

Research Article

The Storyline Development of the Almacens (1842-1959) in Legazpi Port District, Albay Gulf, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the historical, cultural, and architectural significance of the early Almacens that once thrived in the Legazpi Port District of Legazpi City, Albay, Philippines. Utilizing archival research, field surveys, interviews with local historians and residents, as well as storytelling techniques, the study reconstructs the layered narratives of these forgotten warehouses that was also called Almacens. Some of the key findings have reveal that despite the absence of physical remnants, the Almacens have left a lasting cultural imprint on Legazpi City's urban identity and contributed to the city's socio-economic development. They form an intangible link between past and present, shaping community memory and historical consciousness. The study concludes that historical conservation, though not explicitly stated in the SDGs, plays a vital role in achieving inclusive, resilient, and culturally rich urban environments as envisioned in SDG 11.4 to be specific. As for the practical implication, the research recommends incorporating the narratives of the Almacens into the urban planning, cultural mapping, and tourism development strategies to establish a deeper sense of place and historical awareness in Legazpi City.

Keywords: Historical Site, Urban Development, Storyline, Almacen, Manila Hemp

1. INTRODUCTION

The historic Almacens (warehouses) once found in the Legazpi Port District, Legazpi City, Albay, Philippines, stood as architectural symbols of maritime heritage, economic activity, and cultural identity. Built during the height of the abaca trade, these structures played a pivotal role in the regional economy and the port's development as a key node in interisland and international trade. Their disappearance marks not only the loss of physical structures but also the fading of a vital historical narrative. The current research seeks to understand the historical and cultural significance of the Almacens and how their legacy can contribute to sustainable development and cultural tourism initiatives in Legazpi City.

Legazpi's strategic location along the Philippine coastline contributed to its involvement in maritime activities as early as the Spanish colonial period. Bicolanos contributed to the Galleon Trade through abaca fiber production and shipbuilding, highlighting their significant role in maritime commerce (Banzuela, 2013). The Spaniards, recognizing the archipelagic nature of the Philippines, constructed ships and distilleries across the Bicol Region. This activity brought not just economic benefits but also introduced cultural exchanges that shaped the local identity. (Gerona, 2011) further elaborates on the abaca trade, describing the abaca trail that connected plantations to the port via networks of processing centers, where Almacens played a crucial role in the storage and preparation of goods for shipment.

The importance of Albay and the port of Legazpi during the colonial era in the importation and trading of Manila hemp (abaca) shaped the material life of Filipinos and influenced social, economic, and environmental conditions under colonial rule (Owen, 1984). In another work, (Owen, 1979) chronicles the Philippine-American War in Albay, referencing the zenith of the abaca industry and mentioning the presence of Almacens in the Legazpi Port District. His archival work highlights the structural and historical presence of these warehouses as essential components of trade logistics.

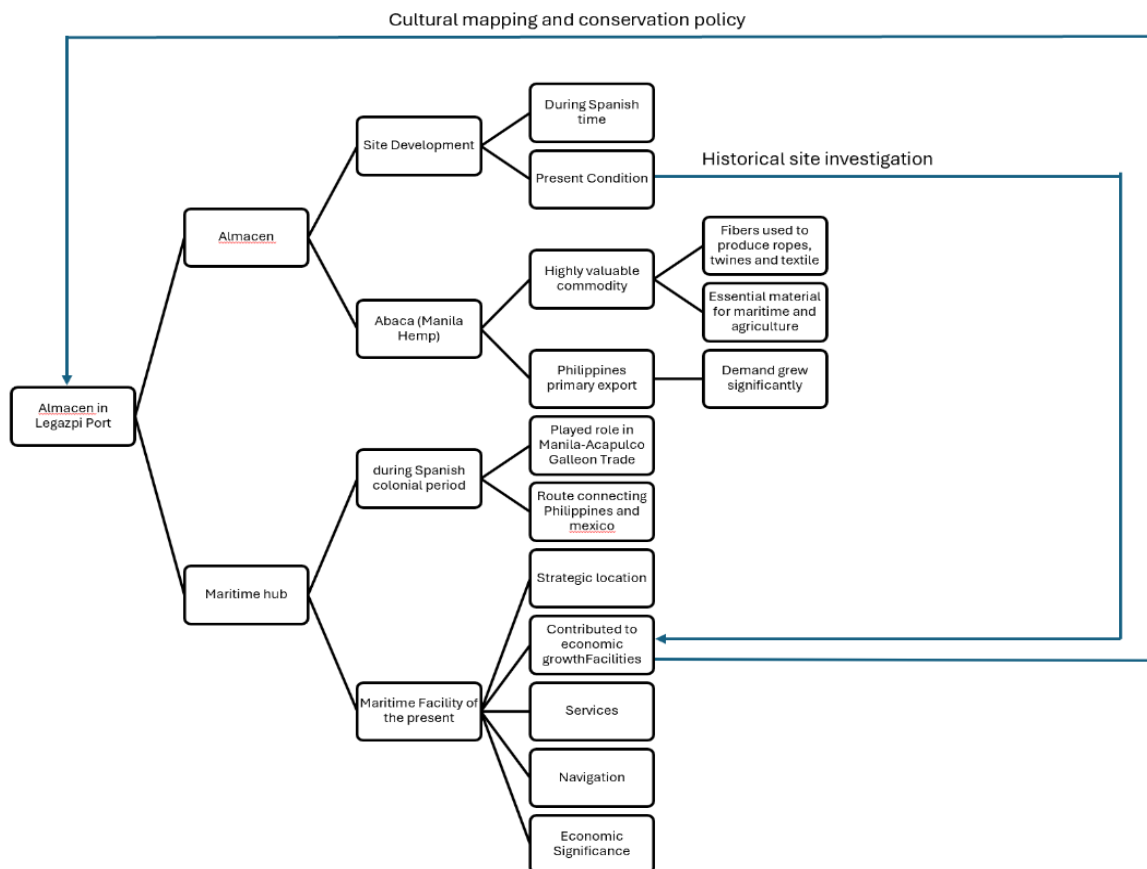
Cultural mapping has emerged as an essential methodology in recognizing and preserving such tangible and intangible heritage. In "Understanding the Past for a Sustainable Future," (Mohd Sabriza Abd Rashid, 2014) emphasizes the importance of cultural mapping in promoting local identity and preserving historical resources amid challenges like insufficient funding and community engagement. This aligns with (Rabang, 2015) study of Vigan, which illustrates how cultural mapping informed heritage

conservation by documenting built, movable, and intangible heritage.

This study is anchored on an interdisciplinary framework combining cultural heritage theory, historical urbanism, and sustainable development. It draws from the concept of cultural mapping as outlined by (Mohd Sabriza Abd Rashid, 2014) and (Rabang, 2015), who emphasize the importance of identifying, documenting, and valuing both tangible and intangible heritage to strengthen cultural identity and guide future development. In this context, the Almacens of Legazpi are approached not merely as lost physical structures but as historical artifacts embedded in the cultural memory and economic life of the city.

To explore further the Almacens' historical and cultural relevance, the framework incorporates archival research, historical mapping, and field validation to reconstruct their physical and socio-economic presence within the Legazpi Port District. Drawing from (Petric et al., 2019), colonial maps and documents serve as key instruments in retracing the spatial and functional roles of these structures in the abaca trade and maritime economy, as highlighted by (Banzuela, 2013), (Gerona, 2011), and (Owen, 1984, 1979). The port's strategic role in global commerce, likened to Fremantle (Tull, 1985), situates Legazpi within a larger historical narrative of port-driven development and global trade networks.

The framework considers the Almacens in Legazpi Port District, as cultural heritage center for the cultural mapping and a catalyst for sustainable development and may structure a sustainable policy. The research thus employs a qualitative approach, integrating historical documentation, local narratives, and cultural inventories to generate a comprehensive understanding of the Almacens' significance. Ultimately, the framework aims to inform policy and planning strategies that can reclaim and reinterpret these vanished structures, transforming them into instruments of cultural education, community pride, and sustainable tourism for Legazpi City.



Regional perspectives on heritage conservation further contextualize Legazpi's historical assets, through the Provincial Tourism Culture and Arts Office, documented various historical sites and cultural properties in Albay, promoting awareness of the Albayanos' unique identity (Zepeda, 2021). Preserving the cultural heritage of Albay, including its pre-colonial and colonial history, is vital in maintaining the region's historical integrity (Banzuela, 2010). These initiatives underscore the need to rediscover and reinterpret the cultural meaning behind forgotten sites like the Almacens.

Globally, heritage-based port development has gained attention. (Tull's, 1985) thesis on the Port of Fremantle underscores

the critical role of ports as gateways of economic and cultural exchange. It draws attention to infrastructure evolution, industrial transformation, and heritage conservation, echoing the potential relevance of the Legazpi Port District's historical structures in a modern context.

The application of cultural heritage for development, where balancing tourism with preservation proved challenging (Ahmad, 2018). His recommendations—improved infrastructure, stakeholder collaboration, and cultural sensitivity—are essential for any effort to integrate the Almacens into Legazpi's urban and tourism framework. Similarly, the comparative study of Vigan and Escolta in "The Cultural Heritage-Oriented Approach to Economic Development" shows how the success of heritage-driven development hinges on effective governance, policy frameworks, and community engagement.

This research also draws from the foundational context provided by the official website of the Province of Albay, which outlines the region's layered colonial history—from Spanish to American and Japanese occupations—highlighting how cultural vestiges endure in place names, practices, and built forms.

In light of these works, this study intends to uncover the storyline of the Almacens and position them as potential anchors of cultural tourism and sustainable development. By connecting archival research, historical mapping, and cultural heritage methodologies, the project hopes to contribute not just to historical knowledge but also to future-oriented planning in the Legazpi Port District.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative exploratory study design was employed to allow an in-depth examination of the contextual knowledge about the early Almacens in Legazpi Port District, Legazpi City, Albay, Philippines, that once thrived and eventually faced decline—a crucial step to ensure that the narratives are accurate and on point. A subsequent literature review was conducted, processing information to establish a narrative, with the expected impact of obtaining nuanced, in-depth qualitative data that reflects the heritage of Albay and unfolds the story of the Almacens. This exploratory study involves detailed research on the given subject matter aimed at showing a complete understanding of the subject. It required collecting only reliable data and using reputable resources, as cited in the presentation of the related literature and studies. After collecting all the necessary data, the task was to make sense of it, achieved by answering the "what" research questions; creating an efficient exploratory study was important to demonstrate the significance of the paper and to provide enough factual evidence to persuade the reader.

Data collection related to the history of the Almacens in Legazpi City was conducted using cultural mapping techniques inspired by Maria Rose Q. Rabang's study on Vigan, which involved hands-on documentation of tangible and intangible heritage components (natural, built, movable, intangible) associated with the Almacens, and an effort to understand the broader historical context of the Almacens in the nineteenth century, considering political, social, and cultural factors. Through the literature review, existing publications on the economic history of Kabikolan and the Philippines in the nineteenth century identified gaps, controversies, and key themes. The process included an exploration of colonial-era records, and official correspondence—including trade records, historical documents such as diaries and letters, and official publications like government reports, newspapers, and periodicals—to collect as many maps and photos as possible, which played an important role in the methodologies and sources of materials. Additionally, a participatory approach involved local community members, historians, government officials, and cultural experts.

A site analysis was conducted, narrowing the architectural assessments and documenting current conditions to further understand its spatial context. Data analysis consisted of thematic evaluation, expert consultation, and the gathering of validation and feedback to leverage results with information that is historically aligned with the goal of this study. The sources of data were composed mostly of maps and photographs, although the comprehensive collection of information extended beyond visual aids to encompass a meticulous review of related literature and studies, both published and unpublished. To ensure the narrative's depth and accuracy, collaboration was pursued with esteemed institutions such as National Museums, Public Libraries, and local historians to tap into their expertise and access their repositories of historical data. In this digital age, the internet has served as a dynamic resource, providing access to a wealth of information and enabling connections with a broader audience; online archives, scholarly articles, and virtual platforms were explored to gather supplementary data, enhancing the narrative with diverse perspectives and supporting evidence about the existence of the early Almacens in Legazpi City, Albay.

Data validation is ensuring that source data is accurate and of high quality before using, importing, or otherwise processing it.

Two types of validation were performed in migrating and merging data. A critical way to ensure that data from various sources and repositories conforms to the objective of the study and does not become corrupted due to inconsistencies in type or context.

The goal is to generate consistent, accurate, and complete data to avoid data loss and errors during the move.

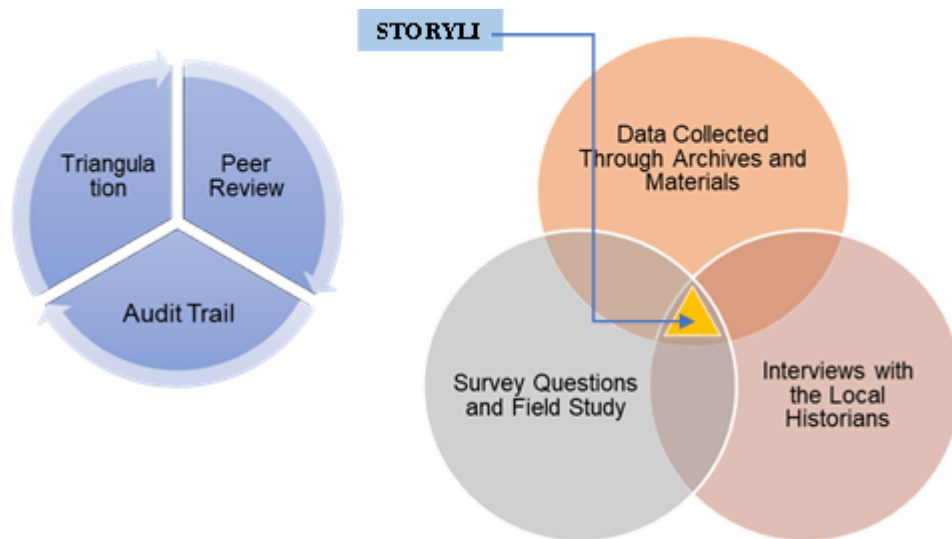


Fig. 05 Data Validation Process

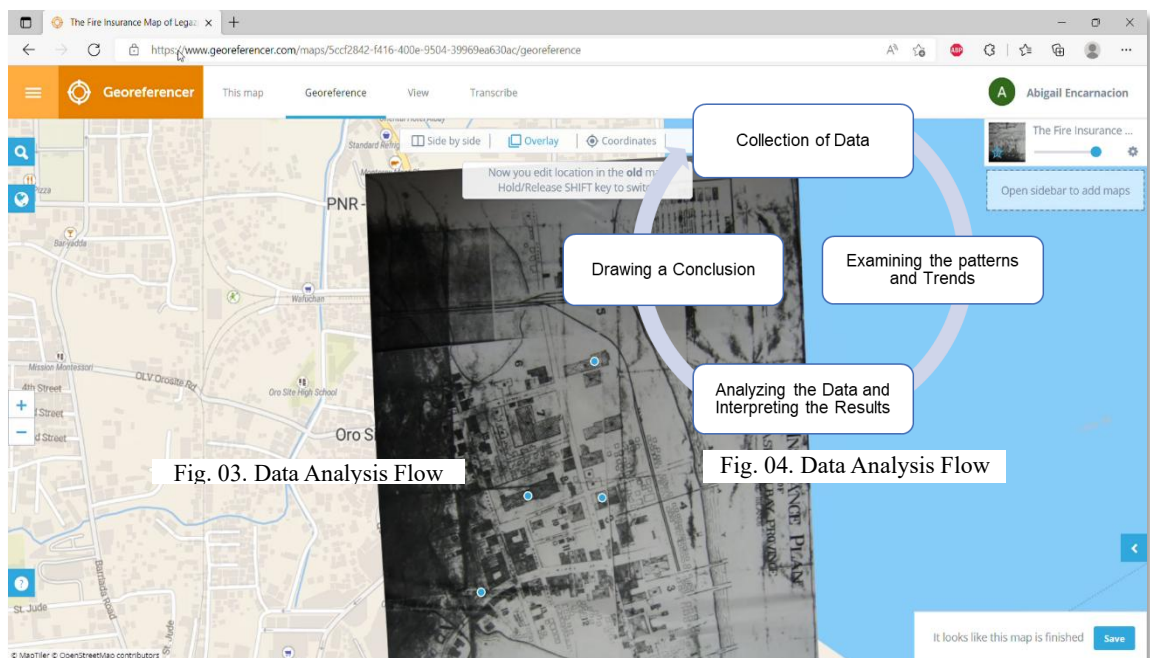


Fig. 02. Georeferencing of collected old map to a satellite map image

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From colonial-era maps and shipping manifests to government records and oral histories, the documents at our disposal provide invaluable insights into the origins, construction, and use of the Almacens. Through meticulous examination and analysis, the author is able to piece together the puzzle of their early existence, tracing their transformation from humble warehouses (Almacens) to iconic landmarks along the Albay Gulf.

The almacens were built to accommodate the demands of abaca not just in the Philippines but throughout the world. Legazpi Port District in Legazpi City, Albay, Philippines then became an open port that opened to trade and other industries. Long gone are the days when Legazpi City, as well as the province of Albay, enjoyed the benefits of abaca, almacens, and pantalans in keeping the industry and culture of the city known. This is supported more of the passage from Norman Owen's book (Prosperity without Progress, Winding down the war in Albay) and from one of our very own Bikolano Historian Dr. Danilo Gerona (Winding

down the abaca trail in Albay) and an interview with several historians including the curator of the Legazpi National Museum, an author and local historian Mr. Lito L. Tuanqui Jr., and an architect-historian Ar. Rino Doinga A. Fernandez, that validate the story of Albay when it used to be the wealthiest province because of the benefits from its port and the success of the almacens.



Fig. 06. Old photo on the abaca transportation in the 19th century.
Source: Arch. Rino D.A. Fernandez



Fig. 07. Old photo of the Abaca warehouse and transportation in the 19th century.
Source: Arch. Rino D.A. Fernandez



Fig. 08. A newspaper publication of the abaca trade in early 20th century.
 Source: Albay public library

The prosperity of Legazpi City, fueled by the booming abaca trading, endured even beyond the Second World War. Despite being one of the most devastated cities in the region during the war, Legazpi City exhibited remarkable resilience and quick recovery. The unwavering hope for a better future empowered its people to rise from the ruins and restore the city to its former glory.

Following the devastation of the war, Legazpi City embarked on a path of sustained progress. The citizens, determined to rebuild, initiated the revival of institutions and infrastructure that had once made it one of the most progressive cities in the region. This marked the beginning of a collective effort to reclaim and surpass its past achievements.

The impetus for urban development pivoted around the commercial establishments that flourished surrounding the almacens, as it became the initial business district of the city. Subsequently, urban sprawl followed, leading to what is now Legazpi City.



Fig. 09. Old photo of Legazpi Port before the World War II, c 1935.
 Source: Lito E. Tuanqui

Architectural Development

An intricate fire insurance plan unveils the initial structures erected along the shorelines, meticulously marking objects believed to be the Almacens. This detailed plan serves as a historical blueprint, capturing the essence of the structures and their

strategic placement in the landscape.

A prominently displayed map of Legazpi (see fig. 11) provides a comprehensive view of the city, showcasing not only its intricate shoreline but also highlighting the seven piers meticulously detailed in Gerona's narrative. Each pier represents a distinct point of connection with the sea, serving as hubs for trade, transport, and cultural exchange.

The juxtaposition of the collected images creates a compelling visual dialogue, illustrating the continuity of design principles of the almacens. Through this lens, viewers can discern not only the economic activities of abaca trade but also the architectural echoes that permeated both commercial and governmental structures during the same historical epoch.

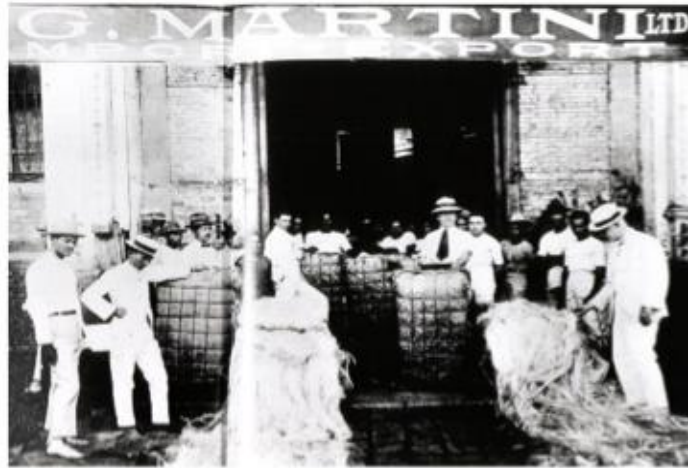


Fig. 10. Old photo of Legazpi Port in 19th century. Source: Legazpi City Museum

Industrial Contribution

The presentation of the photographs in the storyline offers a visual journey through the evolution of the pantalans and almacens lining the shores, presenting a historical narrative that is believed to have unfolded from the mid-18th century until the 1920s. This visual documentation aligns with the accounts provided by historians in written works and is further enriched by the insights shared by Mr. Lito E. Tuanqui, during a personal interview, a respected local historian in Legazpi City.

These images serve as a portal to the past, capturing the gradual transformation and development of the pantalans and almacens over nearly a century. The meticulous curation of this photographic timeline provides a tangible link to the historical accounts penned by scholars, reinforcing the authenticity of the portrayed evolution.

Storyline development of the almacens (1842-1959)



Fig. 11. Construction of the pantalans in Legazpi Port, during the 19th century
Source: Legazpi City Museum

Beginning in the later part of the 19th century, the port of Legazpi served as anchorage for ships sailing to Nueva España which is now known as Mexico. And for 250 years its nearby Sula Channel was used as a sanctuary by galleons during storms because of its sheltered inlet.



Fig. 12. Phot of the Legazpi port with its pantalans and the nearby almacens in the 19th century.
Source: Legazpi City Museum

Due to Spain's interests, the use of the waterfront was broadened and was then often used as a means of transport and trade. As such, it is evident that waterfronts were considered vital in their role of providing a good location for a community since the early law required the formation and orientation of a town to near bodies of water.

With its water port, it was once the central core of the city's trade and industry. In 1873, Legazpi was made a port of entry by a Royal Decree issued in Madrid on May 18, 1872, and later promulgated by Governor Juan Alamenos y de Vivar on December 3, 1874 (*Legazpi.gov.ph*). Thus, industrial establishments rose to their existence, it has become the center of trade and industry, and abaca fiber was a major product for trading in the region. The existing warehouses is evidence of the ancient trading hub that flourished even after the historical battle of Legazpi with the Americans.

There were rumors that circulated in the early month of the 1899 regarding the arrival of the American earships in Albay to attack the ports of Legazpi and Tabaco. However, it was only on September 10, 1899, that the first American attack took place (Ayo, 2015)

During the American period, almaceneros, or warehouse owners, enjoyed the benefits of increasing baling rates. These rates rose rapidly from a nominal P0.20 per picul in 1899 to P0.625 in 1900-1901, eventually reaching P1.00 in 1920. (p. 98). After the Philippine-American War, the British firms Smith, Bell & Co. and Warner, Barnes & Co., which essentially controlled the Bikol-Manila shipping, faced accusations of refusing to transport any abaca other than their own. (Owen, 1984)

During the fiber price slump from 1907 to 1911, governors of Albay, Sorsogon, and Ambus Camarines reported that abaca planters were shifting to coconuts. Despite the initial involvement of Smith, Bell & Co., Chinese traders soon dominated the trade. By the eve of World War II, Kabikolan was contributing over 15 percent of the total Philippine coconut production, suggesting that coconuts had become an alternative to the struggling abaca industry. (Owen, 1984)

The Scottish trader Smith, Bell & Company occupied the house that is now known as the Angela Manalang Gloria, after the Legazpi Port opened to international trade in 1873. Specializing in trade, its presence in Tabaco signaled the importance of Tabaco Port as a major abaca exporter (Zepeda, 2021)



Fig. 13. 1886 map of Albay
Source: Danilo Gerona



Fig. 14. A fire insurance map showing the Legazpi City facing the Albay Gulf. C. 1925
Source: Ar. Rino DA Fernandez

In 1928, the construction of Legazpi's concrete dock started. The concrete plane which elongates from the shoreline to a deeper depth of water served as the port's extension, catering more water vessels. The docks along sabang, pigcale, and baybay, continued as working piers for handling passengers and cargo onto and off ships that is evident in the photo.



Fig. 16. 1935 Aerial photo of the Port of Legazpi
Source: Legazpi City Museum



Fig. 17. 1941-1945 Japanese invasion
Source: Here in Albay webpage

During the war with the Japanese, Legazpi Port was once again becoming a battlefield as the bay of the city was often the frontier for the battles. Shown in the photos are the war vehicles that hits Legazpi City in the year 1941 and 1945



Fig. 18. 20th century map of Legazpi Port District
Source: Legazpi City Museum

Before 1961 there were 5 built pantalans in Legazpi City Bay. Beside the Pantalans where big warehouses of Albay products for shipments. With the coming of Legazpi Oil Company in Legazpi City, the pantalans slowly cease their operations. Moreover, the destruction of past typhoons, deteriorations and maintenance costs of pantalans had its closure eventually.

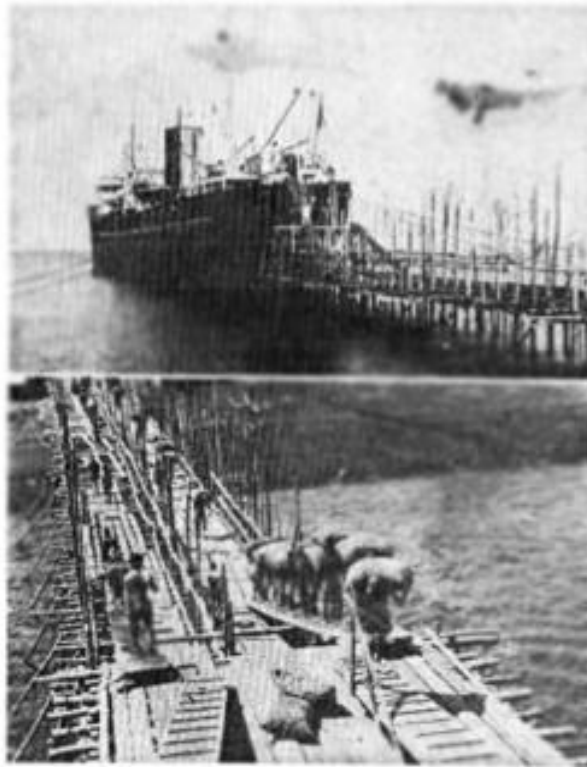


Fig. 19. 1959 phot of the Legazpi Port
Source: Here in Albay webpage

Additionally, according to some residents of Barangay Baybay (where the early almacens once thrived), before it was established, the place was referred to as “Matakla” this is so because according to pioneer residents of the Barangay, it was used to be a dumping scrap material such as iron, steel, GI sheets, steel bars, etc. These was also private wharfs (Pantalan) along the shoreline belonging to Qua Chi Gan, DUPREXCO, PAECO, and Intreco. These establishments are buyers and sellers of copra and Manila Hemp (Abaca). Hence, 2 or 3 times a month, these warfs are occupied by international vessels to ferry copra and hemp. In and out of the city. The transfer of copra from the warehouse to the ships and vice versa were all done manually through labor. Those labors have established their family at the vicinity of the warehouses, and which now turns into highly density village and no more physical evidence of the warehouse, yet its history remains.



Fig. 20 and 21. The loading of copra by the laborers.
Source: Lito E. Tuanqui



PICTURED is the East Asiatic motorship "Korea" loading copra at Legaspi City, Albay. The "Korea" was built in Denmark in 1939 and has a displacement of 18,340 tons. She is one of East Asiatic's biggest freight vessels, having an over all length of 510 feet 10 inches and six hatches. The lower photograph is of stevedores at Legaspi loading copra in sacks. The sacks are carried on their shoulders from warehouses located on the shore and over the length of the bamboo loading piers to the ship's stern where gangplanks provide access to the ship's deck. As may be seen all copra loading at Legaspi is manual. The photograph was taken while the "MS Korea" was being loaded with copra for Europe.

Manila Chronicle - March 27, 1951

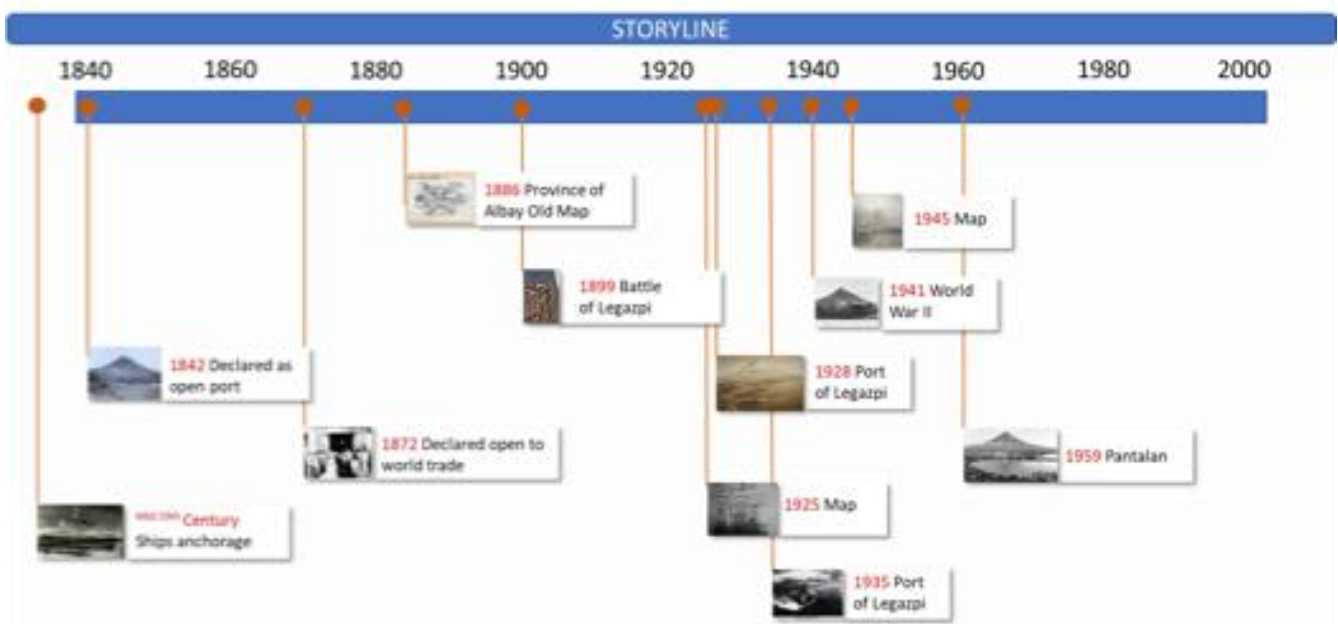


Fig. 22 Storyline of the Development of Almacén

Table 01. Architectural Development findings of the Almacen Site

PERIODS	EVENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS	INFRASTRUCTURES
Spaniards discovery of the Ibalon	▪ Linked to the coastal settlements serving as vibrant ports of call for inter-island vessels. ▪ Gulf shoreline intersected major settlements where pioneering conquistadors established their fledgling military base. ▪ Albay functioned as a gateway for galleons navigating the Manila-Acapulco route. ▪ Late eighteenth-century discovery of the abaca, the "abaca-trail". ▪ Albay ranked as the most prosperous province in the entire Philippines.	▪ Residential houses constructed from nipa and bamboo. ▪ A bamboo port, temporary storage facilities for stocking abaca, a repair station, and a shipyard. ▪ Material and infrastructure improvements (ports and Almacens).
Spanish Era with the Abaca	▪ Opening of Manila port as Albay increases demands for abaca. ▪ Mid-nineteenth century, port of Albay opened to international vessels. ▪ Opening of foreign trade in Legazpi	▪ Abaca brokers established Almacens, with Warner Barnes & Co., Smith Bell and Co., and Munoz brothers being the major traders.
American Era and the World War II	▪ Disrupted external trade, Albay held great importance with the abaca. ▪ Competition in abaca trade intensifies. ▪ Introduction of steamships	▪ Demand for more storage facilities, thus, expansion of Almacens district. ▪ Construction of commercial ports

4. CONCLUSION

The story of the Almacens in relation to the present warehouse district in Legazpi Port District, Albay, is a research topic that may not immediately spark interest in literature, yet it possesses a cultural heritage awaiting unveiling. The previous architecture of the almacens that may have influenced the present design of warehouses, and their current location still serves the purpose they once did. Their significance in the urban landscape of the city, evolving from a humble village to a center of trade due to its abaca industry, led to the existence of the almacens as a manifestation of the booming industry's need for space to cater to global demands. Yet due to its rarely to non-disclosure to convey interest as part of historical landscape of the city, a challenge on the collection of data and its verification vastly encountered during the conduction of this research..

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