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EARLY

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Cover Photo: Kuala Lumpur in about 1887.

The Malaysian Historical Society thanks the Director General of the National Archives for making available the records of the Kuala Lumpur Municipality. We also thank Mr. Donald Davies for lending many rare photographs from his private collection for use in this issue.



An early view of the confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers. The market street bridge can be seen.

The Name 'Kuala Lumpur'

by

MURIN SHEPPARD

As everyone knows, 'Kuala' is the Malay word for 'River Mouth' or 'estuary', and wherever the word is used elsewhere in Malaysia it is usually linked with the name of a large river, and the place is nearly always located near the sea: for example Kuala Trengganu lies at the mouth of the great Trengganu river, and Kuala Selangor lies at the mouth of the Selangor river and was the place of residence of the first three Sultans of Selangor.

How then did the name 'Kuala Lumpur' come to be used for a place which is not a 'river mouth' in the accepted sense, and which is at least 20 miles from the sea. And where is the river 'Lumpur'?

The name was not in collage before the 19th century mining settlement was opened, and it therefore has been invented by some of the early prospectors.

These prospectors came to the Klang river by boat, and as they approached the mouth of the river they entered the 'muddy' water of the Klang, which was called 'Pongkalan' or 'pongkalan' in the Malay word for a landing place or wharf, and 'lumpur' means mud.

When these boats and their passengers reached the junction of the Klang and Gombak rivers, and the miners wished to go ashore, they must have been greatly handicapped by the muddy condition of the landing place. They had the name 'Pongkalan Batu' fresh in their minds, and it would be natural for some of them to call the river junction 'the Muddy Landing Place'. — 'Pongkalan Lumpur'. 'Lumpur' means deep swamp mud.

The non-Malays, who formed the majority of the early workers in this mining village may have shortened the word 'pongkalan' to 'Kalan', and the name 'Kalan Lumpur' then emerged.

The name was spoken long before it was written down, but when the time came to refer to the place in writing, some official, sitting far away from the scene, who was familiar with other Malay place names like Kuala Selangor, may have rejected the abbreviated 'Kalan Lumpur' and converted it to 'Kuala Lumpur', and so the 'muddy landing place' became 'the muddy river mouth', and thus it has remained ever since.