 1754, leaving him, aged 20, as the breadwinner for his mother and a large brood of brothers and sisters. His shop, in which he later employed a number of apprentices and journeymen, produced silverware much praised during his lifetime. He also engaged in copper-plate engraving, and, for many years, dentistry. Active in the revolutionary movement, he was instructed at 10 p.m. on the night of 18th April 1775 to ride to Lexington to warn John Hancock and Samuel Adams of the approach of British troops. Business expanded and by 1788 he had opened a foundry which supplied local shipyards and, after 1792, cast bells. He was much involved in the Boston community and was an active Freemason from 1760 until his retirement.

Young Paul married twice. By his first wife he had eight children born between 1758 and 1772, but she died in May the following year. Five months later he married again, producing eight more children between 1774 and 1787, of whom Maria was the seventh, being born on

14th July 1785, almost two years after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, which officially ended the American Revolutionary War.

In 1801 he invested heavily in a property in Canton, a small town some 16 miles from Boston, and set up a copper rolling business. This went well and three years later, when a great gale blew the roof off the Boston foundry, the bell manufactory was moved there as well. The family spent winters in Boston and summers in Canton. Although well known in Massachusetts Paul's fame only reached a wider audience with the publication in 1861 of Longfellow's poem "Paul Revere's Ride", following which, although dead, he became a national folk hero. Shortly before his death on 10th May 1818 he amended his will, cancelling the \$4,000 he had intended leaving to each of his surviving children – Mary Lincoln, Joseph Warren Revere, John Revere, Harriett Revere and Maria. Instead he left each of them the interest on \$4,000 paid quarterly from the date of probate; \$4,000 would then be paid to each individual's designated heir on his or her death.

After her marriage to Joseph, Maria remained in Massachusetts, where Revere, their son, was born on 15th May 1819. Balestier made several business visits to the West Indies. Maria's letter dated 29th June 1821 to him, care of a merchant in New York, indicates he had left the previous fall for St Thomas, Danish West Indies. She had been unwell, but now, having never before weighed more than 106 lbs, she was 128 and so felt well enough to go with him, if he agreed, when he returned to St Thomas. In 1822 he was there again when the US Consul went on leave and he was left in charge of the Consulate. The main commercial activity there, as elsewhere in the region, was the growing of sugar cane and the export of sugar, and it would have been at this time or in earlier years that he gained his knowledge of the industry.

Joseph probably returned to Boston in the third quarter of that year and left in late October. "Your letter by the pilot reached me yesterday", wrote Maria on 1st November in a 14-page letter (No. 1) addressed to Joseph Balestier, St Thomas, which she finished later in the month. Her letter No. 4, started on 12th December, was addressed to Joseph Balestier c/o Balestier Baily & Clark, St Thomas. In a letter dated 30th December (No. 6) she has had news of his safe arrival at St Thomas.

"I think Mr Baily and Mr Clark are all [*sic*] confirmed bachelors", she wrote, as they had not mentioned his arrival in a letter of 1st December to his relative John.³ The following day she wrote that John had brought her Joseph's note from Puerto Rico but it gave her no news of his health, only reports of dining out, balls and parties.

Next year, 1823, her letter No. 14 of 26th March was addressed to him c/o Messrs Cabot Clarke & Co., Merchants, St Thomas. That of 13th April said she had yesterday received his letter from Guadeloupe. He had written from Basseterre (St Kitts) previously and mentioned he had intended to return to New York in *Aurora*. He wondered if Theresa Balestier, who was staying with Maria, should return to Guadeloupe, but there is no indication of her relationship to him. A week later, on 20th April, Maria addressed a letter c/o Dr John De Vere, Baltimore, so Joseph must have been expected to arrive at that port.

By the beginning of 1824 a firm, Joseph Balestier & Co., was operating from 81 Pine Street, New York City, moving by 1827 to 90 Front Street and once again by 1829 to 78 South Street. A "J. Balestier" is recorded as arriving in New York from St Croix in the Danish Virgin Islands on 17th May 1827 aboard the *South Carolina Packet*. Whether this was Joseph or his relative John one cannot say for certain but he evidently continued his connections with that part of the world.⁴

In the papers of Henry Clay, Secretary of State, there is a letter from Joseph Balestier & Co. dated 21st January 1828 stating that Mexico's determination to "authorize the licensing of privateers by Commodore [David] Porter⁵ for the purpose of sending in for trial vessels having on board Spanish property renders it necessary that citizens of the United States ... should have the means of protecting their property by legal documents proving ownership and nationality". Balestier pointed out that documentation by a Spanish magistrate would be very questionable in the court of a nation at war with Spain. He recommended the establishment of consulates or commercial agencies at Guayama, Ponce and Mayaguez, all on the island of Puerto Rico, and recommended William H. Tracy for the Guayama position. US imports of the produce of that island in 1827 added upwards of 200,000 dollars to the revenues "and if not molested and vexed by privateers of nations at war with Spain" there

was every reason to expect an increase. Tracy was appointed before the end of the month.

Balestier's business failed around 1830. Details are not available but it appears a considerable sum was owed to the Government. As mentioned above the court case was heard by James A. Hamilton and the matter resolved with Joseph's reputation intact. He did, however, have to sell off his possessions, and his books went to auction. Maria was afraid she would have to run a boarding house in New York to earn their keep⁶ and her elder brother offered to pay Revere's fees at Highland School. She tried to sell a collection of 30 or so paintings for which she had earlier had an offer of \$2,000 but was unsuccessful. They stayed temporarily with her brother John, the doctor, in Murray Street, then in lodgings in Chamber Street "in that summer of suffering and sickness". As a temporary measure Joseph was taken on as a superintendent in Dudley and Stuyvesant's small sugar house – a great comedown having been at the head of large commercial dealings, but he was contented and thankful to get it.

So now the question was what to do next. He knew the West Indies and the sugar business, but having gone effectively if not legally bankrupt, no matter what his reputation, making a living might not be easy. He had had experience running a Consulate and so what more natural than to seek such a position. Every friend and acquaintance was pressed into service and letters of recommendation from them were sent to the Secretary of State. His friend W.C. Bryant wrote on 2nd May to Gulian C. Verplanck⁷ that Balestier was desirous of obtaining a permission from the Government to trade with the Indians in East Florida from Tampa Bay southward, on the Gulf of Mexico. Mrs Balestier, he wrote, owned lands in Florida and he was about to go there to settle. Nothing seems to have come of this approach nor is there a record of the lands (if any). Meanwhile the Consul at La Guayra in Venezuela was known to be going to retire and to be his replacement seemed an excellent opportunity. Balestier earlier had had connections there.⁸ For reasons unknown he was not accorded this position but instead was offered appointment as Consul at Rhio, in the Dutch East Indies. He knew but little about the place. The pay for the job was minimal and would in no

way cover the overheads, but as Consul he would be able to act as agent for US ships and generate sufficient commercial business to keep his head above water, so he accepted with alacrity.

Whether or not he at this stage thought of also covering Singapore we do not know, but the fly in the ointment was the treaty of 1815 ending the war which had broken out in 1812 between the United States and Great Britain. It set out, among other things, which British ports would be open to American ships. When it was signed Singapore was merely a pirates' village and had not come under the sway of the East India Company. Strictly speaking, therefore, in the absence of an order-in-council from the Company in London, Singapore was not open to American shipping even though both the officials in Calcutta and the Straits Settlements as well as local merchants did not have any objection to its so being. On the contrary, they would have been delighted were the port open. Sir Stamford Raffles himself had written from London on 2nd January 1825 to A.L. Johnston, the leading merchant in Singapore:

On the subject of the clause in the Treaty which restricts Americans from visiting Singapore nothing can be more ridiculous. I have conferred with the American Minister and our authorities on the subject and I hope I shall succeed in removing this bar to your commerce.

Sadly his optimism proved unfounded.

The unfortunate arrest of an American ship, *Governor Endicott*, when near Singapore about 28th August 1825, by the Captain of the British warship *HMS Larne*, although strictly in accordance with the treaty terms, dealt a blow to confidence. She was taken to Calcutta for trial, and although the verdict favoured the American (she was awarded £5,000 in damages, which was apparently never paid) the news of the case deterred other American ships from venturing near Singapore for several years. They felt the risk that another warship might make the same mistake was too great.

Though Captain Williams of the *Arno* had not previously sailed to Asia he was known as competent and the cost of their passages was not exorbitant. Joseph would have liked to load the ship with his own cargo

to sell on arrival in Singapore but lacked the funds to do so and so she was mainly in ballast, resulting in an uncomfortable voyage. The family travelled from Boston to Philadelphia, where they were to go on board on Christmas Eve 1833. On board the tender on which they were sailing downriver to the ship, Captain Williams did his best to calm Maria's fears. She wrote a quick few lines to Harriett, her sister:

The Captain joined us just as the Doctor [her younger brother John] left us, and already seems like an old friend. I see him with Revere . . . and he says he will make me as comfortable as in his power, but that he is a rough sailor and has never before had a lady passenger.⁹

The strain of parting is shown in the letter as she asks various members of the family to write whenever they can. A strong icy wind was blowing but the pilot would not take *Arno* down the Delaware River that evening in the dark.

The water was calm when they cast off next morning and sailed downriver and out into the ocean. Maria felt fine until the pilot left them at Cape Delaware and they struck open water.

I had not felt the slightest sensation of the dreadful malady, seasickness, but it very soon came and reduced me to the weakness of a child. You would have retracted your opinion of my husband's powers of nursing if you had been a witness of his patience and unwearied care of me for six weeks. I was not able to take anything but a teacup of gruel three times a day, and long after the seasickness subsided a sort of low bilious fever, accompanied by periodical nervous headaches carried off all my colour, all my flesh and almost the remainder of the strength the seasickness had spared.¹⁰

Revere (who was then 14) enjoyed excellent health during the voyage, suffering but little from seasickness or any other indisposition except that of an aversion to any kind of occupation besides reading. His father gave him lessons every day, and at the Captain's request Nathan Frye,

a fine manly boy, joined in. This boy was maybe a year and a half older than Revere. His father "had commanded a ship but by some misfortune had lost the rank and Nathan was recommended to Captain Williams' particular care by his mother who was a most estimable woman".¹¹

From Cape Delaware they sailed, by dead reckoning, 16,202 miles to Java Head in 136 days without once sighting land. On the whole the voyage was a good one apart from a storm which hit them near the Cape of Good Hope but which the Captain treated lightheartedly. Maria, however, was much alarmed.

The accompaniment of dangers such as closing the cabin windows, putting in the dead lights, the loud voice of Captain Williams giving his orders, the cries of the seamen, the noise of the sea, and the wind among the rigging made it to my inexperience quite awful. Poor Revere was very much alarmed and I had to forget my terrors to comfort him.¹²

When the coast of Java finally appeared on the horizon it took many hours to come closer, due to contrary winds, and until they reached Anjer, the small port on the western end of Java facing Sumatra across the strait, they saw no signs of life. There,

before we could anchor we were surrounded by the inhabitants in their canoes, and as the Captain was employed in his various duties, some of them made their way up the sides of the ship from the Government boat which was sent off for letters. You would have been amazed as well as frightened at the first appearance of the natives, almost naked and looking about with as much curiosity in their beautiful black eyes. From so many English and American ships stopping at this port they have picked up a good deal of the language and acquired a strong liking for biscuits. The constant and immediate demand was 'Captain give me biscuit' and when they have tried all else they called to me . . . 'Missis give me biscuit'. I could only say no, and some would then say 'me got wife, me got child, me no got biscuit, give me, give me'.¹³

It was not felt suitable for Maria to leave the ship by a ladder and so a bosun's chair was rigged, into which she was secured before being hoisted up over the rail and down into the boat, where the Captain, assisted by Joseph and Revere, released her, and the rowers pulled for land.

At Anjer almost every ship from America or Europe heading to or returning from China reported to the Dutch authorities so that news of their safe arrival that far could be passed on via other ships to their owners at home and agents in the ports they had left, and so that they could also receive news.

The coconut trees were in the greatest abundance and reached to the water, shading the immediate huts of the natives. The Fort was beautifully shaded by rows of Linden trees and the more we approached the shore the more pleasing it looked. A kind of pier projecting some distance from it, adorned with lanterns, was the place of landing and a native soldier stood ready to show us the way to the Resident. We entered a large square surrounded by low white buildings. One part seemed intended for a parade ground and the other occupied as a flower garden. It had a slight bamboo fence around it and lay immediately opposite that part of the Fort occupied by the Resident. He was seated in the piazza and received us all with great civility. As he spoke but little English, only sufficient for business purposes, the Resident did not make any conversation with me but gave to Mr Balestier and Captain Williams the information they required and led them to his office for the use of pen and ink.

Revere and myself were left to our own amusement and after we had taken a survey of the place as far as we could see we began to wish for the return of our Gentlemen. Not knowing the rules of a fortified place I felt fearful of walking about and contented myself with observing the arrangement of the apartment that we could see from the piazza. It was arranged in a similar manner to the Mansion House at Brookline, only on the ground floor, the rooms very lofty, the walls plastered and beautifully white, and as clean in all its furniture

as possible. The hall or eating room in the center had the floors covered with matting, a circular dinner table in the center, couches and chairs similar to Mr Revere's rosewood, made bright by rubbing. Some prints from Shakespeare on the walls with an abundance of lamps suspended by silver chains completed its furniture. On either side were some handsome bedrooms, well furnished, and at the back of the hall the cook house as it is styled in this part of the world in a building by itself. The piazza had lamps suspended in a similar manner to those of the hall, large couches, chairs and a table on which were placed various kinds of wine and water, and another table for some kind of game. Everything seemed to be kept with Dutch neatness, mixed with a great deal of English comfort.

If I could have seen a female to whom I could have spoken it would have been very delightful but none appeared and the only living object of interest that I saw was an infant in the arms of a white soldier who was carrying it with great affection. When our gentlemen had completed their business arrangements they returned. Captain Williams went to make purchases for the ship, and we went to see the Malay town or village. The population was great and dressed in such a variety of ways as was perfectly amusing. Every kind of article of European dress was in request, and as I passed a large concourse of children, I could not resist a laugh at the appearance of one in particular who I suppose was dressed for the occasion, a boy about as large as Josephine [the three-year-old daughter of her elder brother Joseph Warren Revere] with no other covering but a white vest big enough for Revere. I seemed to be seen a greater object of curiosity to them than they were to me, for we were followed by crowds in every direction, and I was thankful when Captain Williams was ready to depart. We got back in safety and I enjoyed my visit. Although we remained two days at Anjer I did not venture again on shore, but amused myself with the natives who came to visit us, and sell the various products of the place. Every kind of vegetable is plentiful and cheap, as are fowls and eggs and I am profusely provided with my favorite bananas.¹⁴

After a long voyage, having become accustomed to the motion of the waves, it is a strange sensation when first landing to find that one is very unsteady on one's feet. It is almost possible to get "landsick" as the ground seems to rock. At Anjer, they did not have enough time to get over this.

The ship remained anchored there for a further two days and then set sail for the north, with Java to starboard and Sumatra to port. They later anchored for the night in the Straits of Bangka, and slept soundly with muskets all loaded and prepared, boarding pikes laid on deck, cannon loaded and pistols made ready. Pirates, they were told, did not attack ships such as *Arno* but it was prudent to be prepared for all eventualities. They made but slow progress thereafter and only arrived at Rhio on 18th May, a week after leaving Anjer. They anchored some four miles from the landing place. At first only the Resident's boat came out to them, but later, when heading for shore in *Arno's* boat, as they approached the Rhio fort

we saw a very curious boat making for us, similar to those which you see in old Italian pictures and which we afterwards learned had been sent by the Master Attendant¹⁵ for us, the Resident being abroad on a visit to Batavia. He received us on our landing, in a very polite manner offered me his arm and, taking my parasol, escorted me to his house. It is very pleasantly situated but old in furniture. As I afterward learned that the gentleman had been twice married I did not wonder at its ancient appearance. After we sat down for a short time Madame made her appearance, a very pleasant good-natured Dutch lady. She is a native of this part of India [At that period the whole of Southeast Asia in addition to the Subcontinent was referred to thus.] and had been married to an Englishman who died about three years ago leaving her a widow with three children. When she married her present husband he had two and she has already added to the number two more, one a lovely little girl of sixteen months and a boy of forty days. She spoke English and treated me with great kindness. When our gentlemen went to the house of the Resident she took me to her nursery to see the baby. Her old Malay nurse had

brought up the children of the first marriage and of course had great authority. She washed and dressed the baby and the mother gave it nourishment. It had only a little kind of open loose shirt and was as lovely an infant as I ever looked upon. After the mother had satisfied its appetite the old nurse opened a mat on the floor, sat down upon it, put a little pillow on her feet and spread a cloth on her legs. She took the baby, shook some very fine powder from a bag over it and laid it upon the pillow. She then folded the cloth over it and laying its little arms inside the cloth, she held them down, and rocked it with her feet until it fell asleep, and then it was put into the cradle. Our gentlemen returned, and we took our leave and returned to the ship to dine.¹⁶

The visit was a considerable disappointment to Balestier. While there, as he was informed that Rhio was a dependency of Batavia, he sent off a letter to the Governor-General of Java announcing his arrival and requesting registration. His appointment as United States Consul was to "Rhio and such other places as are nearer thereto than the residence of any other Consul or Vice Consul of the United States". Not a single European merchant lived or carried out business in the port and the fine harbour sheltered no square-rigged vessels. Furthermore the Master Attendant confirmed that few if any ships called and that international trade was non-existent. Balestier therefore decided on the spot to go on to Singapore, some 40 miles away, and base himself there, provided the British agreed.

Singapore

At the dawn of the 19th century much of India as well as Penang, Malacca and small settlements on the west coast of Sumatra were under the administration of the Honourable East India Company, an organisation set up centuries earlier under royal charter, with a board of directors in London. A Governor-General residing at Calcutta, appointed by the board, headed what was known as the Supreme Government. His

remit expanded with the British invasion of Java in 1811 to expel the French occupiers but the return of the Dutch after the defeat of Napoleon reduced it again.

Singapore, geographically the drip on the pendulous nose of the Malay Peninsula, had been selected by Sir Stamford Raffles as a potential settlement in 1818 rather than the islands of Carimon, which lie to the southwest and had been recommended to him by the then Major Farquhar when he was in charge at Malacca. The various Dutch colonies which had been taken over by British forces during the Napoleonic Wars were now, in some cases, to be handed back; among them was Malacca. Raffles, who was at Bencoolen on Sumatra's west coast, travelled to Calcutta and was able to persuade the Governor-General that it was essential to establish a settlement to control the Straits of Malacca and guard the route to China. The Honourable East India Company still had rights that excluded British citizens from trading with that country. This would offset the threat posed by the return of the Dutch to their base in the Rhio Islands, a few miles south of Singapore. He was successful in his mission and early in 1819 signed an agreement giving Britain the right to a small area around the Singapore River, at that time occupied since 1811 by the Temenggong of Johore and his followers and effectively a base for their piratical activities.

Raffles' plan was for a completely free port, thus attracting traders from all parts of the archipelago, where the Dutch were doing their level best to control and tax such activity. Malay traders were the first to arrive, apart from a few Europeans, but before long Chinese arrived in increasing numbers and by 1827 outnumbered the Malays, as they have continued to do ever since. In 1823 a new agreement was signed, effectively making over to the authorities the whole island of Singapore. Monthly payments were to be made to the Temenggong and to the Sultan of Johore. All was confirmed a year later by treaty, to the great irritation of the Dutch.

They disputed the British right to Singapore, but in March 1824 a treaty was signed in London between Great Britain and the Netherlands whereby the Malay Peninsula would be under British influence while Sumatra and the islands south of Singapore would be the preserve

of the Dutch. The population of Singapore had since grown to some 10,000 and by the time of the Balestiers' arrival ten years later was in excess of 26,000. Brick buildings had sprung up, replacing many of the earlier attap structures, which process had been hastened by an extensive fire in 1830 which destroyed much of the Chinese quarter.

Many of the early British arrivals in Singapore were Scots or Shetlanders who had had connections with India. They acted to a large extent as agents, receiving goods consigned to them for sale by overseas exporters. These goods were sold in the local and regional markets, usually on short-term credit. Legislation under which to form limited companies did not exist in Singapore and so either an individual traded in his own name or partnerships or firms were formed. These had the drawback that each partner had unrestricted authority to make contracts binding on the firm and each was liable without limit for its debts. In later years it was thus usual for a man joining such a firm to start for a period as a "clerk". If he showed promise he might then be given authority to sign "per pro". If all then went well he might be admitted to the partnership. Exceptions to this practice were usually only when, as a close kinsman of one partner and possibly taking over the family capital invested in the firm, a man was admitted as a full partner on or soon after his arrival.

Trade was almost entirely on an *entrepôt* basis as Singapore produced and manufactured nothing. Capital was sadly lacking and so most firms accepted goods for sale on a consignment basis. Of the non-native firms in business almost all were British, others being Armenian, German and Portuguese. The lingua franca was Malay and although a few Chinese businessmen had a smattering of English the reverse was not the case.

The East India Company in 1826 had grouped Penang, Malacca and Singapore together as the Straits Settlements, administratively under Penang. In 1833 the Company was granted a new royal charter which cancelled its stranglehold on British trade with China. This was now open to individual merchants to participate but in theory any individual wishing to reside in Singapore still needed first to obtain permission from the Governor-General in Calcutta. This requirement was often

ignored. There was no ban on individual Americans, and their ships were free to call at the port but not to load or unload cargo there.

In Singapore in the 21st century we may tend to think of America as being east across the Pacific Ocean rather than west beyond the Middle East and Europe. This was not the view in the early part of the 19th century. To people at that time America was in the west and a very long voyage away across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Until 1848 California was to all intents and purposes uninhabited; it was only the gold rush of 1849 that drew world-wide attention to the Pacific Coast.

The 1783 Treaty of Paris had freed the trade of the American colonies from British control and the following year the first American vessel, *Empress of China*, reached Canton. She was followed over the years by many others and a total of 1,352 visits to Canton by American ships between 1784 and 1833 has been recorded. These sailed from the New England ports of Salem and Boston, as well as from New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore, carrying silver Spanish dollars, ginseng (which grew wild in the Appalachian Mountains and was very much valued in China) and furs, the proceeds of which paid for their purchases of tea, silk, mercury and various other items.

The ships normally sailed southeast to the coast of Brazil, then continued across the South Atlantic, rounded the Cape of Good Hope and headed due east under the prevailing westerly winds until, once past the two small uninhabited volcanic islands of St Paul and Amsterdam and well before reaching the dangers of the Australian coast, they reset course to the northeast for the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra. From there it was north up to the South China Sea, taking care not to come to grief on one of the many shoals, charted and uncharted, and finally entering the Pearl River estuary to anchor at Whampoa, the port of Canton. A few ships did enter the Pacific via Cape Horn, the southern tip of South America, but these were largely either ships hoping to buy furs along the western coasts of America en route to China or whalers headed for the Southern Pacific islands or, in later years, the seas to the north. On the homeward voyage ships followed slightly different courses, taking account of the wind patterns, and usually called at the island of St Helena in the South Atlantic, where a US consular agent

resided from 1831 onwards and acted as a forwarding agent for letters to the United States.

Until 1819 the island of Singapore was, although shown on the charts, not a place to notice. A minor fishing village inhabited by part-time pirates, it was merely one of many such places. The British treaty signed that year with the local chief, under the noses of the Dutch, changed the situation. As the new free port attracted more and more immigrants and trade grew strongly, a few American ships did call in, to the delight of merchants in Singapore, either en route to, or from, India, Penang or the Pedir Coast of Sumatra, where they hoped to buy pepper. They brought with them specie, mainly Spanish pieces of eight, and were more than welcome, cash being generally in short supply and much trade being by way of barter or on credit. This happy state of affairs was interrupted by the commanding officer of HMS *Larne*, who, under a misapprehension as to the rules, arrested the American ship *Governor Endicott*. She had been heading for Singapore and amongst other items had 6,000 firearms on board as well as large quantities of powder. This was not unusual for American ships at the time as arms were also a very acceptable form of currency in many ports of Asia. By 1833 the fear of arrest had receded and cargo purchased in Singapore was sent across the strait in small boats to the ship anchored in Bulang Bay (often incorrectly referred to as Rhio), Batam, about 14 miles south, outside British jurisdiction. As an article in the *Singapore Chronicle* explained, on 18th April 1833:

The American ship Cashmere, Captain Davison, arrived at this port during the week from Boston, the 6th December last, being the fourth American vessel from the United States that has called here within a few months for the purpose of obtaining produce. She proceeds to Rhio today, we believe, to receive such commodities as the Captain or Agent may purchase and send to that convenient port, as cargo. The American ship Shepherdess, Captain Ward, having completed her cargo from this port, is about to proceed, or has already proceeded from Rhio to St Helena, from whence she may probably shape her course to the Continent of Europe. Her principal purchases here, as

we are informed, were; - pepper, about 3,300 piculs; - sugar, 850 piculs; - coffee, 60 piculs; - tin, 585 piculs; - rattans, 123 piculs; - and China camphor about 300 boxes. We are given to understand that 'a Consular Commercial Agent' has been appointed, or is about to be appointed, in America, to this Settlement, in the full expectation of the port being immediately thrown open to American vessels.

As already mentioned, the disappointment at Rhio convinced Balestier to go on to Singapore. Maria wrote:

We left Rhio on Monday morning early [19th] and after a beautiful run through many beautiful islands reached our destined port just after sunset, it presenting a very pleasing appearance. The houses are very handsome, covered with stucco, some white and some stone colour with green blinds, verandahs, porticos and piazzas of every description. [There were] a good many ships of various nations, and among them one with the American flag¹⁷. We greatly rejoiced at this as we thought the port must be opened so our disappointment was great when we found she had only touched at the port and that it was still closed to us. Yet in spite of all the anxiety the scene was one of great interest and in a very short time boats with natives of different parts of India in all their variety of dress, colour and language surrounded us. In the midst of them all a boat approached and a young gentleman dressed in the fashion of this country, all in white, stepped on the deck and announced himself as our countryman from Boston and that his name was Higginson. We soon learned that he was brother to Mr George Higginson of New York and was on his way to Canton from Calcutta. You cannot imagine how cheering it was to me to see him, and the meeting appeared to be equally so to him for I could give him late information of many of his friends and relations. He stayed and took tea with us, promising to return early in the morning and go on shore with our gentlemen.

As Singapore has an open roadstead we had anchored quite on the outside of all the other vessels as Captain Williams did not wish to have his crew go on shore, and also to be ready for an early start if

necessary. Tuesday morning came and with it preparations for leaving the ship. I did not go as I preferred to have Mr Balestier make some arrangements for our accommodation before he encumbered himself with my Ladyship. I remained behind to pack up. With the aid of Revere all was soon in readiness but the day wore away and the boat did not return. So to amuse myself I took the glass to see what was going on on the shore and saw an immense procession moving along with a temple on wheels, and the people dressed in every variety of costume. I afterwards learned that it was a great yearly festival that concluded by their drowning the idol.

Captain Williams returned soon after without Mr Balestier who had been to see a house as they charged at the hotel¹⁸ the enormous sum of three dollars a day for each person, and our means would not allow of such a great expenditure for many days. As there could not be had any other shelter for a day or two I was to go on shore with the Captain immediately after dinner [normally eaten onboard at about 4 p.m. and followed by supper at 9.30] and soon after four I found myself once more an inhabitant of the land. The next day Mr B found a house at thirty dollars a month, a great castle of a place. One gentleman lent us some china and a table, another, Mr Moore [sic], the editor of the Singapore Gazette [sic],¹⁹ lent us a bed, bedstead, mosquito net and later a couch and a footstool. We bought articles of crockery and glass, hired a Chinese and a Malay for cooking and cleaning and on Saturday commenced housekeeping in the midst of one of the most busy, noisy scenes you can imagine. The front of it looks out on the most complete Babel I can imagine.²⁰

The accommodation taken appears to have been in Singapore style, with a warehouse on the ground floor and living quarters above. These were large rooms with high ceilings all on one floor apart from the cook house, which was below in the yard.²¹ It was almost certainly part of the Boustead building²², situated on the right bank of the river on the same side as the Chinese quarter, just by the bridge and on what was later named South Bridge Road. This building had been completed for Edward Boustead²³ in about 1832 by his friend G.D. Coleman and was

known to the Chinese as the “House of Twenty-Seven Pillars”. Maria vividly described the scene in a letter to her sister:

Watching from the outer gallery of our great unfurnished castle of a place you cannot imagine the variety and concourse of people that are constantly coming and going, passing and changing. Just now has passed by a boat full of Chinese ... In the front of the boat hung a gong which a person who was sitting beside it struck so as to keep time with another person who was playing on a kind of guitar and singing a Battung song. It had a wild and yet musical sound and the company drest in white with the half naked rowers have a most picturesque appearance. At this moment there is coming down the basin a boat full of Arabs. Their cry or song resembles the sound of our chimney sweeps in some degree but constantly reminds me of the North Church bells when they ring one, two, three at Christmas time. They are half-naked wild looking creatures and every time they strike with the oars they all strike together. I was sitting at the window reading last Sunday and I observed a peon bring a load of sugar cane which he laid close to the bridge and left. I continued to read in spite of increasing clamour, for you cannot have an idea of the noise they make, until I became sensible something unusual was going on. Looking up I saw a great crowd directly opposite round a very little angry looking Malay. He had got an elderly looking Chinese by his long queue which he had wound around the rail of the bridge so as to bring his head nearly down to it, and it appeared to me as if it must all be drawn out by the roots. What had been his offence I could not tell, but from his gestures and those of the Malay he had been taking some of the sugar cane which belonged to the Malay without paying for it. The Malay, taking him in the act, proceeded to render summary justice. I got so excited, to use the Boston phrase, that I had to get up and go away.²⁴

The bridge, which had originally been constructed in 1822, was by this time in a very bad state and was only fit to be used by pedestrians. It was described as having a broken-backed appearance with a curious

variety of undulations.²⁵ Appeals to the authorities to keep it in good repair went unheeded despite its importance as the only way to cross the river unless by boat, and on 26th July 1834 the *Singapore Chronicle* editor announced that he was happy to find that the subscription lately set on foot to repair the old bridge and make it capable of supporting carriages before the proposed new one was built already amounted to 1,100 Spanish dollars whereas the total needed was only 1,200. Funds had also been allocated to rebuild the bridges at Rochore and Bras Basah, the latter connecting Campong Glam with the town.

Maria had ordered more furniture, and three easy chairs had already arrived, for four dollars and a half. Seventy dollars had been agreed for two bedsteads with rails for mosquito nets, two good wardrobes with lock and key to each, a dozen chairs with bamboo seats, two couches, a round table that was to answer all their eating purposes, and three large racks for hanging clothes on at night, plus one for towels. All were to be in a red wood which took a good polish and resembled redwood mahogany. Maria would in addition tip the carpenter five dollars. By mid-August all this had arrived and an outlay of a further 29 dollars had furnished another dozen chairs with cane bottoms and arms, two very handsome dressing tables with drawers in them, two “that will answer for pier tables for want of better”, three wash tables and another towel horse.

The beds here are made of the covering of the coconut, which is made very fine. I do not know the process but I know the bed is as hard as a rock, or it is filled with cotton. Hair is not easily procured but Mr Balestier had the good luck to buy a very old hair mattress at auction. I hired a tailor-man, as he is called, to come and make it new but ticking cannot be procured here and all coverings of this kind are made of nankin, for four dollars. I had sufficient to make the bed for ourselves and for Revere with two pillows each, for the old one.

We expect very soon to remove from the public situation in which we have lived, to a neat little bungalow quite in the country but at a very short distance from Business, and thankful shall I be to have

a little quiet for my present home is more noisy than our home on Broadway, not from carriages or carts but from human beings. The bridge which I mentioned to you in a former letter, being directly under my window, is in the hands of workmen and undergoing a complete repair. Of course all communication is by water, and the boats are continually passing and re-passing. The street in which we live extends to some distance, I should think a mile, and more than half of this is occupied each side by Chinese. A marshy creek runs alongside of it and on piles in the marshy place are their houses built.²⁶

To Business

Before leaving America, Balestier had distributed a circular in Boston announcing his departure, his appointment as Consul and his intention to establish himself in the Agency and Commission business in Singapore and Rhio. As references he gave the names of a number of firms in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore to whom he was presumably already known.

Apart from finding somewhere for himself and his family to stay, Balestier's most pressing task was to call on the Resident Councillor, Samuel Bonham, and to get his clearance for basing himself in Singapore. This he did on the day of his arrival. The port was officially closed to trading by American ships but was as usual open to them to anchor. He took care "abstaining from presenting myself in a character which might subject me to the inconvenience of a denial and my visit was tendered as a mark of respect to his office".²⁷ Three days later Bonham returned his visit and

as he led to the subject of the place remaining closed, I took the opportunity to ask him if without interfering with the laws and regulations of the Settlement I might be permitted to act in my official capacity towards ships and citizens of the United States. He replied that he

could not conceive the least objection to my doing so, and that in the absence of any instructions to the contrary, I might do as I pleased.²⁸

Balestier reported this at length to the State Department with the first of his many appeals that the absurdity of the situation be rectified, unaware that this would take another three years to achieve.

J.H. Moor reported Balestier's arrival in the next issue of the *Singapore Chronicle*, dated 22nd May, and added:

We learn with pleasure that the question of opening this port to Americans on the same footing as to all other nations has been warmly taken up in America, a representation having been made by merchants of Boston, Philadelphia and New York to the President on that behalf.

Balestier busied himself gathering information on the current state of trade, the complicated currency system and the various currencies in use, as well as anything else he felt would be of use. He spent many hours writing in his own name, rather than as Consul, to his business contacts overseas, and Maria spent even more time copying these out²⁹ as it was normal, apart from a file copy, to send out two or three copies by different ships in the absence of a formal postal service. Letters were handed to ship's captains, mostly through the Master Attendant (harbour-master), and then passed on to other ships before reaching their final destinations. Some ships would fail to arrive, some letters get lost, and thus extra copies by different routes were essential. Even if the ship carrying his letters sailed direct for New England he was unlikely to receive a reply in less than 12 months. The frustration was of course great, and, for Balestier, whose funds were very limited, a great worry.

He was concerned that Singapore was closed to American trade and in his next official letter to the Secretary of State, dated 2nd June 1834, highlighted this:

To us the loss is great, for we are deprived in participating in a most valuable trade with the people of the Eastern Islands & embracing a

circle of which the limits are China, Celebes, New Guinea, Australia, Java, Sumatra, Bengall, the Malayan Peninsula, Siam and Cochin China; all of whom in a greater or lesser degree resort to this port, free in every sense of the word, with their commodities which they exchange for European fabrics. Many of ours would find a ready and profitable sale could they be brought here & landed from our ships, as from vessels of other nations who wait while the sales and investments are being made, or employ the meanwhile in short trading excursions to the neighboring ports or coasts.

On 24th August Maria, who was sending home some small souvenirs with Captain Ward of the *Shepherdess*³⁰, wrote:

As yet Mr Balestier has not had any business to transact for anyone, but he has been very busy in gaining all kinds of information and writing to his expected employers in the United States. This keeps him fully and constantly employed. He has been writing every day for this vessel for several days past and has already some fifty or sixty letters of various kinds ready.

Their first packet of letters from home arrived on 28th August, just over eight months after they had left America, and these cheered them up immensely. Even if there was a ship sailing direct from Boston to Singapore the news would be six months out of date by the time it was received, but at least there was a sense of being in touch and that communication was established.

A few days after this, to the Balestiers' surprise and delight, the Captain and second mate of an American ship were brought to their house by the dubash³¹ who supplied them with beef for Sundays.

*It was quite a dull rainy sort of morning and we had just finished breakfast when the dubash came in and said 'here is Captain Williams'. Thinking it was Captain Williams of the *Arno* I went to the door and saw two strangers coming up the stairs. One of them was a man about middle life and the other quite young, with a most*

*formidable pair of whiskers, mustachios and beard. The face of the older was very familiar to me but I still could not say who he was. It proved to be Captain Stephen Williams, commander of the American ship *Henry Ewbanks* and his clerk, a Mr Turner, whose father is part owner of the ship.³²*

Captain Williams knew many of their friends and relations in Boston and so was more than welcome. The *Henry Ewbank* had been on the west coast of Sumatra to load pepper but had not been able to get a full cargo and so tried Penang, also without success. Williams had then intended to go straight to Rhio but having lost an anchor put in at Singapore on 1st September and was happy to find the Balestiers there rather than at Rhio as he had expected. His acceptance of Balestier as his agent must have been a cause for quiet rejoicing as it was the first prospect of income since their arrival in Singapore.

A week later *Canova* arrived from Penang. Although her Captain, Hall, became a friend of the Balestiers' he consigned her

to Mr Johnston who is the oldest merchant here. The reason why he did not give his business to Mr Balestier, he told Captain Williams, was because he felt under great obligations to Mr Johnston, for the friendship he experienced from him when he was here some years ago under perilous circumstances. Although the commission would have been very acceptable to us, yet gratitude is such a rare plant one cannot but be pleased when we meet with it.³³

The *Singapore Chronicle* four days later published long letters from Governor Fullerton in Penang and from Resident Councillor Bonham, both indicating that they could see no objection to American ships trading in Singapore. This, although encouraging, did not change the situation as neither had the authority to change the regulations, this resting with the East India Company in London.

Another American vessel, *Derby*, is recorded as having arrived from Penang on 11th September and two more, *Prescott* and *Progress*, reportedly passed through the Straits without touching at Singapore.³⁴ The

last American vessel for the year, *Maria*, under the command of Captain Lovett, arrived, also from Penang, on 22nd September but anchored at Batam, where she spent the next few weeks.

Quarters on board ships, even for their commanders and officers, were less than comfortable. When their vessels were at Batam, Captains Williams, Hall, Lovett (who had also appointed Balestier as his agent) and his Mate Turner all spent a good part of their time boarding with the Balestiers in their spacious if noisy rooms above the godown.

Maria had written to Harriett in mid-September and a month later wrote again reporting a bad accident suffered by her husband:

Everything went on well until four weeks ago, yesterday, when after a very pleasant dinner Mr. Balestier asked Captain Williams who is a famous whip, and a great judge of horses, to drive out to try a horse which a Chinese was anxious to sell him. I did not feel any anxiety, as the horse had a good character and the Captain so skillful. You may imagine how perfectly secure I felt as I remained at table with Captains Hall and Lovett, Mr. Turner and Mr. Tracy the American missionary and was deeply engaged in discussing the merits of Brilores Novels, when Captain Williams came into the hall and said, 'Do not be alarmed Mrs Balestier, your husband is coming.' At first I did not understand him, but perceiving his clothes stained with clay, and Mr. Balestier not immediately following, I ran downstairs, and at the foot of them, lay Mr. Balestier fainting in the arms of one of our servants, his leg very much injured and one of his shoes full of blood; I cannot tell you how I felt, or how I was able to run for the cologne and vinegar that was to restore his senses, but I was able to do it, and to stand by him while the surgeon made the necessary examinations to know if the limb was broken.

As soon as he was laid on the bed and the limb uncovered and the doctor sent for, I ran to Captain Williams (to whom I had given a bottle of gin to rub himself with, and sent some gentlemen to assist him to see what injury he sustained and how the accident happened. I found him much bruised but in such a state of excitement as to feel but little bodily pain. He is a man of a very serious turn of mind,

quiet, and gentlemanly in his deportment, and in his manner frequently reminded us of Mr. Revere [her elder brother]. He was in great distress lest I should think it was owing to his want of skill that the accident happened, and that I should think he fully verified the old saying for a sailor. It seemed that the horse had proved all they could wish and they were returning much pleased with their ride and the animal, and were coming over the bridge which is directly under my windows, when Mr. Balestier requested the Captain not to let him go fast down the descent from the bridge. He drew the reins a little tighter to check him, and the right hand rein broke short off, and in attempting to turn him by the left-hand one, that gave way also, and they were at the mercy of the spirited animal. He turned off at the bridge down a very narrow lane that runs on the side of the river. I have never seen either carriage or buffalo cart attempt to pass through it. Captain Williams said to Mr. Balestier 'the reins have broke and I have no command of the horse, you must take care of yourself.' He jumped from the gig, and just as the horse was turning down the narrow lane, at the corner of which was a very large pile of bricks, he found himself between the gig and the bricks, and seeing that he must be crushed if the gig passed him, he pushed it from [him] with all his force. He is a very powerful man and his blow, aided by the descent of the ground to the river, the gig, in which Mr. Balestier still remained, turned [over] and the wheel passed over his leg and remained on it just above the ankle until several persons who had witnessed the accident came to his relief, and lifted it from off his leg and brought him to the house. The horse meanwhile had stopped, and some kind persons took him home. It is the fashion here to drive as fast as possible, particularly in passing this very bridge, and these China men drive in the same fashion, so that the reins become in this ruinous state without their knowing anything of the matter, and poor Captain Williams and Mr. Balestier became the sufferers.

Captain Williams was very much bruised, but had not received any serious injury and would not consent to see the doctor, as his clerk, Mr. Turner, had studied surgery and medicine for several years

and had been his doctor on the coast of Sumatra, he felt perfect confidence in him. But the doctor could not decide upon Mr. Balestier's leg that night, as before he could reach our house the limb was very much swollen, and nothing could be done until that was reduced. The leg was to be kept wet with a lotion which he ordered, with medicine to be taken in the morning, and a comforting draught if he could not do without it, but desired it should not be given if he could possibly do without it, but his frame had received such a shock that he could not close his eyes until I gave it to him and at two he fell asleep. The next day the leg looked very badly. It was shockingly bruised, inflamed, and swelled, and in great distress. Twenty large leeches were applied to the bruised part and a poultice to the wound, and as Captain Williams was confined to his bed, you may suppose I had my hands full. To add to my troubles, my Chinese man of all works and who takes the charge of all my household matters, was so much indisposed that I had to give him a dose of castor oil and send him to bed. Mr Balestier had not had any other injury fortunately, and his medicines all had a good effect and he was free from fever. So that with the kind attentions of Captain Lovett and Mr. Turner who were both our inmates, I kept up my spirits which were sometimes near to fainting, but He who gives the trials, proportions them to the strength of his creatures.

The second day what I feared took place. The bruised place just above the ankle of the size of a dollar and which was as black as it could be was in such a state that a poultice was necessary to remove it. The doctor said the flesh was killed at the time of the blow and it must be poulticed until it was all removed. This I have done, and last week on Monday it was all removed, and the leg dressed by the doctor for the first time. I washed and drest it myself all the rest of its long period of suffering. Fortunately our house was all on one floor, and I had not any stairs to go up and down, and I could step into Captain Williams and say a few words to him to cheer him a little, then set down and sing a little to Mr. Balestier, then run to the counting room to read and answer notes on business, then have to receive Pulicat merchants, Chinese merchants, Malay traders,

and English merchants, receive thousands of dollars, count them and pay them away or put them into my safe. For days together I have got up at five o'clock and been on my feet with the exception of eating my breakfast, until twelve unless I had writing to do. For perhaps half an hour I could then sit down, but after I had dressed myself, and frequently in the midst of my toilet there would be three or four Chinese and Malay servants in the room with chits, as notes are called in this place. Then I usually went to give Captain Williams and Mr. Balestier some chicken soup, or shall I call it the Malay name, Conjee, then ordered tiffin for the gentlemen, for we do not dine until near five that until dinner was over, I had hardly breathing time, but a little nap on the sofa until coffee gave me strength to get through the night, for I could not get through all my cares until eleven o'clock and I had to get up two or three times each night. After three or four days Mr. Balestier was able to be carried to the counting room after breakfast and set there with his leg up until he was carried to the sofa.

After business hours were over the doctor made his visit in the counting house, and sometimes in the midst of the dressing he would have a half dozen visitors of all ranks. Some of the native merchants were quite astonished to see me wait upon him as they frequently came in during the time, and one of them paid me a very peculiar compliment. He said, 'Mam was a very good wife, did so much for Tuan, she was as good as a coolie.' Tuan is the name for Master, and coolie for a labourer of any kind. In eight or ten days Captain Williams had quite recovered from his injury, and was able to be about as usual, and Mr. Balestier getting along slowly.³⁵

Balestier made no reference to his accident in his letter to the Secretary of State in Washington dated 11th October, but referred rather to the stoppage of trade at Canton and its effects on that of Singapore. He quoted an article from the *Singapore Chronicle* showing no imports from or exports to America and emphasised Singapore's advantages as a depot, given that ships loading in Batavia would probably have to pay tax. There was not a single merchant in Rhio, nor any trading vessel. In

the year to 1st May 1834 only two American ships had arrived at Singapore, accounting for 605 tons out of a shipping total of 137,298 tons, a minuscule proportion.

Balestier may have had some contact with Baring Brothers & Co³⁶ in London as on 16th October he advertised that “Bills on London, authorized by, and upon Messrs. Baring Brothers and Co., in desirable sums, may be had at a favorable exchange, on application to J. Balestier”. Whether or not this produced results is debatable as the advertisement did not appear again and subsequently similar advertisements by Douglas Mackenzie & Co. appeared.

Canova sailed early in October, quickly followed by *Henry Ewbank*, which was destined for Trieste. Balestier shortly afterwards received a letter dated 21st February from the Secretary of State in Washington. He opened the letter thinking it would contain his new Commission and that he would now have an official basis for living in Singapore but was driven to near despair when he found that not only did it mirror the original but that four words had been added. He was now appointed “to act only at Rhio and as in such other ports as are nearer thereto than to the residence of any Consul or Vice Consul of the United States *within the same allegiance* [emphasis added]”. It was thus abundantly clear that he was given no authority in Singapore. Nothing daunted he composed a carefully worded letter pointing out that while he had in the past six months helped four American ships in Singapore, none had in fact called at Rhio. There were no merchants at Rhio. His main job was to foster trade and assist ships’ captains who came ashore in Singapore to purchase goods and arrange for them to be forwarded the few miles across the strait to Batam, where the cargo could be loaded outside Singapore jurisdiction. He also suggested the appointment of a Vice Consul at Penang, naming John Revely, an American in business there, as candidate. US ships seeking to buy pepper in Sumatra often called at Penang and his suggestion was supported in writing by six captains of such ships.

Captain Lovett had lived with the Balestiers for most of his visit to Singapore and become a close friend. He took the letter with him when *Maria* sailed for New York on 16th November carrying a cargo of 2,100

piculs of pepper, 1,000 of coffee, 530 of Siam sugar, 180 of cassia, 160 of mother of pearl, 330 of tin, 260 of rattans, 50 of sago, 130 of buffalo hides, 18½ of tortoise shell and 2,000 walking canes. The commission on this cargo, most of which Balestier obtained for him in Singapore, must have reduced their financial worries considerably but uncertainty continued as they had no idea when another American ship consigned to them might appear.

Domestic Affairs

The census taken at the end of 1834 showed a total population of just over 26,000 people, of whom roughly 40% were Chinese and 35% Malay. Fewer than one in ten of the Chinese were female and these were almost without exception from the surrounding area rather than from China. Europeans (today these would perhaps be termed Caucasians) numbered 138, a mere 0.5%, of whom 38 were female. The Balestiers, Joseph at 46 and Maria at 49, were both older than most of these Europeans, who were in their twenties or thirties.

To have come some 16,000 miles to a part of the world of which they knew nothing, without letters of introduction and in dire want of funds, shows a determination on the part of Joseph and the total loving support of Maria, who had never before left her very close-knit family. She it was who had to bear the brunt of loneliness and the want of anyone with whom she could openly discuss her fears or who could honestly answer her questions. Bitterly homesick, she could not reveal her desperation even in letters home as she did not want to worry her sister Harriett or her elder brother and sister-in-law. There is no mention in her letters of overt anti-American feeling as such but social customs were unyielding and social positions clearly defined. Even her style of dress differed. She did, however, have one success. She wore her hair braided back round the head when European women still used fake curls and ringlets, which did not stand up well to humid weather, and was delighted when several copied her hairstyle.