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Mapping Madras: Historical Maps, Urban Change, and Spatial Memory

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Introduction

Maps do not merely record cities; they make them. *Mapping Madras: Historical Maps, Urban Change, and Spatial Memory* argues that the city historically known as Madras—and officially called Chennai today—was not only shaped by the ground it occupied, the waters that framed it, and the people who inhabited it, but also by the cartographic practices that measured, named, bounded, taxed, and visualized its spaces. This book presents a cartographic history showing how maps shaped and reflect Madras's evolution. It is both a visual atlas of rare charts, plans, and images, and a critical guide for historians, urban planners, and heritage professionals interested in the city's spatial narratives.

Our approach begins with the artifacts themselves: early company plans of Fort St. George, nautical charts of the Coromandel Coast, revenue and cadastral surveys, sanitary and improvement trust maps, and later aerial photographs and satellite imagery. Read closely, these materials reveal far more than streets and parcels. Scale, projection, color, and legend encode decisions about what—and whom—to make visible. Marginal notes capture the anxieties of surveyors confronting shifting sands and monsoon-swollen rivers. Successive editions show the city's pulse: demolitions and extensions, tanks that vanish from one plate to the next, and newly gridded neighborhoods advancing along rail lines and roads.

Colonial surveying practices sit at the heart of this story. From the East India Company's early fortifications to the Great Trigonometrical Survey and the Presidency's revenue regimes, mapping was a technology of rule that converted landscapes into legible property and labor. In Madras, this meant fixing boundaries where they had been seasonal, translating customary rights into cadastral lines, and imposing a cartographic order that sorted "White Town" from "Black Town," cantonment from bazaar. The same instruments that set geodetic benchmarks also defined hierarchies of access to land, water, and mobility—legacies that persist in contemporary planning and everyday life.

Yet maps also register change driven from below and from without: the engineering of the harbor, the cutting of Mount Road, the carving of the Buckingham Canal, the arrival of railways, the promulgation of master plans, and the ebb and flow of wetlands, temple tanks, and backwaters. Public health cartographies plot the geography of disease and sanitation; disaster maps trace cyclones and floods, exposing the costs of encroachment and the consequences of forgetting old hydrologies. Industrial corridors stretch the city's footprint; suburban layouts translate planning ideals into everyday neighborhoods; and renaming practices—from Madras to Chennai—recast toponymy and identity on the printed page.

Equally vital are the city's spatial memories. This book listens for the echoes carried by place names, street corners, and shrine precincts; it treats community maps and oral histories as counter-cartographies that complicate official plans. Heritage surveys, whether documenting forts, temples, or modernist civic buildings, become maps of attachment and controversy. By juxtaposing atlases across time—and by placing formal surveys alongside community-generated mappings—we ask how people remember, resist, and remake space, and how those memories can guide more just and resilient futures.

Each chapter pairs a curated set of maps and images with interpretive essays and close readings. Methodologically, readers are invited to read beyond the frame: to attend to north arrows and missing scales, to compare editions, to track the fate of tanks and channels, and to note how lines harden into policy. For practitioners, the volume offers techniques for integrating archival maps with GIS, remote sensing, and fieldwork; for historians and heritage professionals, it models ways to turn cartographic fragments into narratives of continuity and rupture. Above all, Mapping Madras proposes that to understand the city's past—and to plan its future—we must learn to see how maps have drawn, and can redraw, the lines of urban life.

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CHAPTER ONE: Fort St. George and the Birth of a Colonial Port City

The year 1639 marked a pivotal moment on the Coromandel Coast, a stretch of southeastern India known for its vibrant textile trade. It was in this year that Francis Day, an English merchant representing the East India Company, successfully negotiated a land grant. This grant, secured from Peda Venkata Raya, the last king of the Aravidu dynasty of the Vijayanagara Empire, through his local chief, Damarla Venkatapathy Nayak, provided the English with a small parcel of coastal land in the village of Madraspatnam. The stage was set for the establishment of Fort St. George, a structure that would not only serve as a fortified trading post but also as the genesis of a sprawling colonial port city.

Before Fort St. George, the East India Company had already established trading posts, or "factories," in other Indian locations, such as Masulipatnam and Armagaon. However, Masulipatnam's port was gradually silting up, making it less suitable for large ships, and Armagaon proved to be a "wretched place," easily overshadowed by the Dutch at Pulicat. The Company's desire for a secure and accessible trading hub on the east coast, closer to the lucrative Malaccan Straits, drove Francis Day's search for a new site. The chosen location at Madraspatnam offered a strategic advantage and access to the highly sought-after fine muslin and calico cloths produced in the Carnatic region.

The construction of Fort St. George began on March 1, 1640, with Francis Day and Andrew Cogan jointly overseeing the endeavor. It was a significant undertaking, intended to be an almost square enclosure, approximately 100 yards on each side, with bastions at each corner. A central building, diagonal to the square, was also part of the initial plan. A portion of the factory house was completed by April 23, 1640, which, being St. George's Day, gave the nascent fort its name, a direct homage to England's patron saint. The early fortifications were built without conventional foundations, a testament to the urgency and perhaps the experimental nature of colonial construction in this new environment.

The fort's strategic importance was immediately evident. It provided a secure base for the British East India Company's trading activities, safeguarding their valuable merchandise, primarily textiles, from potential threats from local rulers and pirates. The walls were designed to be robust, capable of withstanding attacks from both rivals and the unpredictable Bay of Bengal. The completion of the inner citadel in 1640 and the outer wall with four bastions by 1659 underscored the Company's commitment to establishing a formidable presence. However, this rapid construction did not come

without scrutiny, as Andrew Cogan was later questioned about the "extravagant and irresponsible" expenditure on fortifications given the Company's relatively small stock.

Maps from this early period, though rare, offer invaluable insights into the initial layout and ambitions of Fort St. George. They depict a military-focused enclave, a fortified island of European presence amidst a foreign landscape. These nascent cartographic representations were not merely descriptive; they were prescriptive, defining the boundaries of colonial power and the emerging spatial order. The very act of drawing these lines on paper was an assertion of control, transforming a physical space into a legible and governable territory for the East India Company.

One of the earliest detailed plans, though completed later, is the "Prospect of Fort St. George and Plan of the City of Madras," commissioned by Governor Thomas Pitt (1698-1709) and finished in 1726. This map, unusually orienting west at the top, provides a bird's-eye view of the civic buildings and an urban plan. Such documents highlight the foundational division of space that would characterize Madras for centuries: the "White Town" within the fort walls, reserved exclusively for Europeans, and the "Black Town" outside, where Indian settlers resided. This binary spatial segregation was not an accidental outcome but a deliberate cartographic and social construction, encoding racial hierarchies into the very fabric of the burgeoning city.

The flag flying over Fort St. George was initially the East India Company's ensign: red and white stripes, varying in number from nine to thirteen, with the St. George's Cross in the canton. This flag, a powerful visual symbol, marked the territory as an English possession and a hub of Company trade. Its presence on maps and in visual depictions of the fort was a constant reminder of the colonial power that was taking root. The very name of the fort, linking it to England's patron saint, was a statement of cultural and national identity projected onto Indian soil.

The area immediately surrounding Fort St. George quickly transformed from an "uninhabited land" into a bustling settlement. Indian weavers, merchants, and artisans, drawn by the new economic opportunities, established themselves outside the fort walls, giving rise to what would be known as Black Town (later George Town). This organic growth was a direct consequence of the fort's establishment, making it the nucleus around which the city of Madras developed. The mapping of this expanding settlement would become an increasingly complex task, reflecting the dynamic interplay between colonial planning and indigenous urbanisation.

Early maps of Fort St. George, therefore, are not just quaint historical curiosities. They are primary sources that tell a story of ambition, strategic calculation, and the imposition of a new spatial order. They show the nascent stages of a colonial project that would eventually reshape much of the Indian subcontinent. The precise lines and designated spaces on these early plans reveal the initial vision for Madras—a secure European enclave surrounded by a functional, if subordinate, Indian town. The seeds

of urban planning, albeit colonial in its intent and execution, were sown in these foundational cartographic acts.

Even in these early years, the fort was not immune to the geopolitical currents of the time. In 1746, during the First Carnatic War, the French captured Fort St. George, holding it for three years until it was restored to the British by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1749. This period of French occupation is also documented in contemporary maps, which provide alternative perspectives on the fort's layout and strategic vulnerabilities. These French plans, for example, like "Madraz det le Fort St. Georges Pris par les Francois commandes" from 1747, highlight the dynamic and contested nature of colonial power on the Coromandel Coast.

The constant need for defense against rival European powers, such as the French and the Dutch, as well as local rulers, dictated much of the early cartographic efforts. Maps became tools for military strategy, depicting bastions, moats, and other defensive structures. The evolution of these fortifications, as seen in successive plans, reflects the escalating conflicts and the British East India Company's determination to maintain its foothold. The changes in the fort's shape, from a small square in the 1640s to a "quadrangular bastioned enclosure" by the 1670s, and eventually to its present "half octagon" form by the 1780s, are all meticulously recorded in these historical documents.

The presence of other communities, such as the Armenians, also registered on the early maps, even if implicitly. Armenian merchants, who had a significant presence in Madras from the 1660s, quickly aligned themselves with the British, contributing to the city's vibrant commercial life. Their settlements, such as those along what became Armenian Street in George Town, while initially outside the fortified White Town, were nonetheless integral to the broader urban fabric that Fort St. George initiated. The naming of streets and localities after these communities attests to their early and lasting impact on the city's spatial memory.

Beyond its military and trading functions, Fort St. George rapidly evolved into an administrative center. By 1641, it had become the East India Company's headquarters on the Coromandel Coast. In 1652, it was briefly elevated to a Presidency, an independent administrative unit, before being downgraded to an Agency again in 1655. However, by 1684, it was re-elevated to a Presidency, signifying its growing importance in the Company's vast Indian empire. This administrative evolution further solidified the fort's role as the nucleus of a rapidly expanding colonial domain, with its governance extending over an increasing territory.

The early governors and agents, such as Andrew Cogan, Francis Day, Thomas Ivie, and Thomas Greenhill, played crucial roles in shaping the fort and its surrounding settlement. Their decisions, often recorded in company minutes and correspondence, directly influenced the physical development of the area. The building of St. Mary's

Church within the fort between 1678 and 1681 by Governor Streyntsham Master, and the provision of church plate by Governor Elihu Yale in 1687, illustrate the establishment of a distinct European civic and religious life within the fortified walls. These structures, too, found their place on the maps, contributing to the visual narrative of a burgeoning colonial town.

The strategic site selection for Fort St. George, while primarily driven by economic and defensive considerations, proved to be remarkably prescient. The decision to establish a trading post on this seemingly empty strip of land, allowing for future expansion, was a critical factor in the long-term success of the British East India Company in Southern India. The fort's location, combined with subsequent infrastructure developments like bridges connecting it to the mainland, cemented its role as the administrative and commercial heart of the nascent city. The mapping of this growth, from humble beginnings to a significant colonial capital, forms the central theme of this cartographic history.

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