

**Salem's Sumatra Trade and the City Seal:
Historical Context and Contemporary Perspectives**

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In November 2025, the Salem City Seal Task Force (CSTF) submitted its official report to the City Council. The form in which it was submitted, however, includes substantially censored versions of the material prepared by the CSTF's two appointed historians, and in a way that also excludes important primary source material obscures the specific citations that were originally provided for reference. Here we present an uncensored, fully-referenced version of that material which supports the argument for preserving Salem's city seal in its current form.

The mishandling of our original notes and citations in the report by the CSTF creates the false impression that the issue is simply a matter of opinion in which the relative weight of empirical support for each side in the form of historical documentation, material sources, or statistical evaluation of feedback from the community is not to be considered.¹ This radically relativist framework for deliberation is, frankly, irresponsible – particularly today in a world in which emotional, fact-free public rhetoric has done so much damage to civil discourse in the public sphere. This document presents the full, un-redacted results of our research into the history of Salem's trade with Sumatra in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the design and development of the city seal to commemorate that trading relationship, and perspectives from contemporary Acehnese academics, artists, journalists, and civil society leaders on how Salem's city seal is regarded in Sumatra today by members of the community that the image actually represents. Taken together, this material presents a compelling case for preserving Salem's city seal as a testament to a history of interactions between American and Asian merchants in ways that challenge contemporary assumptions about intercultural engagement during that pivotal period of our nation's history.

Salem's city seal is rather unusual – and indeed may be unique – among American municipal emblems in its depiction of a person that is neither a colonizing settler nor a colonized native inhabitant of its own

¹ An extended critique of the CSTF report along similar lines has been made by Professor Donna Seger of Salem State University. "Facts, Feelings, and Erasure," *Streets of Salem*, November 24, 2025: <https://streetsofsalem.com/2025/11/24/facts-feelings-and-erasure/>

geographic territory. This distinction is in itself an important consideration in framing our understanding of the Salem city seal in relation to other images on state and city seals and flags that have come under increasing critical scrutiny. The figure of a prosperous Sumatra merchant on the seal represents neither an indigenous resident of the land that was taken to found the English settlement at Naumkeag, nor a heroic paean to the conquering beneficiaries of native genocide. It is thus clearly different, for example, from the representation of a Native American figure on the Massachusetts state flag to which it has been compared by some contemporary critics in Salem. Nevertheless, some of those calling to change the seal have argued even more radically that *any* cross-cultural representation is, by definition, ‘racist’ – thereby forcing any and all historical instances of interaction between ‘Westerners’ and ‘Others’ into pre-ordained interpretive templates of European colonialism and New World genocide.²

While recognizing that indeed the history of the 19th century does provide an extensive catalogue of horrors perpetrated by Americans and Europeans on indigenous and other peoples, we should also acknowledge those historical instances in which other choices were made that pushed back against racism and colonialism – pointing ways toward possibilities of other modes of cross-cultural engagement. The city seal of Salem commemorates one generally under-acknowledged example of just such a case, and one for which the people of Salem can and indeed should be proud.³ The seal was designed and officially established in 1839 to recognize the distinctive place of Sumatra in the city’s history of long-distance maritime trade. Its depiction of ‘an Atjehnese’⁴ in the dress of a wealthy merchant in recognition of the city’s source of prosperity through maritime

² Euro-American histories of colonial conquest, subjugation, and genocide must be approached critically by academic historians – and condemned by any person of conscience. At the same time, we should caution ourselves against indulging in what Olúfémí Táíwò has powerfully critiqued as the peculiar form of ‘narcissism’ that has degraded the project of ‘decolonization’ into imagined dichotomies that dispenses with the complexity of actual historical experience (*Against Decolonization: Taking African Agency Seriously*. London: Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2022). Emotions of the present moment cannot justify the interpretive violence of allowing any one theoretical model of cross-cultural encounter pre-determine our readings of any particular chapter of this history. Simply because European companies and empires perpetrated horrors in their pursuit of colonial expansion during the early modern period does not mean this is the only type of engagement possible between different peoples everywhere and always in history. Exceptions matter both for the particulars of historical accuracy, and to provide opportunities for reflection on alternative paths that might have been – and might still be – taken toward progressive goals. Salem’s Sumatra trade in the early 19th century is an important exception with significant pedagogical potential in a post-colonial age. Acknowledging this is not meant in any way to justify, excuse, or gloss over historic instances of injustice, racism, and violence, but rather to point to exceptions that shed light on other ways in which things might have gone had different choices been made, and to kindle a bit of hope about how things might go better in the future.

³ For more on Salem’s continuing historical relations to Aceh: Donna Seger. “Salem Can’t Lose Sumatra,” <https://streetsofsalem.com/2024/09/23/salem-cant-lose-sumatra/>

⁴ “The Municipal Seal of Salem,” *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute* 8.1 (1868): 3–9; Original primary source material held in the collections of the Peabody Essex Museum: Phillips Library MH 178: Joseph Peabody Family Papers, 1821–1905, 1923–1928, undated, MH 178.

trade with Asia in the early 19th century is a considerable source of pride for many Acehnese today – several of whom have expressed that they are, frankly, offended by the appropriation of their global representation by a group of activists in the United States that does not include a single individual from the actual community being represented on the seal.⁵

I. Salem and the Sumatra Pepper Trade

The city of Salem, Massachusetts has a rich history of maritime trade that is intertwined with the region of Aceh at the northern end of the Indonesian island of Sumatra.⁶ In 1789 Captain Jonathan Carnes of Salem learned of new pepper markets expanding along the west coast of Sumatra and soon thereafter other Salem captains found their way there in search of pepper and the huge profits it could bring.⁷ Before Carnes' arrival, Sumatran entrepreneurs including the enterprising Lebby Dappa had already begun expanding independent pepper cultivation into areas along the west coast that could avoid the attempts at monopolies on Sumatran pepper by both the English East India Company, and the Aceh Sultanate.⁸ As a weakening Aceh Sultanate lost the ability to effectively control the west coast of Sumatra, British East India Company officer John Anderson characterized the pepper trade booming there as attracting trade directly from "Bengal, Madras, and Bombay..." but that "the direct American trade was... the most important branch" in the early nineteenth century.⁹ The supercargoes of Salem ships did a brisk business in this new frontier of free trade.¹⁰ Dealing directly with local

⁵ In her remarks during the [July 14th Listening Session](#) (password: e^tW5Rn%), one Acehnese speaker objected to the fact that "decisions about cultural symbols are being made without talking to the people they depict." She also urged for more open and inclusive discussion on the issue: "I think we need a more nuanced, future-oriented thinking..." and called attention to the fact that way that we understand and interpret images can change over time and referenced in particular that the umbrella "might look Chinese now". To address these issues of interpretation, she urged us to consider approaching historical images by way of "non-essentializing discourses" – something she noted is generally welcomed in progressive discourses on race, ethnicity, and identity in the United States, Indonesia, and elsewhere.

⁶ On Salem's maritime Asian trade and its role in shaping the city's history: James Duncan Phillips. *Salem and the Indies: The Story of the Great Commercial Era of the City* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947); James Duncan Phillips. *Salem in the Eighteenth Century* (Salem, Massachusetts: Essex Institute, 1969).

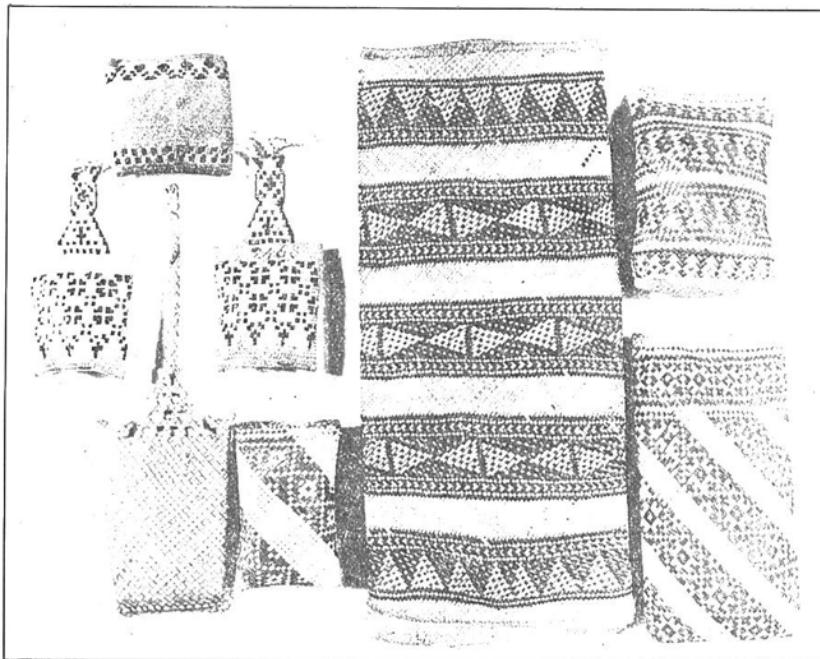
⁷ On the origins of this trade, and its conduct over the late 18th to early 19th centuries: Putnam, George Granville. *Salem Vessels and their Voyages I: A History of the Pepper Trade with the Island of Sumatra* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1924); Farish A. Noor. *America's Encounters with Southeast Asia, 1800-1900: Before the Pivot* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

⁸ John Anderson. *Acheen, and the Ports on the North and East Coast of Sumatra, with Incidental Notices of the Trade in the Eastern Seas, and the Aggressions of the Dutch* (London, 1840), pp. 29-24; 159-160.

⁹ Anderson, *Acheen*, pp. 38, 159.

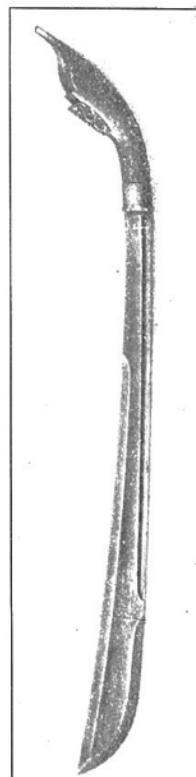
¹⁰ Details of the imposition of the EIC's pepper monopoly in Sumatra, and other aspects of pepper cultivation during this period is presented in William Marsden. *The History of Sumatra* – reprint of the Third Edition, Introduced by John Bastin (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 129-146. Marsden laments the damage done to British interests by the incursions of American traders along the coast stretching north of the EIC's fort at Bencoolen (146), noting that the inhabitants of "the northern countries of the island" (including the

datu (chiefs) to purchase pepper grown along the foothills of Aceh's west coast proved mutually profitable - and over a crucial half century of early U.S. history, Salem's maritime trade made the city one of the wealthiest cities in America establishing the fortunes that built some of our most famous buildings,¹¹ and establishing the foundations for the remarkable collections that are today held by the Peabody Essex Museum.¹²



PEPPER BAGS BROUGHT FROM SUMATRA BY CAPTAIN JAMES S. KIMBALL AND OTHER EARLY 19TH CENTURY SHIPMASTERS, AND THE SWORD OF RAJAH PO ADAM, WHICH HE PRESENTED TO CAPTAIN CHARLES M. ENDICOTT, OF SALEM

Photographed from the originals in the Peabody Museum



Sumatran Artifacts in the Collections of the Peabody-Essex Museum

IMAGE SOURCE: George Granville Putnam, *Salem Vessels and their Voyages I: A History of the Pepper Trade with the Island of Sumatra* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1924), facing p. 73.

The city seal reflects dynamics of the entangled histories of Sumatra and Salem that are not immediately apparent from an aesthetic appreciation of architecture, or the presentation of any single museum artifact. In particular, its presentation of the image of a person from Aceh opens up a space for exploration and appreciation

Acehnese) "are found to be more independent also, and refuse to cultivate plantations upon any other terms than those on which they can deal with private traders" (Marsden, 130).

¹¹ On the broader cultural impact of the Sumatra trade on Salem, and on U.S. History more broadly, see: *Salem: Maritime Salem in the Age of Sail* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service Division of Publications, 2009).

¹² On the early history of the institution that is currently known as the Peabody Essex Museum: Walter Muir Whitehill. *The East India Marine Society and the Peabody Museum of Salem: A sesquicentennial history*. Salem, MA: Peabody Museum, 1949.

of the interpersonal relationships through which Salem merchants carried out their trade on the northwestern coast of Sumatra over the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The preponderance of primary sources documenting direct engagements between Salem merchants and mariners and their Sumatran counterparts reflects dynamics of interaction that disrupt the uniform application of colonial paradigms of coercive trade monopoly.¹³ Dozens of historical documents in manuscript, print, and even engraved in stone testify to a range of relationships that reflect mutual respect and deliberate decisions on the part of the Salem traders to engage with local merchants in ways that positively distinguished American traders from the representatives of European companies active in Southeast Asia at the time. Evidence of the dynamics of interaction between Salem shipmasters, supercargoes, and other literate visitors to the Pepper Coast – and the regard in which the former held the latter – can be found in a number of log-books, journals, and published accounts. That source material makes it clear that relations between Salem seafarers and the merchants of Aceh's west coast in the early 19th century cannot be simplistically characterized as 'colonial encounters'. Indeed, in 1801 John Crowninshield reflected on the approach he had taken in his dealings on the west coast of Aceh, and how that deliberately differentiated him from Europeans active in the Sumatra trade at a that time, writing:

...I was a stranger come amongst them to transact business merely as a merchant & had no right to interfere in their internal affairs at all. It laid with themselves to abide by their own laws & customs & that they never ought to trust any foreigner to meddle or disturb their internal police.¹⁴

Crowninshield further elaborated on his pleasant surprise of his experience in Sumatra as he found the people that he met there to be rather different from the way that they had been described by the European authors that he had read in preparation for his voyage:

...Americans...have been afraid from the information they have received of the disposition of the natives but it must be remembered this information has been given by those whose interest it was to deceave ...representing them as worse than savages...how inconsistent with reason & common sense.¹⁵

¹³ For an introduction to the broader history of Aceh, and the current state of its historiography: R. Michael Feener. "The Acehnese Past and its Present State of Study," in: R. Michael Feener, Patrick Daly & Anthony Reid, Eds., *Mapping the Acehnese Past* (Leiden: Koninklijk Instituut voor het Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, 2011), pp. 1-24.

¹⁴ John Crowninshield. "Log book of the Salem Ship *America III*, at Sumatra, 1801," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 80 (1944): 152.

¹⁵ Crowninshield, "Log book of the Salem Ship *America III*," 153.

In fact, he reported on discussing this very matter of prejudiced representation with his Sumatran counterparts:

I told them as well as I could make them understand the reason the Americans had not traded largely with them before & that it was from the bad character we had heard of them.¹⁶

Once established, trade with Salem ships proved attractive to many local merchants and *datu* (chiefs) along the west coast of Aceh, some of whom eagerly adapted to the conditions presented by this new and expanding market. Nathaniel Bowditch, who served as supercargo on Sumatra pepper voyage, noted that by 1803, at “several native ports on the northwestern coast of Sumatra, where the Americans trade for pepper, -- Analaboo-Sooso, Tangar, Tally-Poo, Muckie, &c.”... “pepper consignments were regularly weighed with American scales and measures.”¹⁷ Bowditch also provided some details about how the trade for pepper was conducted:

On your arrival at any of these ports you contract with the Datoo for the pepper, and fix the price. If more than one vessel is at the port, the pepper which daily comes to the scales is shared between them, as they can agree : or they take it day by day, alternately. Sometimes, the Datoo contracts to load one vessel before any other takes any, and he holds to his agreement as long as he finds for his interest, and no longer.¹⁸

This mode of commercial asymmetrical engagement – in which the merchants from the United States were positioned as accepting the terms dictated by local counterparts along the Aceh coast is a striking departure from conventional depictions of colonial coercion to enforce trade on terms unfairly in their favor.

Other Salem seafarers took acceptance of local custom even further, presenting themselves in both dress and deportment in ways that were apparently accepted as further evidence of an approach to trade that substantially differed from the practice of Europeans associated with the English and Dutch corporate trade monopolies. George Nichols, for example, reported adopting certain local forms of clothing when conducting business along the Pepper Coast, noting that, “Nothing pleased the natives more than to find me ready to conform to their customs.”¹⁹ Far from being viewed as ‘cultural appropriation’ in the idiosyncratic idiom of some activists in the U.S. today, the accommodation of local practice by Salem merchants in 19th-century Sumatra were apparently welcomed gestures, and further facilitated trading relationships that brought considerable profits to both sides of an increasingly lucrative pepper trade over the early decades of the 19th century.

¹⁶ Crowninshield, “Log book of the Salem Ship *America III*,” 144.

¹⁷ *Memoir of Nathaniel Bowditch* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1841), p. 72.

¹⁸ *Memoir of Nathaniel Bowditch*, 72-73.

¹⁹ M. Nichols. *George Nichols: Salem Shipmaster and Merchant* (Salem, Mass.: The Salem Press Co., 1913): 56. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89076991645&seq=9>

Salem merchants were aware of the impact that their distinctive approach to the Sumatra trade had made, and saw it in their continued interests to distinguish themselves from the imperious posturing of their European rivals. Captain Luther Dana, for example, mused in one of his entries to the journal of the ship *Recovery* in 1802 that:

Probably that if we had treated them as Europeans in general are disposed to treat the meaner Casts of the inhabitants of India, we should not have had these privileges & many others, but been in a continual quarrel and jarr with them.²⁰

Other American shipmasters commented on the differences between the ways that their vessels were generally received in the islands of Indonesia, and how that contrasted to local attitudes toward European company ships. Captain Amasa Delano, for example, reported that upon his first call off the coast of Java in 1791:

...drawing near to the land, it will be found that the Javans will come off in their canoes to trade to the ship. They will bring fowls, parrots, monkies, and sometimes pigs, plantains, melons, sweet potatoes, cocoa-nuts, oranges and green turtles. They will likewise bring off great numbers of Malacca joint canes: all of which they sell for old clothes, knives, and any trifles. But as soon as the Dutch boat is seen coming off from Anger point, ever one of the canoes of the natives will leave the ship, as they are in fear of the Dutch.²¹

Delano also notes similar patterns in his interactions with Malays settled more broadly across the archipelago at the time – as for example on the coast of New Guinea, where he and his crew were able to negotiate permission to land after distinguishing themselves and their vessel from European merchant ships: “The Europeans and others have not conducted themselves with sufficient integrity and disinterestedness to remove all apology for this suspicion.”²²

The mutual regard and recognition of the profits that peaceful and respectful modes of interaction could support is also reflected in one of the most striking surviving artifacts relating to Salem’s trade with Sumatra: a marble stele bearing an English-language inscription and ornamented with the image of a classical urn at its apex.²³ That stone is now set as a monument near the office of the village head of Kuala Batee (‘Qualla Battoo’),

²⁰ Luther Dana. *Journal of [the ship] Recovery*, 1802, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum: MH 88 (2.13): https://archive.org/details/mh88v02_recovery/page/n69/mode/2up, p. 201.

²¹ Amasa Delano. *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres comprising Three Voyages Round the World together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands* (London: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 37.

²² Delano, *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, 85.

²³ In situ digital documentation of this inscription at Kuala Batee was conducted by the Maritime Asia Heritage Survey (MAHS) Field Team in August, 2025 under record number MAHS-IDN-ACH-ABD-KLB-S-002-F-0001. The complete MAHS archive is made available free online at: R. Michael Feener (Ed.) *Maritime Asia Heritage Survey Archive*: <https://maritimeasiaheritage.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/>) An interactive 3D model model of

but this remarkable object was originally produced in Salem and sent to Sumatra to mark the Muslim burial of a trade official (*shahbandar*) of Kuala Batee who died at that Sumatran pepper port on 13 April, 1824.



An inscribed gravestone from Salem sent to the west coast of Aceh
to mark the Muslim grave of a Sumatran trading partner (d. 1824)

IMAGE SOURCE: R. Michael Feener (Ed.) *Maritime Asia Heritage Survey Archive*

<https://maritimeasiaheritage.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/>

MAHS-IDN-ACH-ABD-KLB-S-002-F-0001

this inscribed stone is available at: <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/shewbuntar-inscription-stone-aceh-indonesia-777efc01adb64c00b9978f4d87d8909c> The production, movement, and local reception of the stone is further discussed in: R. Michael Feener & Dan Finamore, "A Salem Stone on a Sumatran Shore," (forthcoming).

The epitaph reads:

This marble points ot the grave of SHEWBUNTAR who died at Quallabatto 13 April 1824
Æt. 42. As he was ambitious of distinction, active, persevering & energetic, success followed
his efforts and his dominion & reputation was widely extended. Personally brave he was
cautious & calculating. In more cultivated society, his fame would have been probably that of
a great conqueror & history would have recorded it.

He had imperfections as well as virtues. He was generous & open towards his friends severe &
implacable towards his enemies. The traditions of his Countrymen will preserve the memory
of his abilities and his conquests. Strangers will recollect the kindness of his temper & the
friendliness of his conduct.

Not only do the words of the inscription convey a deep, personal relationship based on recognition of genuine human qualities across a hemisphere of cultural distance, but the very materiality of the object on which those words are carved testifies to the real expense and effort invested into commemorating that relationship. The Shahbandar's counterparts back in Salem obviously went to considerable lengths to commission, pay for, and ship this impressive monument half a world away as a posthumous gift. The gravestone of 'Shewbuntar' at Kuala Batee is thus an artifact of compelling testimony literally carved in stone that conveys the tenor of the personal relationships forged through encounters between Salem merchants and their Sumatran counterparts in the early 19th century.

Many Salem merchants in fact deliberately strove to conduct themselves in ways that distinguished them from representatives of European colonial powers in the Indonesian Archipelago. Moreover, the distinctive reputation that 'the Americans' (as represented by Salem merchants on the Aceh coast) and the trading benefits that it proved to carry did not go unnoticed by their European competitors. Numerous documents produced by officers of the East India Company at the time reflect the grudging acknowledgment of the success of what Salem merchants had come to establish as the 'American model' of trade over the policies of forced monopoly and slave labor that had been the norm for European commercial interests in the Indonesian Archipelago. Referencing a comment by Sir T.S. Raffles (who had been posted to the British fort on Sumatra's west coast at Bengkulu), James Gould notes that Salem's Sumatra trade had "proved that free enterprise could produce far greater results than slave labor."²⁴ John Crawfurd, one of the most learned authors stationed in Southeast Asia by the East India Company at the time commented even more extensively and admiringly on what se the Salem merchants of the Sumatra trade apart from competing European commercial interests:

²⁴ James W. Gould. "Sumatra - America's Pepperpot, 1784-1873" *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 92.1 (1956): 209.

The first appearance of an Anglo-American trader in the ports of India in the year 1784 is the true era of the commencement of fair and legitimate commerce between India and the civilized nations of the west... During all the time of the American trade, it has never connected itself with any political concern of the natives, never embroiled itself in their quarrels; nor has any American ship ever been cut off by the rudest tribe they have dealt with... [Rather]... by their conciliatory conduct... Their trade, in all this time, has been progressively flourishing... [so that] the success of their mode of carrying on the Indian trade, its immeasurable advantage over the monopoly system may, at all events, be proved, when it is remembered that the Dutch and English had been little more than half this time engaged in the same trade, when they had already quarrelled with and insulted every maritime power in the Indies, invaded, conquered, and plundered those who had received them hospitably, quarrelled with and massacred one another and, by all these means, subjected their trade to expenses which no legitimate profit could cover...²⁵

Here again, ample evidence coming from even adversarial perspectives stresses the extent to which Salem's involvement in the pepper trade cannot be easily characterized as a 'colonial encounter' simply to fit the frameworks of contemporary polemics.

No evidence exists of any attempts on the part of the Americans to establish settlements in Sumatra, nor of initiatives to build fortified trading stations, or to use the force of arms to secure favorable trading terms. On this the Americans remained consistent well into the second half of the 19th century. On January 31st 1874 - soon after the start of the Dutch War in Aceh - a Russian diplomat recorded remarks made by the American Secretary of State during dinner at the Swedish Legation in Washington, stating when he pointed to a map of Southeast Asia saying: "There is the island of Sumatra. It was offered to us: but we don't want it. It's too far off."²⁶ Such was the opinion of Washington. The Acehnese, for their part appear to have trusted the non-colonial nature of American interest in Sumatra to the extent that they actively engaged the American consul in Singapore for support against the Dutch invasion of Aceh in 1883.²⁷

²⁵ John Crawfurd. *History of the Indian Archipelago: Containing and Account of the Manners, Arts, Languages, Religions, Institutions, and Commerce of its Inhabitants* (Edinburgh, 1820), III: 253-254.

²⁶ James W. Gould. *Americans in Sumatra* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 4.

²⁷ Gregory A. Swedberg. "'Deeply Wronged:' American Diplomacy and the Origins of the Last Dutch War for Empire in Sumatra," *Journal of Asian History* 44.1 (2010): 38-50. Sultan Ala' al-Din Mahmud Shah expressed his high regard for Studer in a Jawi-script Malay letter noting "The Honorable Consulate of the Government of America, now residing in Singapore... manifests much kindness in his transactions." The American consul at that time, Adolph G. Studer warmly welcomed a succession of delegations sent from the Sultan of Aceh to Singapore and wrote impassioned pleas to his superiors imploring U.S. assistance for their cause: "Truly the nation of Atcheen, in spite of all the bad things said of them by the Dutch, have been deeply wronged." The authorities in Washington, however, were unpersuaded, and refrained from any intervention into the Dutch war in Aceh.

It is important to note here that while Dutch politicians of the later 19th century attempted to include cutting off American influence on Sumatra as one of several flimsy justifications for their invasion of Aceh in 1873, subsequent Dutch historians of Aceh have tended to view even the American attack on Kuala Batee as something rather different from (and completely marginal to) the major reconfigurations of European colonial power in Sumatra in the 19th century following the 1824 Treaty of London which divided the Southeast Asian spheres of Dutch and British colonial control, respectively.²⁸ Likewise, post-colonial Indonesian-language historiography of Aceh in the 19th century does not frame discussions of the United States' or Salem's commercial interests in Sumatra in relation to the extensive treatment that competing Dutch and British colonial powers generally receive from Indonesian historians of colonialism. Mention of the Americans is strikingly absent, for example, in the chapter on that period of colonial history in Mohammad Said's classic work on Aceh, *Atjeh Sepandjang Abad*.²⁹

The story of Salem's Sumatra trade, like that of all human endeavors, is however not without its dark chapters. The great stain upon this record comes in the form of not one, but two, acts of Sumatran piracy and armed American response thereto. On February 7th, 1831, while her captain and a small detachment were ashore at Kuala Batee... an armed group of local Malays boarded the Salem vessel *Friendship*. Several of her crew were killed as the ship was taken.³⁰ In response to this act of piracy, the U.S. Navy issued orders for the frigate *Potomac* to proceed to Qualla Battoo to investigate the incident and to demand appropriate redress. Their rules of engagement were clarified in considerable detail:

On your arrival at Quallah Battoo, you will obtain from intelligent ship-masters, supercargoes, and others, engaged in the American trade in that neighbourhood, such information as they might possess in respect of the nature of government there, the piratical character of the population, and the flagrant circumstances of the injury before mentioned. Should the information substantially correspond to what is given to you in documents marked A and B, the President of the United States, or order that prompt redress may be obtained for these wrongs, directs that you proceed to demand of the Raja, or the authorities at Quallah-Batloo, restitution of the property plundered, or indemnity thereof, as well as for injury done to the vessel; and the immediate punishment of those concerned with the murder of the American citizens. Great care must be taken to have such vessel conduct with caution, forbearance, and good faith towards the natives; to render any assistance to American citizens; to make as

²⁸ J. Kreemer. *Atjeh: Algemeen Samenvattend Overzicht van Land en Volk van Atjeh en Onderhoorigheden* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1922), Vol. I: p. 10. For the broader context of Dutch relations with Aceh up to 1857, see: E.B. Kielstra. *Beschrijving van den Atjeh-Oorlog met gebruikmaking der officieele bronnen, door het departement van koloniën daartoe afgestaan* ('s-Gravenhage: De Gebroeders van Cleef, 1883), Vol. I, pp. 11-28.

²⁹ Mohammad Said. *Atjeh Sepandjang Abad* (Medan, 1961), Vol. I, pp. 243-256.

³⁰ Putnam, *Salem Vessels* I: 74-110.

favourable an impression as possible upon the population, of the justice and strength of our government...³¹

Despite these clear orders, upon arrival in Kuala Batee Commodore Downes of the *Potomac* dispensed with any local intelligence gathering and launched a pre-dawn surprise attack that resulted in the killing of women and other non-combatants.

One of the earliest reports of what transpired at Kuala Batee was published by the *New York Observer* on 7 July, 1832. The publication of that account of the violence perpetrated by American forces on Sumatran civilians called attention to the fact that Downes had flagrantly disregarded the official Naval Office orders for their mission: “The orders given prior to the attack were to spare all the women and children... There were several women killed who had the hardihood to take up arms when they saw their husbands fall at their feet...”³² Progressive publications in the American popular press of the day condemned the violence, as did Downes’ superiors in the military chain of command. An official reprimand was issued on July 16th, 1832, reading: “The President regrets that you were not able to before attacking the Malays...to obtain...fuller information of the particulars of their outrage on the *Friendship*...” The letter requested further information on his conduct, noting that “it may hereafter become material.”³³ However, as then-president Jackson expressed his “highest commendation” for Downes, no charges came to be filed.

Downes was nonetheless castigated by the press for instigating a pre-emptive ground assault, “...ordering the wanton destruction of the entire settlement of Quallah Battoo, of choosing not to negotiate with the belligerents, and of ordering the slaughter of women and children, as well who were unarmed.”³⁴ His response to such critiques only further corroborated his guilt, as he admitted that his decision to pre-emptively attack was based solely on prejudice:

No demand of satisfaction was made previous to my attack, because I was satisfied, from what knowledge I already had of the character of the people, that no such demand would be answered, except by refusal, and that such refusal would proceed from want of ability, as well as of inclination, it being a habit generally among this people to spend their money as soon as it is obtained.³⁵

³¹ Reynolds, Jeremiah N. *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac, Under the command of Commodore John Downes, during the Circumnavigation of the Globe, in the years 1831, 1832, 1833, and 1834; Including a Particular Account of the Engagement at Quallah-Battoo, on the Coast of Sumatra, with all the Official Documents Relating to the Same* (New York: Harpers & Bros., 1835).

³² Farish A. Noor. *America's Encounters with Southeast Asia, 1800-1900: Before the Pivot* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), p. 53.

³³ Reynolds, *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac*, pp. 116-117.

³⁴ Farish A. Noor. “America in Southeast Asia before the ‘Pivot’: the ‘Battle of Quallah Battoo’ in 1832,” *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Working Paper No. 275* (12 June 2014), p. 10.

³⁵ Reynolds, *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac*, 115.

For context, it is important to note here that Downes was himself not from Salem and had never been involved in the pepper trade prior to his initiation of the attack on Kuala Batee. His prejudices here seem rather to be grounded in the kind of European literature that the Salem merchant John Crowninshield had so forcefully critiqued decades earlier.

The punitive expedition carried out at Kuala Batee ('Quallabattoo') has nevertheless been repeatedly cited by critics of the Salem city seal as 'proof' of the inherent racism and colonialism of Salem's historic relationship to Sumatra. One short excerpt of text in particular has been repeatedly quoted in this connection:

The Inhabitants of Acheen are the most vicious of any on the coast. They are proud, perfidious, and envious. With an outward show of being strict Mahometans, they are the most consummate hypocrites...³⁶

These words are from the pen of Charles Endicott, the captain who had lost the *Friendship*, in his own narrative of the event. The content of those disparaging remarks, however, were not original to Endicott but rather a translation (apparently his own?) a passage from an older European source: a French account of Aceh from the early 17th century.³⁷ Far from being an essential distillation of the character of Salem's Sumatra trade, however, Endicott's embittered remarks were an aberration among a literature that more broadly reflects more complex and nuanced interactions between Salem merchants and their Sumatran counterparts. That longer history needs to be carefully considered in evaluating this statement from a single captain, and the subsequent actions of a rogue U.S. Naval Officer.

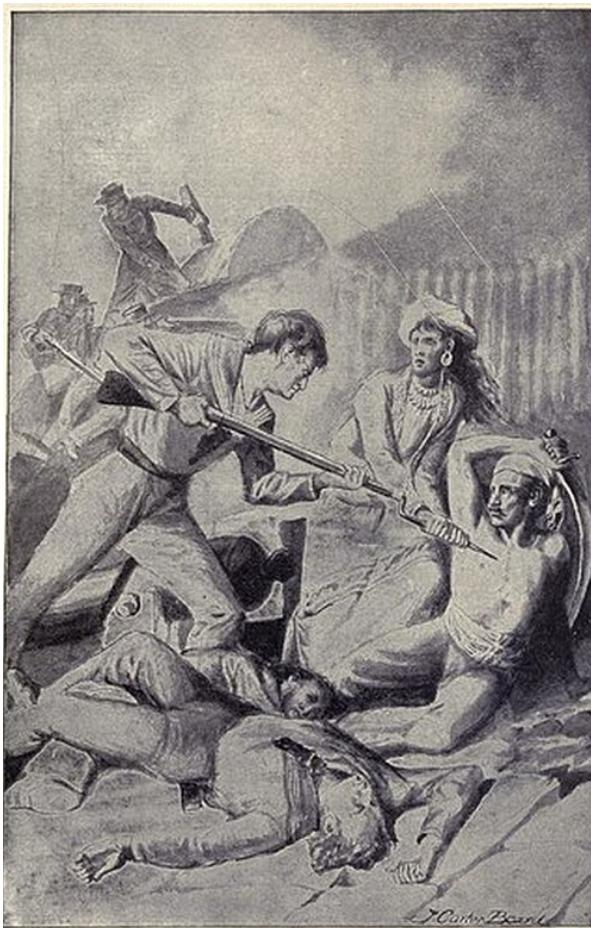
The need to recognize more nuance in our appreciation of this history has also been recommended by Farish Noor in his work on the 19th-century 'media fall-out' of press coverage of the American attack on Kuala Batee. Noor sees the public debate around the event as "...a reminder for those who may mistakenly believe that 19th century Western colonial adventurism and expansionism was without its critics back home..."³⁸ Critical perspectives on the actions of Commodore Downes and the marines he commanded on the *Potomac* continued

³⁶ Charles M. Endicott, *Narrative of the Piracy and Plunder of the Ship Friendship, of Salem, on the West Coast of Sumatra, in February 1831 ; And the Massacre of Part of her Crew ; Also her Re-capture out of the Hands of the Malay Pirates*. Salem: Essex Institute, 1859, p. 4.

³⁷ Agustin de Beaulieu. *Mémoires d'un voyage aux Indes Orientales, 1619-1622, Introduction, notes, et bibliographie de Denys Lombard* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême Orient/ Maisonneuve & Larose, 1996). This would appear to be one significant example of the sort of negatively prejudicial European sources on Sumatra that Captain John Crowninshield explicitly contrasted to his own experiences of direct interactions with his trading counterparts on the west coast of Aceh.

³⁸ Farish Noor, "Attack, Reprisal and dealing with the Media Fall-Out: The Battle of Quallah Battoo in 1832," *Media Syari'ah* 16.1 (2014), p. 259.

through the end of the 19th century, as evidenced by a striking image of American aggression in Sumatra circulated as an illustration in a popular U.S. history textbook:



J. Carter Beard's illustration 'Quallah Battoo'

IMAGE SOURCE: Edward S. Ellis, *The History of Our Country: The United States* (1898)
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_Quallah_Battoo.jpg

The depiction here is striking in its depiction of the naked aggression of U.S. forces in contrast to the vulnerability of the half-fallen Acehnese man and the dramatic intervention of a woman to save him. The inclusion of such an image in a popular American history textbook would seem to indicate that even several decades after the 'Battle of Qualla Battoo' popular opinion was not unequivocally in support of the military action taken by Commander Downes on the coast of Sumatra.

Nor did the American attack on Qualla Battoo seem to permanently spoil the appetite of Sumatran merchants to continue their trade with Salem. Even after the attack of the *Potomac* on Qualla Battoo we find evidence of continued engagement on the part of local leaders from settlements along the west coast of Aceh in the form of letters written in Jawi (Arabic-script Malay) appearing to Salem ship captains to trade with them –

as, for example, in this letter from the Raja Bujong of Trumon to the captain of the Salem Ship *Borneo* inviting him to trade:



Letter from Raja Bujong of Trumon to the Captain of the Salem Ship *Borneo* – May 16th, 1833

IMAGE SOURCE: George Granville Putnam, *Salem Vessels and their Voyages I: A History of the Pepper Trade with the Island of Sumatra* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1924)

In fact, American ships continued to call at Trumon and other ports along the pepper coast where they were generally welcomed in the years following the *Potomac*'s attack on Kuala Batee.

The second U.S. military intervention on the northwest coast of Sumatra took place in August 1838, the U.S merchant ship *Eclipse* was boarded and attacked by pirates who killed several members of the crew in the course of plundering its cargo. Upon receiving news of the incident, the US Frigate *Columbine* (then at Ceylon) was dispatched to Sumatra where it carried out a second bombardment of Kuala Batee and landed marines at

Muckie where the town was set ablaze.³⁹ This attack was met similarly met with public criticism back in the States, sparking further debate over American projections of military power in Asia. As Farish Noor writes, these incidents of piracy and naval retribution:

...did not lead to calls for more direct and lasting intervention in Sumatran affairs, and was not accompanied by calls for the colonization of Sumatra. It would take another seven decades for American public opinion to shift to a more expansionist register, when the United States would play a decisive role in its war against Spain and its eventual colonisation of the Philippines in 1900.⁴⁰

It was in fact in the same year as the *Eclipse* incident that some of Salem's leading citizens designed the city's seal to commemorate their trading relationship with the people of Aceh on Sumatra's west coast. In that context, the design and adoption of the Salem city seal marks a deliberate attempt to recognize a more open mode of engagement with Asia than was the norm in the United States at that time.⁴¹ It can also be seen as an attempt to imprint upon the future of the city a vision that was outward looking, cosmopolitan, and indeed appreciative of the ways in which trade with Sumatra brought prosperity to Salem, even at a time when anti-Asian racism and support of colonial projects were growing in many sectors of American society.

Since the turn of the 19th century, Salem traders had established close relationships with Sumatran merchants that were mutually beneficial and built upon significant trust. Referring to the Sumatran trade in an 1815 address to Congress, Thomas Perkins made a point to note that: "The Malays on the Coast of Sumatra are trusted with large sums"⁴² – and this trust was also expressed in a range of gestures, statements and actions that were remarkably progressive for that time. Looking beyond the Sumatra pepper trade in particular to a broader range of 19th -century sources from Salem we indeed find evidence of initiatives on multiple fronts wherein some of Salem's most eminent citizens argued at both the local and national levels for more respectful and ethical treatment of their Sumatran counterparts, and for inbound immigrants from other parts of Asia. The Rev. Bentley, for example opposed in principle the idea of promoting Christian missionizing of Muslims in Aceh being advanced in his day by some New England theologians:

³⁹ Fitch, Taylor. *The Flag Ship, or A Voyage Around the World in the United States Frigate Columbia* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1840).

⁴⁰ Farish Noor, "Attack, Reprisal and dealing with the Media Fall-Out: The Battle of Quallah Battoo in 1832," p. 281.

⁴¹ The story of the rise in anti-Asian racism and its institutional dimensions over the later 19th and early 20th centuries is told in: Erika Lee. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Those developments, however, follow a rather different trajectory than that which was pursued nearly a century earlier in the maritime encounters of Salem seafarers in Sumatra and elsewhere in Asia.

⁴² James R. Fichter, *So Great a Profit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 204.

The Andover Professors exult that an administration which refused their wishes for Missionary & other incorporations has been so soon changed & endeavour to impeach Mr. B. Crowninshield of the House & of Salem as a Deist from his open resistance to the project for the Missions of the East Indies. Mr. Spaulding says they expressed themselves in the strongest language & have appeared again with their petitions to the Legislature. From the present state of the Senate, it is needful to make Mr. C. odious to destroy his influence if possible, in that board. Religious frenzy needs only the civil patronage to render it as active as it ever was in this or any other country.⁴³

Such active defense of the religious liberty of men and women living in distant parts of Asia that were perceived by many of the time as theaters of missionary proselytization testifies to the degree of respect shown for the people of Sumatra and their religious liberty by prominent citizens in Salem. Indeed, Bentley's knowledge of and high regard for Islam in particular is remarkable not only for his own time, but even arguably for many Americans today.⁴⁴ Significant respect for the religiosity of Sumatra's Malay Muslims was even expressed by one of the official chroniclers of the *Potomac*'s attack on Kuala Batee. Francis Warriner, who often laced his narrative with pious Christian sentiments, himself noted that: "...The Mohammedans are more firmly attached to the rites of their religion than we are to ours, and they often more rigidly observe the precepts of the Koran, it is to be feared, than Christians do those of the bible. Who is there in our country that would give *one hundred dollars for a Bible*? Yet the Mohammedans offered this sum for a Koran, which he had captured at one of the forts at Quallah Battoo..."⁴⁵

This tone of respect and commitment to equitable engagement with Asian trading partners was, moreover, by no means restricted to the sphere of religion. In 1820, Salem merchants appealed to the U.S. Senate for the preservation of the open and equal trading terms that they had been practicing in Sumatra:

...at a moment when the statesmen of the old world [*Europe*], in admiration of the success of our policy [free trade], are relaxing the rigour of their own systems [*monopoly/exploitation*], and yielding themselves to the rational doctrine, that national wealth is best promoted by a free interchange of commodities, upon principles of perfect reciprocity. May the memorialists be permitted to say, that it would be a strange anomaly in America

⁴³ *The Diary of Rev William Bentley III*: May 31, 1812 (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1962).

⁴⁴ For more on Bentley's intellectual engagement with Islam and Arabic literature: Jeffrey Einboden, "I most sincerely wish and Arabic Manuscript of the Koran": William Bentley's Islamic Archives," in: *The Islamic Lineage of American Literary Culture: Muslim Sources from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2016): <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199397808.002.0003>

⁴⁵ Francis Warriner, *Cruise of the United States Firgate Potomac round the World, during the Years 1831-1834, Embracing the Attack on Quallah Battoo, with Notices of Scenes, Manners, etc. in Different Parts of Asia, South America, and the Islands of the Pacific* (New York: Keavitt, Lord & Co., 1835), pp. 115-116.

to adopt a system [*monopoly/exploitation*], which sound philosophy is exploding in Europe.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most famous national legal appeal for the rights of Asians in America was also made by a native of Salem: Joseph Hodges Choate, who famously argued to the U.S. Supreme Court against the Chinese Exclusion Act.⁴⁷ We thus have a considerable body of evidence from 19th-century Salem that testifies to a remarkably progressive pattern of engaging with the people of Sumatra – as well as to Asians and Muslims more broadly. Sweeping all of this history aside in favor of a blanket assumption that all of U.S. history must by definition be ‘racist’ and projecting late 19th-century anti-Asian racism as a perennial fact rather than an historically contingent condition does both damage to the actual legacy of Salem’s Sumatra trade, and also closes off possibility for seeing any glimpses in it of how individuals and groups of concerned citizens might support positive changes toward a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive society.

II. Salem’s City Seal

The Creation of Salem’s City Seal (1836–1839)

Salem officially became a city on March 23, 1836, when Governor Edward Everett signed the act of incorporation. The first city government met that May under Mayor Leverett Saltonstall, but no seal was immediately created.⁴⁸ The seal’s design became a matter of discussion during the second city government (1837–1838), where a Committee produced a simple design: the word “SALEM” encircled by an olive wreath and the text “Founded Sept. 1628 / City Incorporated 1836.”.⁴⁹

At the following meeting, it was proposed “*that the subject should be carefully and fully considered before the city council act finally in relation to it*”. A second committee was formed, composed of appointees Henry K Oliver (Ward 4), William Hunt (Ward 2), David Putnam (Ward 4). Aldermen George Peabody and Samuel Holman Jr joined. 10 months later in 1839 this committee returned a report and design submission.⁵⁰ The Committee thought it best that the subject be “*the chief source of our commercial prosperity... and an allusion*

⁴⁶ [Memorial of sundry merchants and inhabitants of Salem, Massachusetts To the Honorable the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled \(1820\)](#)

⁴⁷ “Chinese and the Geary Act Provisions of the Exclusion Law Under Legal Scrutiny: Mr. Joseph H. Choate Argues Upon the Constitutionality of the Decree Before the United States Supreme Conrt — The Power of Congress Questioned and the Rights of Aliens Considered — Mr. Charles H. Aldrich for the Government Points Out the Purpose of the Act — Mr. Ashton’s Views,” *New York Times* 11 May, 1893 p.11:

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1893/05/11/106864112.html?pageNumber=11>

⁴⁸ Rantoul, Robert *The Municipal Seal of Salem*. Essex Institute Historical Collections, Vol 8 (1859).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

to the name of the city, as the dwelling place & City of Peace.” Accompanying the report was a sketch executed by George Peabody:



**The original c1839 sketch of the Seal by George Peabody.
Peabody Essex Museum**

**IMAGE SOURCE: Philips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA
(Gift of Ross Turner 2431)**

George Peabody was the son of the wealthiest pepper trader in Salem, Joseph Peabody. “Given [George] Peabody’s background, it’s understandable that he chose to depict the personage from Sumatra rather than a more generic ‘Eastern’ figure as the west coast of that Indonesian island was the source of the pepper which had enabled Salem’s commercial ascendancy.”⁵¹ The final design featured a shield with a ship under full sail approaching a distant shore, representing Salem’s maritime and East Indian trade. Standing on the beach among pepper vines and other representative vegetation is a figure depicted as a prosperous Sumatran trader dressed in the manner of the day. A dove with an olive branch above the shield, symbolizing peace. The Latin motto

⁵¹ Donna Seger. (2024, September 16). *The Salem City Seal*. Streets of Salem.
<https://streetsofsalem.com/2024/09/16/the-salem-city-seal/>

“Divitis Indias usque ad ultimum sinum”—“To the farthest port of the rich East.” Around the border: “Salem Condita 1626 / Civitatis Regimine Donata 1836” (“Salem founded 1626 / Incorporated as a city 1836”).

Debate arose over the correct founding date—1626 (Roger Conant’s settlement) vs. 1628 (John Endicott’s arrival). The council ultimately chose 1626.⁵² The word “Solyma” (Latin for Jerusalem) was also replaced with “Salem.” After these changes and further committee work the design was adopted on March 11, 1839 and formally approved by both branches of city government by April 29, 1839. The seal, engraved soon after, became the enduring emblem of the City of Salem:



The first wax impression of the Seal (above).
Peabody Essex Museum

**IMAGE SOURCE: Philips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA
(Gift of Ross Turner 2431)**

Salem's City seal was one of the first created in the United States and part of a broader 19th -century practice where cities used seals to define their historical identity as a City. Many Massachusetts City seals depicted their own commerce, industry, discovery, or major historical events as the visual source of their prosperity.⁵³ Salem's seal recognized that the chief source of prosperity was dependent on its relationships with

⁵² Robert Rantoul. *The Municipal Seal of Salem*. Essex Institute Historical Collections, Vol 8 (1859).

⁵³ Allan Forbes & Ralph Mason Eastman. *Town And City Seals of Massachusetts: Presenting the Official Seals of Some of the Towns And Cities of Massachusetts, Together With Brief Historical Sketches And Local Anecdotes* (Boston: Printed for State Street Trust Co., 1955).

Asian trading partners, as “the chief source of our commercial prosperity” attained under the values of “the dwelling place & City of Peace”⁵⁴ as represented by the dove and olive branch encompassing the entire Seal image. Pepper was the product, but the peaceful nature of Salem’s trade with Sumatra was thus conceived to be the true basis for its prosperity.

The claim that the Salem city seal is a racist reflection of colonialism, and characterizing the figure on the seal as a demeaning stereotype or caricature of a generically Asian person are unsubstantiated by the available historical evidence.⁵⁵ The misperception of the seal appears in fact to be a misreading of some of the visual elements of the original drawing upon which the seal is based, viewed anachronistically in light of derogatory stereotypes that emerged in later American history. Professor Erika Lee stated in her presentation to the CSTF:

The artistic elements of a figure, a vaguely Asian person dressed in oriental-fashioned robes with an umbrella, was a very popular motif in 18th and 19th century chinoiserie objects in Europe and in the United States...chinoiserie style and objects were not authentic representations of Chinese or Asian cultures or arts, but were manufactured to appeal to what Europeans and Americans believed to be typical of Chinese or Asian cultures...And it's important to note that this is not a sign of respect.⁵⁶

While that may be true *generally* of American images of Asians during that period, the Salem City Seal does not in fact depict a ‘vaguely Asian person’ but rather was intended to reflect a more specific reference to a wealthy merchant on Sumatra’s Pepper Coast during the early 19th century. That specific referent informed the design of the image on the seal by George Peabody, and it is the reason why the image continues to resonate positively for so many people in Aceh to this day. Here we have a case in which specific details matter, and the historical evidence and context of those details should not be disregarded simply to lump the image on the city seal together with a broader repertoire of stereotypical images that were designed and executed according to very different intentions.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Rantoul, Robert *The Municipal Seal of Salem*. Essex Institute Historical Collections, Vol 8 (1859).

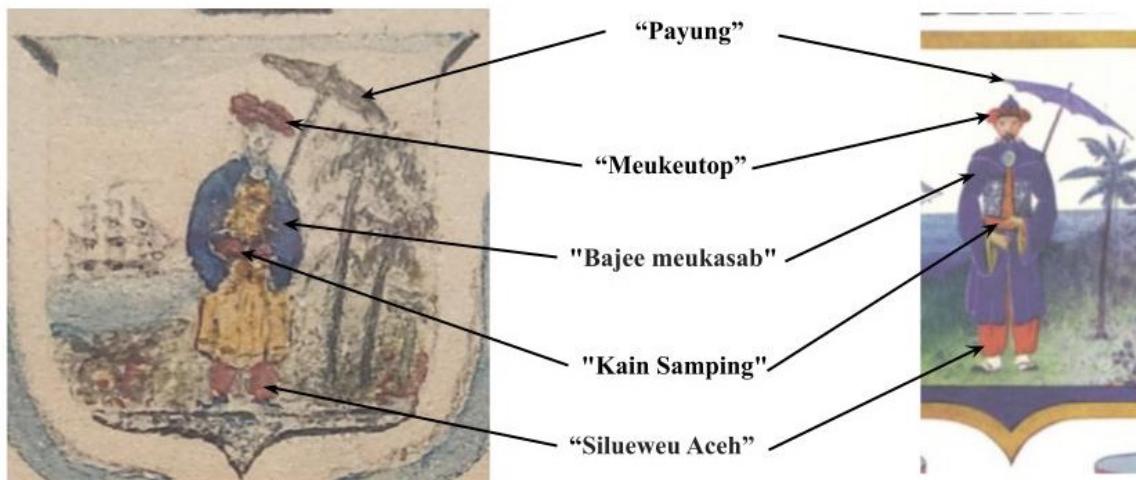
⁵⁵ Example of such expressions include: “the seal contains an anachronistic, racial caricature of a 19th-century Asian merchant...” Brian MacQuarrie, “Cultural Tribute or Asian Stereotype,” *The Boston Globe*, November 27, 2025: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/11/27/metro/salem-seal-dispute-asian-stereotype/>; and “I want to share my perspective on the city seal, its connection to Aceh, and the harm of continuing to display a racist caricature in such a prominent way,” Public Comment at the September 30 CSTF Listening Session. Time Stamp: 8:55.

⁵⁶ [Professor Erika Lee’s presentation to the CSTF](#). September 29, 2025. Time stamp: 26:00-28:00. Password: \$aXb*q\$6

⁵⁷ As concisely expressed on the online public feedback form submitted by Dean and Betsy Lahikainen on October 19th: “Several members of your Seal Task Force have convincingly proved that the allegations that the seal is racist and a symbol of colonialism to be untrue. They have documented the real history behind the seal, revealing a remarkable story of international trade cooperation and many honorable deeds by Salem merchants.

The specific identification of the figure as a Sumatran has been reaffirmed multiple times by later generations of Salem officials. In 1946, the Mayor of Salem wrote “George Peabody, son of the patriarch of the pepper merchants, and himself a pepper ship owner, drew a design of a man wearing a flat red turban, red trousers and belt, a yellow knee length robe and blue jacket. There is no people in the East Indies whose costume is closer to this than the Atjehnese, and that was probably his intention.”⁵⁸ In 2005, Salem officials again reaffirmed the connection that the figure on the Seal is from Sumatra when announcing a joint Tsunami Flood Relief effort between the City and the Peabody Essex Museum where they stated “[a] human figure from Banda Aceh is on the Salem city seal, a reference to the extensive and lucrative spice trade established between Salem merchants and northern Sumatra.”⁵⁹ A deeper look at the specific ways in which the figure is depicted on the Seal also confirms this.

The clothing worn by the figure on the Seal



The Merriam Webster definition of ‘*caricature*’ specifies that certain elements of such a representation are subjected to “exaggeration by means of often ludicrous distortion.” The depiction of the figure on the Salem city seal, however, fails to provide evidence of such ‘ludicrous distortion’. A detailed breakdown of various components of the dress of the figure on the seal reveals that it is in fact an ensemble that includes elements of Acehnese dress, albeit in some variants that reflect the prosperity and cosmopolitan culture of the Pepper Coast during the years in which Salem merchants were active there. In fact, Pratitou Arafat, an Acehnese textile

Today, many Acehnese people, represented by the figure on the seal, are not offended by it, but proud of being represented in this way...”

⁵⁸ Write-up about the Seal in the City Clerk’s City Seal folder. A copy of that documented dated to 1946 is also written on the letterhead of mayor Stanley J Usovitz, Jr. and framed in the lobby of the Hawthorne Hotel.

⁵⁹ *City of Salem and the Peabody Essex Museum Team Up For Tsunami Fundraising Event*. Press Release 3/23/2005.

collector and expert on the history of clothing has noted that the original design for the seal (image on the left above) reflects more distinctly Acehnese styles, where the later revision of the Salem seal (image on the right above) reflects a degree of Chinese influence upon local styles.⁶⁰ Claims that the figure on the seal as originally designed not dressed in ‘traditional Acehnese clothing’ is a revisionist reading of history that is tied into late 19th century museumized notions that a specific cultural group must be depicted in purely ‘traditional’ clothing – essentializing stereotypes borne out of essentializing and static visions of ‘culture’. Doing so obscures the autonomy of Acehnese agents in history of far-flung maritime connections in which prestige goods and patterns of elite consumption and display circulated among a diverse range of peoples across the Indian Ocean World. For hundreds of years prior to their contact with Salem traders, Sumatrans had selectively incorporated foreign materials and styles of clothing and accessories from outside cultures as a self-designated signs of respectability, globalism, and cosmopolitanism. As Michael Feener explained during one of the public meetings of the CSTF: “it was that sort of hybridity that really marked the sort of the prosperity and the dynamism of a lot of these societies.”⁶¹

One item that has frequently been referenced by critics of the seal has been the ‘parasol’.⁶² This English-language term has been used by some critics of Salem city seal to refer to the object that would be referred to as a *payung* in Malay. Locally in Aceh the particular object referenced here is widely understood to be a *payung mesikhat* - a symbolic umbrella expressing elite status and used on ceremonial occasions, including the reception of honored guests. *Payung* continue to be used in Aceh today as accessories deployed during customary occasions, and continue to be produced for use by Acehnese today, and in particular for customary (*adat*) wedding ceremonies:

⁶⁰ Pratitou Arafat, personal communication (email) to R. Michael Feener, 12 December, 2025. Some of the alterations to the original design appear to have been influenced by paintings and sculptures of Hong merchants available in Salem at the time. An extended discussion of this process of incremental alteration is presented in: R. Michael Feener, “Aceh and the Salem Seal: Historical Entanglements and Contemporary Contestations over Representation,” in: Reza Idria & Jesse Grayman, Eds. *Aceh in the Long Wake of Disaster* (forthcoming).

⁶¹ Professor [R. Michael Feener's presentaiton to the CSTF](#). September 15, 2025. Time stamp: 51:00-53:00.

Password: ^+3QgS.N

⁶² For example, in [Suzanne Barnes presentation to the CSTF](#). May 19, 2025. Time Stamp: 1:48:45. Password: \$nFmX12z



Cottage industry producing ceremonial *payung* at Pango Ulee Kareng, Banda Aceh

IMAGE SOURCE: Wandra, “Payung Sulaman Aceh,” Unduh Foto 1493 - 20 Augustus 2020:

<https://infopublik.id/galeri/foto/detail/110492>

Beyond that particular accessory, various items of the outfit which adorns the figure can be identified with specifically Acehnese garments. Anissa Puspa Kirana's overview of traditional garments worn to this day for Acehnese wedding celebrations provides some clear descriptions,⁶³ which we have supplemented here with historical photographs taken in 19th -century Aceh from the Leiden University Archives.⁶⁴ The particular points below refer to depictions presented on the original model for the seal and the current official seal to show that, while some colors and details have changed over time, the basic referential clothing pieces remain the same.

This historic engraving presents an image of a nobleman of Sumatra and his retinue at the turn of the 17th century. One of his retainers carries a *payung* to shade him. The Muslim gentleman himself wears a headdress that is also an earlier version of the one donned by the figure on the Salem city seal:

⁶³ Anissa Puspa Kirana. “*Acehnese Traditional Clothing and Its Functions, from Meukeusah Clothes to Samping Cloth*”. October 31, 2023. iNews Portal Aceh. <https://portalaceh.inews.id/read/364331/pakaian-adat-aceh-dan-fungsinya-dari-baju-meukeusah-hingga-kain-samping>

⁶⁴ We would like to thank Pratitou Arafat for his suggestions for these images to illustrate particular pieces of traditional Acehnese clothing.



“Muslim Dress on the Island of Sumatra”

IMAGE SOURCE: Theodore De Bry, *Indiae Orientalis III*, Plate XIV (Liege: 1601)
Meukeutop (headdress)

“The meukeutop is an elongated, oval-shaped head covering with a tangkulok (traditional headband)... this head covering resembles the head coverings worn by Turkish sultans. This also demonstrates the strong influence of Islam in Acehnese culture. This head covering is made from embroidered woven fabric, often in yellow, green, black, red, and white...Red represents courage and heroism.”⁶⁵

Note that the color of the *meukeutop* as rendered in the Peabody's original sketch and official seal is red – traditionally symbolizing courage and heroism, along with the *kain samping* and the *siluewue*.

As we can see from this 19th -century photograph, that style of headdress remained in use through the period of Salem's involvement with the Sumatra pepper trade:

⁶⁵ Kirana (op. cit.).



Acehnese Leaders at Singapore, 1862

IMAGE SOURCE: *Photographisch Album van den Luitenant ter Zee H. Nijgh*. Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde Photo Archive No. 155858

Bajee meukasab (jacket):

“The meukeusab is a traditional Acehnese attire worn as an upper garment for Acehnese men. This garment, in the form of a blazer, some variation of which has been worn in Sumatra since the 13th -15th centuries... The embroidery usually features motifs of vines, leaves, and flowers... The collar on this traditional attire resembles Chinese culture. This collar shape is thought to be a result of Chinese influence on Acehnese culture, brought by traders and sailors sojourning in Aceh at that time.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Kirana (op. cit.).



Teukoe Oemar in Aceh wearing a form of *bajee meukasab* (c. 1890)

IMAGE SOURCE:

Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde Photo Archive No.

408104

Kain samping (waistcloth):

*“A piece of fabric is often used as an accessory, which can be wrapped around the waist.”*⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Kirana (op. cit.).



Examples of late 19th-century waistcloth (*kain samping*) and trousers (*siluewue*)

IMAGE SOURCE: *Nadere beschrijving van de foto door G.P. Rouffaer*

Deel van een reeks foto's om Nederlands-Indische kunstnijverheid vast te leggen in het kader van de reeks tentoonstellingen hierover in Den Haag van 1900 tot 1902 - Uitgebreide aantekeningen op voorzijde fotokarton in handschrift van G.P. Rouffaer.

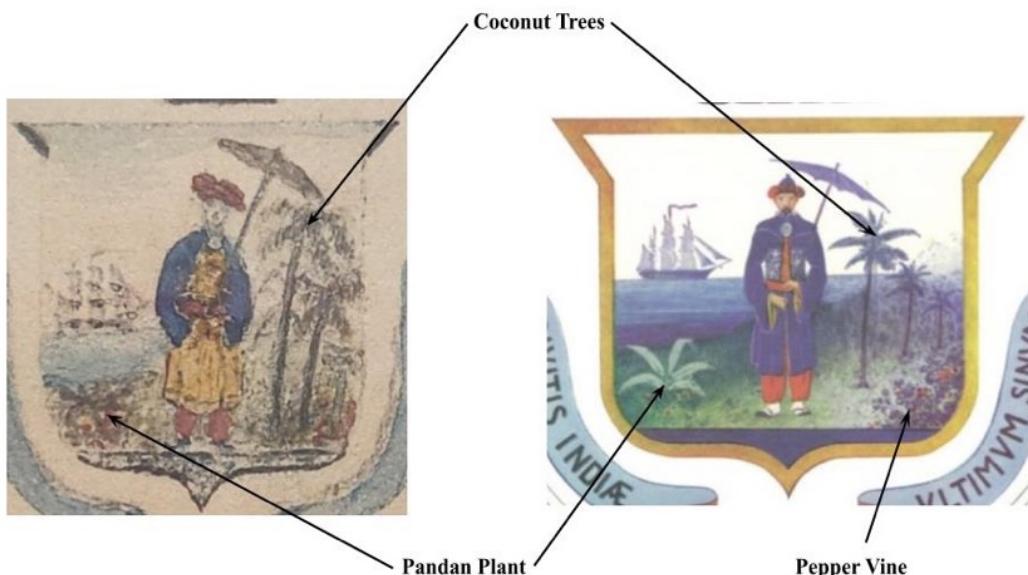
Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde Photo Archive No. 11954

The dress of the figure on the seal which has been deemed by some contemporary critics in Salem as presenting a racist stereotype thus actually reflects quite specific Sumatran traditions. According to Dane Morrison, Ph. D., Professor Emeritus of Early American History at Salem State University, "A close visual examination of the original seal reveals that the image did not employ racist images that were common to the early nineteenth century and earlier, such as a lack of clothing associated with 'savagery' or 'barbarism,'... the Salem seal depicted a fully clothed figure in what was known as the traditional garments of Sumatran rajahs at the time..."⁶⁸ The clothing depicted was not an exaggerated distortion that would meet the level of 'caricature'.

⁶⁸ Dane Morrison, "Thoughts on the Design of the 1838 Salem Seal," October 20, 2025.

Nor does the image on the Seal rise to the level of ‘ethnic stereotype’ as defined as “a generalization made about an ethnic group, concerning a trait attribution, which is considered to be unjustified by an observer.”⁶⁹ As shown in Section One of this Report Salem merchants regularly interacted directly with Sumatran merchants even going as far as to wear the clothing themselves; understanding that such an action was a sign of respect.⁷⁰

Other imagery on the Seal



The vegetation presented on the seal are also references to specific species cultivated in Southeast Asia. Coconut palms dominate the right side of the seal, while pandanus and a pepper vine appear in the bottom corner.

Dove of Peace

Above the head of the Sumatran man is a ‘Dove of Peace’, rendered along with an olive branch in its mouth.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Brigham, J. C. 1971. Ethnic stereotypes. *Psychological Bulletin*, 76, 15-38.

⁷⁰ M. Nichols. *George Nichols: Salem Shipmaster and Merchant* (Salem, Mass.: The Salem Press Co., 1913): 56. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89076991645&seq=9>

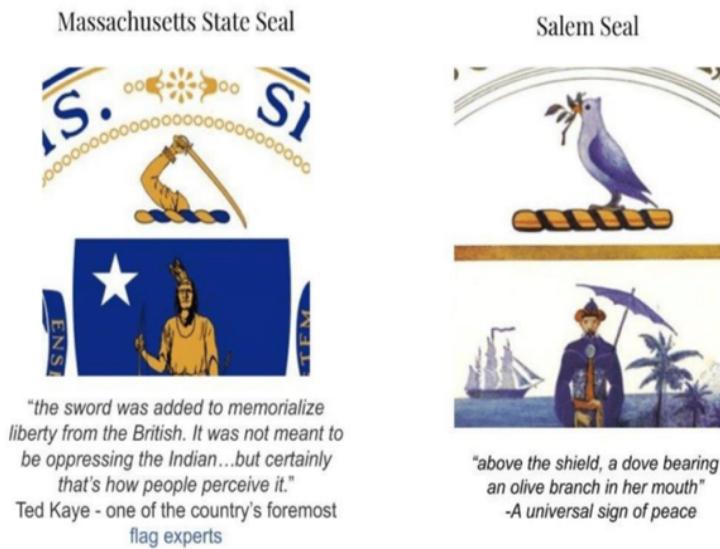
⁷¹ Rosenthal, Peggy. 1994. “How on earth does an olive branch mean peace?” *Peace and Change* 19.2 (April: 165-179); Rigby, Andrew. 1998. “A Peace Symbol’s Origins,” *Peace Review* 10: 475-479. DOI: 10.1080/10402659808426187.



Original sketch for the Salem City Seal - Gift of Ross Turner 2431 (left) – IMAGE SOURCE: Philips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA

Current Salem City Seal (right) - IMAGE SOURCE: <https://www.salemma.gov/1236/City-Seal---Full-Resolution>

The representation of Salem as a ‘City of Peace’ something that was required to be commemorated by the City leaders in their initial charge for the design of a City Seal.⁷² This is a notable inclusion because of the contrast that can be drawn to the Massachusetts State seal which is currently under review for the aggressive or violent connotations of having a sword-in-hand over the head of a Native American.⁷³



The ‘Dove of Peace’ has, however, not been rendered consistently across iterations of the Salem city seal.

⁷² Rantoul, Robert *The Municipal Seal of Salem*. Essex Institute Historical Collections, Vol 8 (1859)

⁷³ Katharine Seelye. *A State Wrestles With Its Imagery: A Sword Looming Over a Native American*. September 7, 2019. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/07/us/massachusetts-flag-native-americans.html#>

Major Revisions/Variations of the Seal Over Time

The original image of the Seal described in the Ordinance passed on March 11, 1839 was altered by the engraver who physically incised the image onto a metal plate, creating the die. That die was used to create the first wax impression of the Seal which is preserved along with the original sketch by George Peabody, Alderman on the Salem City Council at the time of its creation.



The first wax impression of the Seal (left) engraved using the original c1839 sketch (right) of the Seal by George Peabody, as a reference.

IMAGE SOURCE: Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA (Gift of Ross Turner 2431)

When compared with the original design by Alderman Peabody the image was altered in a number of ways. Most dramatically, the gender of the figure at the center of the image was briefly changed from a male to a female. While that temporary innovation was reversed over the course of finalizing the design of the seal, other changes have been preserved in the current version of the image. These include the dove of peace, which has been modified to include a crest on the head of the brid, as well as some particulars of the rendering of the clothing of on the figure which have been criticized as deviations from the original design that were introduced “without authority.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Robert Rantoul. *The Municipal Seal of Salem*. Essex Institute Historical Collections, Vol 8, pg 7-8.(1859).



Detail of bookplate previously used by the City of Salem Public Library, showing the female figure in the center of the Seal.

IMAGE SOURCE: Seger, Donna. "A Country by Itself" *StreetsofSalem*. June 30, 2025.

<https://streetsofsalem.com/2025/06/30/a-country-by-itself/>

In 1888, local artist Ross Turner undertook a study of the Seal in order to return the official image to the original sketch by Alderman Peabody because, as a newspaper of the time noted, “[the Seal] has suffered a great deal at the hands of engravers and others.”⁷⁵ A watercolor was then produced and gifted to the Essex Institute in which Turner corrected some of the deviations in which the gender of the figure, the clothing, the headgear, and the dove were rendered according to the original sketch by Peabody.



Ross Turner study of the Salem City Seal and detail of the central figure in Frank Cousins Painting of the Salem City Seal

IMAGE SOURCE: Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA
(Glass Plate Negatives Collection, PhotoVault_Box 21_644)

⁷⁵ *Salem Register*, December 27, 1888.

Additionally, a sketch found in the City Hall records shows corrections rendered almost identically to those represented in the watercolor study produced by Ross Turner. The artist who produced this sketch, however, has yet to be identified.



Sketch, likely by Ross Turner, from the file compiled by the Salem City Clerk.

IMAGE SOURCE: City Seal folder, Salem City Clerk's Office

The sketch was sandwiched between two wood boards with the name of a Boston engraver *Henry Mitchell* written on them. This sketch was likely used as a basis for Mitchell to engrave a new die of the Seal, an impression of which was included alongside the sketch between the boards. The engraver and the sketch artist were most likely different people, considering the engraving closely, but not exactly resembling the reference sketch.



The new engraving by Boston engraver Henry Mitchell (left), detail of figure and dove (right). The trade mark of the engraver (below). City Seal folder, City Clerk's Office.

IMAGE SOURCE: City Seal folder, Salem City Clerk's Office (Photo by Vijay Joyce)

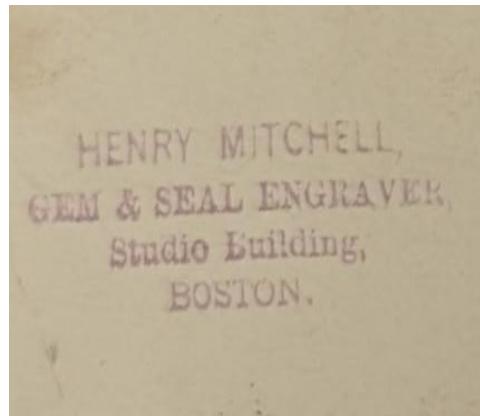


IMAGE SOURCE: Salem City Clerk's Office (Photo by Vijay Joyce)

The primary change here was to revert to a male, rather than a female, figure – thus returning the seal closer to its original form. At the same time the rendering of the figure's clothing was brought into closer alignment with Peabody's design. The dove, however, was still not corrected to reflect the original design image, which had a fully rounded head without the crested feature.

The current version of the Seal at the center of the CSTF's discussion is based on a watercolor painting of the Seal undertaken at an as-yet unknown date. This version is framed and currently hangs in the City Clerk's office.



Watercolor of Salem City Seal hanging in City Clerk's Office, City Hall, Salem, Massachusetts.

IMAGE SOURCE: Photo by Vijay Joyce

More research - ideally in collaboration with the City Clerk as the keeper of the Seal - will need to be undertaken to fully understand these later changes and their adoption. This was precluded from the CSTF's work as a majority vote was taken at the September 15th meeting to prematurely end public deliberations in October. Vijay Joyce voted against the accelerated timeline and Michael Feener also expressed his disagreement with the decision to rush the work of the CSTF to an early close.⁷⁶ The City Clerk was absent from the meeting for personal reasons during the time that the 'official report' of the CSTF was being edited.

III. Contemporary Perspectives

Appropriating the claim to unilaterally determine the way in which members of another ethnic group are represented in the public sphere – or erasing it entirely against the will of those very people – in the way that some in Salem have attempted to do out of an apparent disregard toward will of the people of Aceh is something that should be anathema to anyone who supports progressive work toward the respectful recognition of diverse perspectives, equitable treatment of all parties engaged in multi-cultural dialogue, and the inclusion of historically marginalized communities. Any decision to change the city seal must consider the specific history of its present design, and the historical legacy that it continues to reflect for both Salem residents and for the people of Aceh whom it was intended to represent.⁷⁷

In contemporary Aceh, reaction to the news that Salem was considering changing the city seal has been overwhelmingly against the idea of changing the seal.⁷⁸ The current debates have spurred some remarkable new

⁷⁶ [September 15th Public Meeting](#) of the CSTF (starting from 1:35:00). Password: ^+3QgS.N

⁷⁷ Deputy Chair of the CSTF Rachel Tonthat "confirmed that the CSTF did not reach out to people in Aceh, including its governor, to gauge their opinions." Brian MacQuarrie, "Cultural Tribute or Asian Stereotype," *The Boston Globe*, November 27, 2025: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/11/27/metro/salem-seal-dispute-asian-stereotype/>

⁷⁸ There has been a spate of Indonesian-language news stories and other media on the CTSF expressing concern over calls in Salem to change the seal: Abi Mu'ammar Dzikri. "Kontroversi Orang Aceh di Segel Kota Salem, Amerika Serikat," (20 September 2025): <https://tirto.id/kontroversi-orang-aceh-di-segel-kota-salem-amerika-serikat-hhWV>

"Kontroversi Segel Salem: Indonesia dan AS Perdebatkan Warisan Lada Aceh, " (27 September 2025): <https://www.kompasiana.com/aidhilpratama7463/68d7f9f4c925c4409b4fa005/kontroversi-segel-salem-indonesia-dan-as-perdebatkan-warisan-lada-aceh> ; "Orang Aceh di Segel Dagang Kota Salem, Pemkab Abdy Bisa Jadi Jembatan Diplomasi Budaya Dunia," (21 July 2025): <https://aceh.tribunnews.com/2025/07/21/orang-aceh-di-segel-dagang-kota-salem-pemkab-abdy-bisa-jadi-jembatan-diplomasi-budaya-dunia> ; "Gubernur Aceh Kirim Surat ke Gubernur Massachusetts, Usulkan Pelestarian Jejak Sejarah Aceh," (20 July, 2025): <https://acehworldtime.com/tag/segel-dagang-salem/>

Reza Idria. "Ungkap Kontroversi Segel Salem dan Jejak Aceh dalam Sejarah Amerika," (26 September 2025): <https://sudutberita.id/2025/09/26/reza-idria-ungkap-kontroversi-segel-salem-dan-jejak-aceh-dalam-sejarah-amerika/> ;

engagements with the history of the Salem trade on Indonesian social media. For example, a young Acehnese artists' collective who call themselves "boringcoolpeople" have produced a series of videos, animated shorts, visual images, a tarot card deck and poetic compositions calling attention to and arguing passionately for preserving the Salem City Seal in its present form:



Beban Kepala, Akar Hati

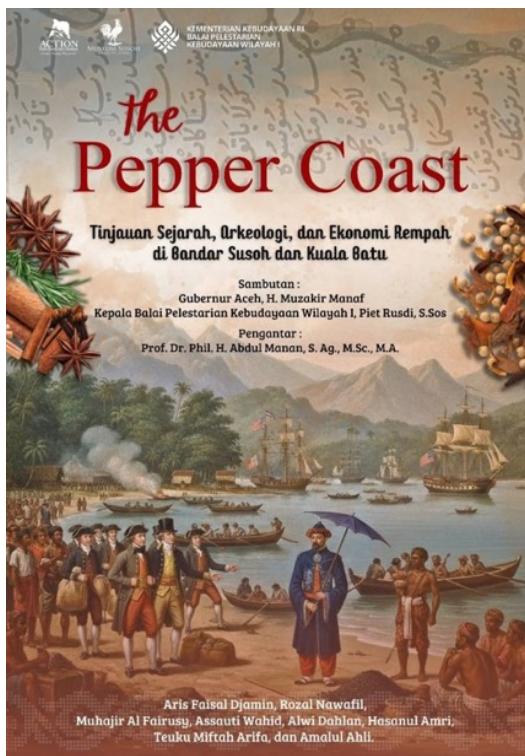
Trailer image for a social media campaign against changing the Salem City Seal launched by a collective of young Acehnese artists ('boringcoolpeople')

IMAGE SOURCE: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNabXbaT4ht/>

While in northern Sumatra for research in late July and August 2025, CSTF member Michael Feener was invited to speak on the history of Salem's Sumatran pepper trade at several venues, including: "Sumatra and Salem: Contemporary Reflections on Connected Histories," *ICAIOS X: The 10th International Conference on Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies* (August 15th 2025 at the Aula Dinas Pendidikan Provinsi Aceh), and to the Regent (Bupati) of the Aceh Barat Daya District in which Kuala Batee is located on August 20th:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gjv9y2m8HTg> Feener was also invited for interviews with several local media outlets in light of public interest among contemporary Acehnese in the history of connections to Salem and current debates over the city seal: SAGOE TV: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFQxk8JFhMQ> ; Beurawang Road Lhee Sagoe Press Podcast: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB9sjCm9GuA>

Reza Idria, the first Acehnese speaker at the July 14th listening session, started his comments noting that he had visited Salem for the first time in 2014 and had returned to the city several times during his years as a graduate student at Harvard. He also commented on how touched he was by the support sent from residents of Salem to Aceh in the wake of the massive destruction of the Indian Ocean tsunami that wiped out his home city on September 26th, 2004.⁷⁹ His remarks stressed that to the fact that in Aceh today the Salem city seal “is part of our daily conversation,” and several other Acehnese participants in that listening session, and others, have expressed similar personal experiences with and pride in the representation of the figure on the seal. Such sentiments are also reflected broadly in both social media and print circulating among the Acehnese public today, including a recent adaptation of the image of the figure on the Salem City Seal featured on the cover of a new book just published in Indonesia.⁸⁰



Cover of an Indonesian-language book on the Salem Pepper Trade published in 2025

IMAGE SOURCE: Courtesy of Muhajir Al Fairusy

⁷⁹ Unfortunately, Salem's official response to the more recent tragic flooding in Aceh in December 2025, which killed over a thousand people and devastated communities in many districts of the province, have not met with similar expressions of solidarity and support from Salem. See: Justin Whittier. “Shameful Silence on Aceh,” *The Salem News*, Thursday December 11, 2025, p.7:

https://www.salemlnews.com/opinion/letters_to_the_editor/letter-shameful-silence-on-aceh/article_3f78695f-4c97-42bd-b149-224f7161f873.html

⁸⁰ Aris Faisal Djamin, Rozal Nawafil, Muhajir Al Fairusy, Assauti Wahid, Alwi Dahlan, Hasanul Amri, Teuku Miftah Arifa & Amalul Ahli. *The Pepper Coast: Tinjauan Sejarah, Arkeologi, dan Ekonomi Rempah di Bandar Susoh dan Kuala Batu*. Jakarta: Kementerian Kebudayaan RI, 2025.

In her contribution to the [July 14th Listening Session](#), Raiah Lubis cited responses to a post that she had written about the Salem seal last year on her Instagram feed, which has more than 20,000 followers, emphasizing that the post received “very, very positive engagement and positive feedback” with over 1,100 ‘likes’.⁸¹ The topic has energized public discussions, online presentations, and numerous seminars all across the province, as well as a formal letter sent from the Governor of Aceh to the Governor of Massachusetts urging them not to change the seal but rather to preserve it in its current form:

For the people of Aceh, the seal of Salem represents a rare symbol of Indonesia-U.S. connection predating formal diplomacy, recognition of Aceh’s place in global maritime history, and a bridge of cultural respect between two distant lands. Rather than erasing this visual history, we propose enhancing its message-by promoting educational collaboration, deeper cultural exchanges, and even a sister city relationship between Banda Aceh and Salem. Such a gesture could strengthen mutual understanding and illuminate the positive legacy embodied in the seal.⁸²

Today, many Acehnese regard the image on Salem’s city seal as pointing toward a history of relations with a ‘Western’ nation that presents a positive contrast to the interventions of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British in Sumatran history.⁸³

The image of the figure on the Salem city seal is thus a considerable source of pride for many Acehnese – some of whom have expressed offense at the appropriation of their global representation by a group of activists who are not from the community that the seal was designed to represent. After the announcement of the first CSTF listening session scheduled for July 14th circulated online, several Acehnese academics, activists, and

⁸¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/DC9EsF0T8aj/?igsh=MWo2dGlqdTB6MW1pNQ%3D%3D> The password for the recording of the July 14th Listening Session is: e^tW5Rn%

⁸² Letter 400.6.4/9190 from the Governor of Aceh, Muzakir Manaf, in “Support for Preserving the Historic Seal of the City of Salem,” was addressed to Governor Maura Healey, with Cc: to the Mayor of Salem, members of Salem City Council, Members of the CSTF, Congressman Seth Moulton, Senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey, as well as Heather Merrit (interim U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia and Chargé d’Affaires), and the U.S. Consul for Sumatra based in Medan, Indonesia.

⁸³ As Maida Irawani remarked during [July 14th Listening Session](#) (password: e^tW5Rn%): “The Salem seal is not as a symbol of colonial domination but as a reminder of friendship built through the pepper trade—a trade that not only helped Salem prosper, but also opened the city to people from many nations who now call Salem HOME. That legacy of connection and peace is part of what makes Salem what it is today... As Professor Lee mentioned during her presentation (Q&A session), in the five-year survey that she advised showed that most Americans unfamiliar with most event that consider to be important in Asian American history. Yet in Salem, you have a unique historical symbol—the city seal—that reflects a connection between America and Asia through a story of friendship, not colonialism. Instead of changing it, why not embrace it as an opportunity to educate, to raise awareness, and to help more Americans understand the important role Salem played in Asian American history?”

cultural figures decided to log on and make their voices heard.⁸⁴ In her remarks during that session, Uchra Mustika objected to the fact that “decisions about cultural symbols are being made without talking to the people they depict.” The same speaker also urged the need for more open and inclusive discussion on the issue and called attention to the fact that way that we understand and interpret images can change over time. To address these issues of interpretation, she urged us to consider approaching historical images by way of “non-essentializing discourses” – something she notes is generally welcomed in progressive discourses on race, ethnicity, and identity in the United States, Indonesia, and elsewhere, but which seems to be beyond consideration by those in Salem today calling to change the city seal.

As Salem resident Alison Christiansen pointedly noted in her contribution to the public listening session on October 14th:

Ignoring both the actual history of Salem's trade with Sumatra, as well as the voices of so many Acehnese people alive today in a discussion about how they are represented flies in the face of our stated commitment to respecting the identity of diverse communities, equitable treatment in the public sphere, and inclusivity of historically marginalized communities.

For a generation of Acehnese whose lives have been inextricably shaped by the deep and pervasive trauma of decades of violent conflict and the massive natural disaster of the 2004 earthquake and tsunami, pride in their representation on Salem's city seal is widespread and deeply held.⁸⁵ In Aceh today the Salem city seal is overwhelmingly seen as a symbol of peace, prosperity and cosmopolitan connections to a wider world that was

⁸⁴ The ten Acehnese who spoke during the [July 14th Listening Session](#) (password: e^tW5Rn%) were unanimously opposed to the idea of changing the Salem city seal. In response to these voices of individuals from the actual community historically represented by the image on the seal, however, Salem resident Flora Tonthat, intervened to say that “the Aceh people should really have no say on our seal...”. The hostility she has repeatedly expressed toward the people of Aceh has since been echoed by other members of the CSTF, including by Noreen Gachignard during the [September 15th Public Meeting](#) (password: ^+3QgS.N). As a result of such stark expressions of intolerance and hostility, many Acehnese have come to feel unwelcome in joining subsequent public discussions of the issue convened by the CSTF.

⁸⁵ For an overview of the complex dynamics of reconstruction efforts and conflict resolution in Aceh: Patrick Daly, R. Michael Feener, & Anthony Reid (Eds.) *From the Ground Up: Perspectives on Post-Tsunami and Post-Conflict Aceh* (Singapore: Institute for South East Asian Studies, 2012). An Indonesian translation of this book is also available as: *Aceh Setelah Tsunami dan Konflik* (Banda Aceh: International Center for Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies, 2013).

not shaped by colonial domination.⁸⁶ The voices of those in Aceh who have expressed their hope that the seal be preserved in its present form should be carefully considered, and we in Salem should not be contributing further to the erasure of the history of a people who have already faced so much trauma.⁸⁷

In 2004, the Salem city seal featured prominently as the frontispiece of a landmark volume of historiography that strove to highlight dynamics of race, ethnicity, religion, community, economy and popular culture to facilitate a “new direction in American Studies.”⁸⁸ Professor Donna Seger references this work as

⁸⁶ During the [July 14th Listening Session](#) (password: e^tW5Rn%), Cut Puan Tiszani Pasha (who identified herself at the beginning of her remarks as half Chinese / half Acehnese), remarked that: “It is worth noting that in an era when racism was normalized and colonization widespread...” Salem chose a seal reflecting connections with Asia “...rooted in commerce in mutual exchange... to promote empathy, solidarity and diversity against racism, and I believe should be continued by us preserving the seal.” Another participant in the same session (Asna Hussain, an Acehnese who has lived for decades in the United States) recounted to those at the listening session her first visit to Salem in 1991, and how proud she was then to see the representation of Aceh on the Salem city seal, stressing that to her the: “image represents honor, no exploitation... and also respect for the culture of Aceh.”

⁸⁷ The people and culture of Aceh have struggled against a near-constant onslaught of outside interventions of destructive intent for over 150 years. In 1873, the Dutch launched an invasion of Aceh that resulted in one of the Netherlands’ longest and bloodiest campaigns of colonial conquest which continued well into the first decades of the twentieth century before ‘pacification’ was claimed over most of Aceh through Dutch occupation (Anton Stolwijk. *Atjeh: Het verhaal van de bloedigste strijd uit de Nederlandse koloniale geschiedenis*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2017). Shortly thereafter, when the Dutch were ousted by the invasion of Japanese occupation of much of Indonesia during World War II, resulting in what some remember as even harsher deprivations. (Arie Johannes Piekaar. *Atjeh en de oorlog met Japan*. The Hague: van Hoeve, 1949); Following Indonesian Independence in 1945. Almost immediately after war’s end a new internal conflict arose with the ‘social revolution’ of leftist organizations against traditional Acehnese elites. (Anthony Reid. *The Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra*. Oxford University Press, 1979); After that movement was suppressed, Acehnese aspirations for the new nation were further frustrated, in response to which some Acehnese religious leaders joined a resistance movement known as the Darul Islam, which lasted from 1949-1962. (C. van Dijk, *Rebellion under the Banner of Islam: The Darul Islam in Indonesia*. (Leiden: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, 1981, pp. 269-339). It was not long after that large natural gas deposits were discovered in North Aceh and the Indonesian national government opened the area for exploitation by multi-national corporations. Popular discontent with that exploitation gave rise to the Free Aceh Movement. (Edward Aspinall. *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia*. Stanford University Press, 2009); The ensuing conflict between GAM and the Indonesian government brought a brutal toll of violence and suppression against the people of Aceh that was only brought to an end through a peace process made possible in the wake of the December 26th 2004 earthquake and tsunami that devastated Acehnese society. (Michael Morfit. “Managing Risk: Aceh, the Helsinki Accords and Indonesia’s Democratic Development,” in: Patrick Daly, R. Michael Feener & Anthony Reid, Eds. *From the Ground Up: Perspectives on Post-Tsunami and Post-Conflict Aceh*. (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies Press, 2012, pp. 179-213).

⁸⁸ The preface to this volume notes that: “After Salem was incorporated in 1836, 210 years after its founding, the community imaged by city leaders was a much more globally connected entity than conventional histories have depicted.” There they expand upon the Atjehnese figure in particular as symbolizing “Salem’s global connections” as an opportunity to open new lines of conversation arguing that: “Understanding Salem, then, helps us to better understand the world.” Dane Anthony Morrison & Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Salem: Place, Myth, and Memory* (Boston, Northeastern University Press, 2004), pp. xix-xx.

inspiring her own ongoing investigations into the history of the ways in which Salem's pepper trade with Sumatra "transformed both the city and the nation."⁸⁹ Salem's relations with Sumatra in the 19th century, and the historical memory of the same in Aceh today, are very different from the caricature of racial prejudice and colonial oppression that are claimed by critics of the seal today.⁹⁰ Rather, the creation of the seal can be seen as a deliberate gesture to distinguish the city of Salem from national trends of anti-Asian racism and militarized imperialism that were to further gain ground in other parts of the United States over the course of the later 19th century.⁹¹ Abandoning the established form of the Salem City Seal to conform to contemporary American culture war concerns would deprive us and future generations of occasions for critical and contextualizing reflection on a complex past – something we actually need more of in these increasingly polarized times of immediate, emotional and algorithmically-accelerated reactions to every soundbite we hear or every image we see.⁹²

⁸⁹ Donna Seger. "History is Gray,": <https://streetsofsalem.com/tag/salem-city-seal/> Professor Seger has contributed several insightful posts on this history of Salem's seal, and the city's connections to Aceh: Donna Seger. "The Salem City Seal,": <https://streetsofsalem.com/2024/09/16/the-salem-city-seal/>; Seger, Donna. "Salem Can't Lose Sumatra,": <https://streetsofsalem.com/2024/09/23/salem-cant-lose-sumatra/>

⁹⁰ For example, in the public comment submitted to JotForms on October 7th, Maida Irawani noted: "Some may view the seal as offensive or could trigger racism. As an Asian Muslim woman of color who wears a hijab and has lived in several countries, I understand how painful racism and Islamophobia can be. Those experiences should never be ignored... I believe that symbols like the Salem city seal—which represents a historic friendship between America and Asia—can instead be used to promote understanding and education... The Salem seal is not as a symbol of colonial domination but as a reminder of friendship built through the pepper trade."

⁹¹ On the shifting profile of American relations with Asia over the course of the 19th century, see: Farish A. Noor. *America's Encounters with Southeast Asia, 1800-1900: Before the Pivot* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

⁹² As Professor Dane Morisson noted in his letter submitted to the CSTF: "At a time when erasure of our complicated and nuanced histories has become the norm, Salem especially has a responsibility to tell these stories. Rather than erase the 1838 seal, I hope the city would do a better job of centering this part of our narrative and renew its commitment to educating visitors and residents alike." (Dane Morrison, "Thoughts on the Design of the 1838 Salem Seal," October 20, 2025).