

# Museum Volunteers, JMM

Taking the Mystery out of History

## Federated Malay States Railway

*by Eric Lim*

The introduction of railways in our country occurred in the second half of the 19th century and the British played an important role in its development. However, a Malay Ruler beat the British to the construction of the country's first railway.

He was Maharaja Sir Abu Bakar of Johor who laid the foundation for the construction of the Johore Wooden Railway (JWR) line connecting Johor Bahru and Gunong Pulai where he had envisioned constructing a sanatorium and a hill resort in 1869. James Meldrum was given the task to build the line. In 1875, upon the completion of the first phase, he invited Sir Andrew Clake and his wife to ride on the steam locomotive, which was purchased from India and was subsequently named *Lady Clarke*. A few months later, the incoming Governor, Sir William Jervois was invited for a ride. An article in the *Straits Observer* (Singapore) dated 21 September 1875 reported the abandonment of the JWR line. The JWR was a short-lived railway line purposely built for the Maharaja and his guests.



*Maharaja Sir Abu Bakar / Photo source : Wikimedia Commons*

In 1880, Maharaja Sir Abu Bakar ordered the construction of another railway, connecting Muar town and the coastal settlement of Parit Jawa, to eventually link with Batu Pahat and Johor Bahru. It became known as the Muar State Railway (MSR). Both JWR and MSR were funded from the state's coffers. The early construction was done by Malay and Javanese workers and the line began operation on 11 March 1890. MSR was very profitable due to the high traffic of passengers and goods travelling between the terminals. Children attending English school in Muar travelled free. The opening of Jalan Abdul Rahman in 1918,

greatly affected the traffic of MSR and eventually the line was closed in 1929. Below, news reports of construction workers who uncovered railway sleepers believed to be part of MSR.



Photo source : NST / 3 Sep 2017

[https://www.nst.com.my/news/national/2017/09/275878/johor\\_construction\\_workers\\_uncover\\_state%E2%80%99s\\_first\\_railway\\_built\\_137\\_years\\_ago/](https://www.nst.com.my/news/national/2017/09/275878/johor_construction_workers_uncover_state%E2%80%99s_first_railway_built_137_years_ago/)

The development of the railway system by the British tied up closely with their involvement in the politics of our country. The first phase started after the Pangkor Treaty of 1874 that saw the start of the Residential System. In 1880, Hugh Low, who was the British Resident of Perak, sought the approval and fund for the first British-built commercial railway line linking Taiping to Port Weld. Construction began in 1882 with help from the Pioneer Corporations of the British Army stationed in Ceylon. The line was completed in 1884 and opened for traffic on 1 June 1885. The locomotive was named *Lady Weld*, which later became FMSR 1 and ended its service in 1916.

In Selangor, Frank Swettenham who was then the British Resident recommended the construction of the 19-mile line between Kuala Lumpur and Bukit Kuda. It was opened to traffic on 10 September 1886 and it became the second line built by the British. It was extended from Bukit Kuda to Klang, a distance of 2 1/2 miles on

17 April 1890. *Lady Clarke* from the JWR was used on the construction of the Selangor state railway. It was renamed as FMSR 2 and it survived until scrapping in December 1912.

The third line was in Negeri Sembilan. This time, a firm by the name of Hill and Rathborne was granted a concession to construct and operate the 24 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> mile long line between Seremban and Port Dickson. Construction started in 1888 and it was completed in 1891. The name of the company set up to run this line was Sungai Ujong Railway Company Limited. The locomotive was aptly named *Sungai Ujong* and it was later sent to Selangor and was called FMSR 4. It was sold to a contractor in 1909.

Tin production in our country was the fourth largest in the world in the 1870's, then we became the largest producer in the 1880's and by the 1890's, British Malaya was producing more tin than the world's production combined. Also at this time, the country was heading into agriculture and rubber became the major crop. Commercial cultivation of rubber was developing rapidly and most of the rubber plantations were located along the railway lines.



*Model of locomotive used in the Taiping to Port Weld line displayed at Gallery C, National Museum.  
Photo source : Eric Lim*

By the end of the first phase, twenty railway lines were already being constructed connecting all the major mining towns and districts in Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan to their respective ports. The second phase started in 1896, which saw the amalgamation of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang into the Federated Malay States (FMS) under one central administration headed by Frank Swettenham as the first Resident General.

Frank Swettenham, in a bid to unify the railway lines, put forth several suggestions. He suggested a line from Tapah Road to Kuala Kubu (thus linking Perak and Selangor railway system), a line from Taiping to Kuala Perai (Province Wellesley) and an extension of the Pudoj-Sungai Besi-Cheras to the south to connect to the Sungai Ujong line in Seremban. In 1901, saw the formation of the Federated Malay States Railway (FMSR) and two years later in 1903, Province Wellesley, Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan were connected by rail, linking Perai in the north to Port Dickson in the south. Edwin Spooner was appointed as the first FMSR General Manager. By this time, an additional thirty-seven lines were constructed across the FMS.

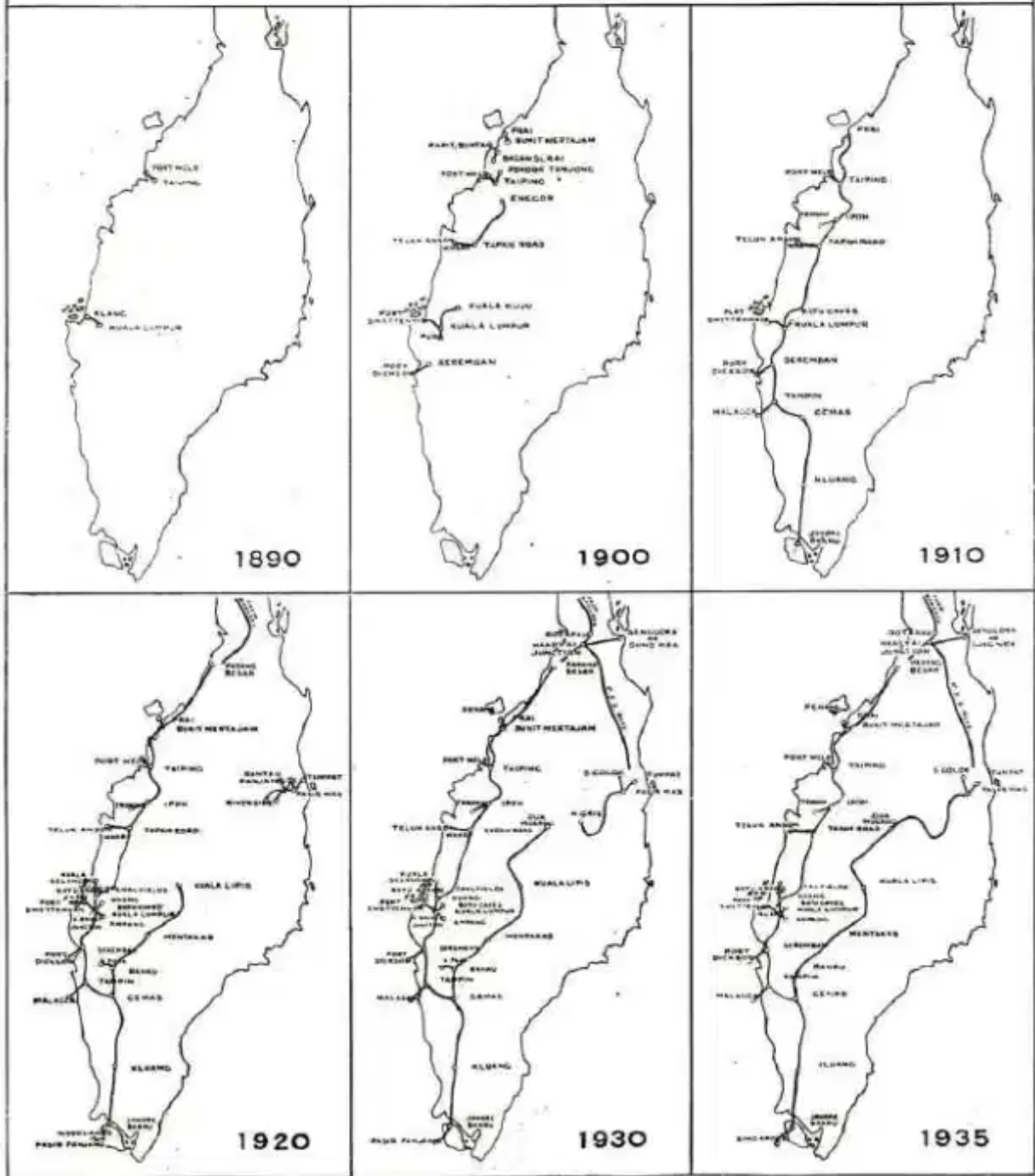
On 1 December 1905, the section from Tampin to Malacca town was officially opened thus extending the North-South trunk line from one Straits Settlement to another. The Straits Times reported on 4 December 1905 that *'it is now possible to leave Malacca at 1 pm and arrive in Penang at 6.21 on the following day instead of taking two to three days by steamer'*. Malacca Government Railway was awarded the concession to construct the railway line. The following year, they extended the main line from Tampin to Gemas and upon completion, Malacca Government Railway was absorbed into the FMSR.

During the expansion of the railway lines in the FMS, Frank Swettenham had wanted to connect the FMSR from Penang to Singapore passing through Johore but it was turned down by Sultan Ibrahim, who took over the throne from Sultan Abu Bakar who had died in 1895. That impasse ended on 11 July 1904 when the Railway Convention was signed in London. Construction began northward from Johore Bahru at the end of 1904 and in March 1905, construction from Gemas moving southward started. The line passing through Johore was completed in August 1907. However, the line was opened to the public on 1 July 1909 and was known as the Johore State Railway. It later came under the FMSR when the FMS government managed to lease it for 21 years, starting from January 1912 with

rental paid each year at an incremental rate. The section to cross the Straits of Johore was made possible with the construction of a causeway at the end of 1919. It was opened for goods trains on 17 September 1923 and later to passenger trains on 1 October 1923.

The next important event that took place was the signing of the Anglo Siamese Treaty a.k.a Bangkok Treaty on 10 March 1909. The treaty was intended to resolve the dispute over railway development and control in the Peninsula. For the latter, the states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu were ceded to the British. These four states became known as the Unfederated Malay States (UMS) and Johore was later added to this grouping.

# DIAGRAMMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEDERATED MALAY STATES RAILWAY CONSTRUCTION 1885 TO 1935.



*Photo source / The Imperial Locomotive : A study of the Railway System in British Malaya 1885 – 1942*

The stage was set for the next grand expansion of the FMSR into the UMS and to the last state in the FMS i.e Pahang. Construction of the railway line connecting Bukit Mertajam to Alor Setar started towards the end of 1912 and it was officially

opened in 1915. It was then linked to Bukit Ketri in Perlis on 15 October 1917 and reached the border town of Padang Besar on 1 March 1918. The line from Padang Besar linked up with the Siamese Railway system and it was opened on 1 July 1918. This marked the start of international train services between the two countries, with an initial schedule of three times a week between Perai and Bangkok. The following year, saw the first international express train service from Thonburi to Malaya. By 1920, it was possible to transverse the entire West coast of Malaya, from Padang Besar to Johore Bahru, by rail.

Between 1910 and 1931 the East Coast line was constructed from Gemas to Pahang and Kelantan, while in Kelantan, construction began from Tumpat. On 15 October 1917, the construction from Gemas had reached Kuala Lipis. In May 1920, it marked another important milestone for the FMSR, with the start of construction of the longest river bridge in the country, the Guillemard Bridge, as a crossing over the Kelantan River. This 600 metres bridge was completed in July 1924. The other river bridge built by FMSR is the Victoria Bridge in Perak, which was built in 1900. The date 5 September 1931 witnessed the completion of the East Coast line connecting Gemas and Bahau (in Negeri Sembilan) through to Mentakab and Kuala Lipis (in Pahang) and finally to Gua Musang, Tumpat and Sungai Golok (in Kelantan).



*Guillemard Bridge / Photo source : Wikimedia Commons*



By 1935, fifty years after the start of the first British built railway line, FMSR had laid 1321 miles of railway tracks and built 213 permanent stations and 76 halts across the Peninsula. Terengganu remained the only state not connected by the FMSR. (The new railway link infrastructure, East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) will be connecting all the East coast states namely Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang to the West coast).

## References

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