

The Cuban Insurgent Colony of Key West: 1868–1895

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Introduction

The history of the nineteenth century Cuban émigré colonies in the U.S. provides a fascinating glimpse into the exiles' political shrewdness and their financial resources as they conspired with loyal patriots from within Cuba to overthrow the Spanish government. In order to provide munitions from abroad to sustain a war in Cuba, the émigré colonies organized themselves into clubs in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, New Orleans, Tampa, and Key West. Relying upon their local resources, the colonies developed different roles in the insurrection. Members of the club in New York were wealthy influential businessmen who served as officers for the various revolutionary organizations that were formed in the U.S. Émigrés in Philadelphia, Boston, and New Orleans helped raise funds to supply the munitions for the soldiers while waging a propaganda campaign against Spain. In Florida, the cigar workers in Jacksonville, Martí City, located near Ocala, Tampa, and Key West provided the primary financial support for the expeditions from the U.S. and orchestrated the expeditions from Florida. Fermín Valdés describes the role of the cigar workers in Florida in the 1895 campaign as compared to the Ten Years War (1868–78): “In Tampa and Key West, the poor cigar workers personified the word, patriotism. Their sacrifices justify our noble revolution. The revolution of 1868 was the work of the wealthy, this revolution [1895] is the work of the people.”¹

The Key West Colony

The first mention of Cuban émigrés in Key West is associated with Narciso López who led the first expedition to Cuba in the late 1840s. López had the financial backing of the Club de la Habana in Cuba and the support of the junta in New York that worked with him throughout the 1840s to launch his expedition.² López' first attempt to land an expedition in Cuba failed when President Taylor ordered the U.S. authorities to arrest the crew as the ship was preparing to depart for Cuba. However, in May 1850, López organized another expedition that left Bahia Honda and successfully landed 450 rebel soldiers. Surrounded by the Spanish army at Cárdenas, López appealed to the local Cubans to join his insurrectionist army, but they failed to respond.³ López and his remaining soldiers managed to board the ship *Creole* in order to escape to nearby Key West. The Spanish navy pursued the *Creole* aboard their frigate, *Pizarro*, and they eventually caught up with the *Creole* in front of Fort Taylor in Key West. The U.S. authorities warned the Spanish that if they opened fire on the *Creole*, which was flying an American flag, they would receive cannon fire. The threat was enough to dissuade the officers aboard the *Pizarro*, who wisely decided to return to Cuba.⁴ The residents on the island, comprised of a small number of Cubans and native "Conchs," welcomed the expeditionary soldiers into their houses and their hearts.⁵

When the Ten Years War began in 1868, thousands of exiles fled from Cuba to Key West and to other émigré centers such as New Orleans, Philadelphia, and New York. In 1869, Vicente Martínez Ybor moved his cigar factory from Cuba to Key West and employed the Cuban émigrés on the island who had fled from political persecution.⁶ Other wealthy factory owners like Cayetano Soria followed Martínez' lead and established several cigar factories in Key West. Three of the largest factories in Key West employed more than 1,500 workers whose combined salaries were in excess of \$1 million annually.⁷

At times, the frustration and anger of the Cuban exiles turned into animosity toward the Spaniards, who lived and worked abroad. One of the most sensational incidents was the murder of Gonzalo Castañón in Key West on January 31, 1870.⁸ Gonzalo Castañón was the editor of the pro-Spanish newspaper, *La Voz de Cuba*, which was financed by several wealthy and influential Spaniards in Cuba. Castañón traveled to Key West to challenge Juan María Reyes, the editor of the pro-Cuban

newspaper, *El Republicano*.⁹ The Spanish Consul's report of Castañón's murder to the authorities in Spain included an article printed in one of the local newspapers:

Gonzalo Castañón, editor of the Spanish paper published at Havana, *La Voz de Cuba*, landed here from Havana, on January 29 and with his accompanying Spanish friends, took lodgings at the Russell House. Every one knows he came to this country in open and direct violation of our laws, his errand being to fight a duel with a Cuban refugee who had taken refuge under the American flag... The announcement of Castañón's arrival... caused no little excitement among these unfortunate men on this island. No sooner had his caravan of fighters arrived, than the lordly and mail-clad Castañón sent a message to Juan M. Reyes...

The poor, feeble old man, repaired at once to the hotel, depending, as he did, on the honor of a gentleman as he thought; but once in the clutches of the supposed gentleman, who turned out to be the ferocious Castañón, he of the grey hairs, was rudely slapped in the face... The news of this slapping spread like wild fire through the city, and the Cubans were made desperate with this effort; but having respect for law and for order, they restrained their passions and awaited the progress of events. The affair was carried before the court, and Castañón was held to answer the charge on a \$200 bond. Meantime preparations were carried forward in haste to affect the duel, and the brave breast plated Castañón showed an eager disposition to fight... The last day of January was the last day of Castañón. Early in the morning of that day, the steamer destined to carry his corpse hovered in sight, and Castañón and party made preparations to leave Key West. At about half past twelve o'clock two Cubans went to the Russell House and inquired for the Spanish gentlemen. That message was delivered and Castañón and his



Russell House, 1870s. Courtesy of Monroe County Public Library.

friends came down to the parlor; once there, one of the Cubans (the unarmed one) asked Castañón what he had come here for, and whether he was satisfied with all the mischief he had done to the Cubans... Castañón answered that, having slapped the face of a Cuban in this country, he had enough for the present. The Cuban then said, "Villain, you are a coward!" Castañón slapped the Cuban, and taking two steps backward, prepared to fire. The Cuban, at the same moment asked, "Who will give me a pistol?" Castañón had fired but did not hit the Cuban, and the other Cuban having instantly taken out his revolver, it was wrenched out of his hand and discharged, the ball taking effect somewhere in Castañón's neck, felling him to his knees, in which posture he fired again at the Cuban but without effect. The Cuban fired his second shot and most deadly was its errand, for it entered Castañón's abdomen and laid him prone on the floor...¹⁰

Five Cubans in Key West were arrested and charged with complicity in the murder of Castañón. Soon after their arrest, they were released on bond. The three individuals most directly related to the shooting, Mateo Orozco, Carlos Rodríguez, and A. Lozano, fled from the authorities on the island.¹¹ After the incident, a number of pro-Spanish supporters who worked in the cigar factories in Key West felt so threatened by the émigré colony in Key West that they requested permission from the Spanish Consul to return to Cuba.¹²

In an effort to resolve the hostility between the Cuban exiles and the Spanish residents on the island, the mayor of Key West, Henry Mulrennan, issued a proclamation on February 1, 1870, calling on all good citizens to be prepared to aid him at a moment's notice in maintaining the laws of the land, and the peace and good order of Key West.¹³ Despite the mayor's reassurance, a number of Spaniards received permission through the Consul to return to Cuba due to the threats made by the Cuban émigrés. The following year, Antonio Huertas, a Cuban exile, killed a Spanish resident, Guillermo Carbajal, in Key West. Antonio Huertas was tried on May 10, 1871, but the jury was unable to reach a verdict. The presiding adjudicator, Judge Locke, set a new trial date in November to retry the case, but there is no indication that the trial took place.¹⁴

In 1877, the Spanish general Arsenio Martínez Campos arrived in Cuba to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the Ten Years War (1868–78) by promising new reforms. The controversial agreement, the Pact of

Zanjón, was signed on February 10, 1878, bringing closure to this war. However, Cubans soon realized that the reforms promised by the Spanish government would never be enacted to the extent that they would be able to achieve the representation that they had fought for in the Cortes nor would the pact improve their economic and political status in Cuba.

The general discontentment and disappointment with the terms of the Pact of Zanjón led Cubans to continue their conspiracy against the Spanish government. In the same year as the Pact, 1878, Calixto García, a veteran officer of the Ten Years War, met with the influential leaders of a new movement who believed that the war had failed due to a lack of military aggressiveness.¹⁵ The new leaders, Ramón Martínez, Leoncio Prado, Leandro Rodríguez, and Fidel Pierra, well-known businessmen in New York, collaborated with leading Cuban émigrés in Key West such as J. D. Poyo and Carlos M. de Céspedes y Céspedes to establish a secret organization that would support the next revolution in Cuba.¹⁶ In 1878, Calixto García met with the leaders of the new junta in New York and volunteered his services to lead the latest effort to free Cuba. After receiving the support of the new junta, Calixto García established the *Comité Revolucionario Cubano* and asked the rebel colonies in the U.S. to establish similar organizations that would report to the New York committee.

One of the leaders of the committee in New York, Leoncio Prado, wrote to J. D. Poyo in Key West, explaining that the newly-formed junta would appoint agents in the U.S. and abroad and that Poyo had been designated as the agent in Key West. As their designee, he would be affiliated with all of the agents and would be responsible for the collection of funds from the residents in Key West that he would retain until Prado instructed to wire them to Manuel Aguilera in New York.¹⁷ By August 4, 1878, J. D. Poyo founded the *Orden Cosmopolita del Sol* in Key West whose mission was to support their common goal, the liberation of Cuba. In order to maintain its covert operations, the members were referred to only by symbolic names. The resolutions adopted by the *Orden Cosmopolita del Sol* laid the groundwork for future revolutionary organizations in Key West.¹⁸

On May 5, 1879, the governor general of Cuba, Salvador Albacete, submitted a report to the Spanish ministry in Madrid in which he described the activities of the insurgents in the key rebel centers in the

U.S.. Governor General Albacete informed the ministry that General Calixto García and members of the revolutionary committee in New York had decided to send several key military leaders to Santo Domingo and to one of the English-speaking islands in the Antilles to organize expeditions of arms and munitions. The primary source of funding to outfit the expeditions would come from the secret organizations recently organized in the key rebel colonies. Monthly pledges would be collected by the secret clubs, which would then be forwarded to New York. In addition to supplying the munitions, the money would also be used to pay the expenses of former military officers so that they could join the insurrection. The revolutionary committee sent monies to two veteran generals, Mayía Rodríguez and Flor Crombet, who had been deported to Spain due to their involvement in the Ten Years War. The revolutionary committee called upon Santiago Spencer, who resided in Paris, to facilitate the transfer of funds through his connections in Madrid. Upon their release, Crombet and Rodríguez were expected to return to New York.¹⁹

The Cuban émigrés in Key West soon realized that by becoming U.S. citizens, they would be accorded all rights and privileges of citizenship. Many of the émigrés who had fled Cuba during the Ten Years War and the Guerra Chiquita became U.S. citizens, which entitled them to carry arms, engage in target practice, or even join a local militia group. Another important privilege afforded to them was that of voting. The local politicians soon realized they needed the votes of the Cuban émigrés in order to keep them in office. In 1883, there were 3,000 registered voters in Monroe County, Florida; however, the average number who voted was approximately 2,000. Of these 2,000, 800 were members of the Democratic Party, while the remaining 1,200 were members of the Republican Party. The number of Cubans who were registered as Republicans was 400, which represented one-third of the Republican Party, and they voted as a bloc. The Spanish Consul in Key West often complained to the Spanish ministry that well-known Cuban rebels like Manuel Alvarez were employed in important positions in the Customs House in exchange for having supported certain politicians in the polls. Another well-known Cuban insurgent, Fernando Figueredo, was appointed an inspector in the customs office.²⁰ As federal employees at the Customs House, these insurgents were able to support the filibustering activities of the insurgents.

Frustrated by the lack of leadership in New York, the rebel leaders in Key West established the central revolutionary committee in mid-June 1883 that would act independently of the junta in New York.²¹ The cigar workers in Key West pledged to donate a percentage of their weekly earnings, and the money instead of being sent to New York, would be sent directly to Antonio Maceo, a rebel leader, in Costa Rica. The rules for the establishment of this war fund specified that the workers would elect 10 individuals who would serve on a committee, which would select four members to serve on the newly formed central revolutionary committee. Several weeks later, the revolutionary Cuban committee was established in New York. Important decisions made at that meeting included the announcement of a new newspaper, *El Separatista*, (one of the writers for this newspaper was José Martí); the appointment of Beraza as Ramón Bonachea's private secretary; the disbanding of the Comité Patriótico Organizador; and the departure of Estrada Palma for Honduras with letters written by Bonachea and Beraza addressed to Flor Crombet and Carlos Roloff.²²

Key West's close proximity to Cuba enabled the trafficking of contraband, as well as private correspondence to and from Cuba. For years, ships like the *Dauntless* and the *Kingsland* had been used to carry contraband to and from Cuba, including "aguardiente" (a powerful liquor) that was sold in every Cuban grocery store on the key.²³ Historian, Samuel Proctor, explains why the keys became a base of operations:

Florida, because of her proximity to Cuba, her long seacoast, and the ease with which a vessel could slip out from any one of a thousand inlets, bays, and rivers, afforded the best facilities for filibustering. . . . The Keys, numerous small, wooded islands, sand bars, and rocks extending fingerlike into the Gulf of Mexico, were a filibuster's haven. Narrow, crooked channels running into innumerable sand bars and treacherous, jagged reefs made it difficult for revenue cutters to catch the small, swift vessels carrying guns and ammunition to the revolutionists.²⁴

The *Dauntless* and the *Kingsland* were also often used to carry correspondence to and from Cuba. The Spanish Consul in Key West complained about this practice because it deprived the government of revenue generated by the sale of stamps. The consul reported that when the *Dauntless* arrived at the dock, the captain would hand over

to Gabriel Borroto, another well-known insurgent who worked in customs, a large number of letters addressed to families and friends abroad.²⁵ This system of communication enabled the conspirators in Cuba to communicate secretly with their agents abroad.

By the end of 1883, the Cuban community in Key West had achieved the political power it needed to openly continue its hostile campaign against Spain. Alarmed by their increasing control over local politicians, the Spanish Consul wrote:

The rebels of Key West are now more than ever the owners of Key West and I run the risk of being assassinated. They don't fear any reprisals for their actions because the guilty will simply disappear or they will never be charged with the murder. The reason why I am still alive is because there are some Americans on this island that are concerned about my safety, and they would probably lynch the murderer. As the elections near, the rebels, like Fernando Figueredo, are more daring than ever because the federal government is resolved to not only keep them employed as federal agents but also to tolerate their plots to overthrow our government in Cuba. I predict that Key West will be the central organizing focus recognized by Madrid and Paris for the criminal element that exists here, who are organizing and keeping alive the hope of overthrowing our government.²⁶

Several nihilist clubs, which advocated the destruction of society so that they could build a new one, were organized in Cuba and Key West in 1883 to support the more radical policies of destruction advocated by expeditionary leaders such as Ramón Bonachea. The leading nihilists in Key West were J. D. Poyo, Fernando Figueredo, Miguel Mira, and Castillo Pomares.²⁷ By March 1884, Key West was considered the general headquarters for the insurrection. Veterans from previous wars and activists organized a system to transport weapons, munitions and explosives to Cuba. The weapons were purchased by the committee in New York and sent in crates addressed to merchants in Key West who were not under suspicion for conspiracy.²⁸ When the Spanish Consul in Key West informed the federal agents that weapons were being secretly sent to Key West, the customs agents attempted to inspect the contents of certain baggage, but the merchants reacted angrily to this decision. An article in the *Key of the Gulf* blamed the Spanish Consul Bermúdez for orchestrating the incident.

Some excitement was created on Thursday last among our merchants on the arrival of the New York steamer, when they were informed by the consignee of said steamer that he had instructions from Special Agent Hubbs to detain all their freight, as there was some suspicion that some packages among the cargo contains contraband of war. Our merchants protested against his action as unjust and unwarranted, and more so as it would submit them to heavy losses, some of their freight being perishable articles. Steps have been taken to ascertain the legality of the action of the Special Agent here and no doubt the matter will soon be brought to the courts where somebody will have to pay a heavy bill of damages...It being freely circulated that the action of the Special Agent, was at the request of the Spanish Consul Mr. Bermúdez. We learned that a petition will be drawn up by our merchants appealing to the Department of States, to obtain his removal, inasmuch as they cannot allow their interest to be subjected to the whim of an individual.²⁹

The inspections came to an abrupt end when the federal authorities realized how much money they would have to pay the local merchants to compensate them for any damages to their merchandise.

The narrow channel leading into Key West made it impossible for the rebels to send large expeditions from Key West because they would be easily detected by the American Coast Guard cutters and the Spanish warships sent to patrol the Florida coastline. If a suspicious boat entered the narrow channel, federal agents would inspect her cargo and note the number of crewmembers aboard to detect whether refugees were being smuggled into or out of port. In order to avoid detection, several methods were devised to evade the authorities.

There were essentially two ways of sending men, rebels, weapons and munitions to Cuba without having to present the proper documentation to the Spanish authorities in Key West or Cuba. The first involved using small boats that left Key West with their cargo of arms and munitions under the pretext of fishing or conducting legal trade with Cuba. The residents living between Matanzas and Cárdenas, Cuba, would signal these filibusters by lighting bonfires on the beach when it was safe for them to land their cargo. Another way of evading the authorities was to transport suspected rebels disguised as fishermen on boats leaving Key West. About midway to Cuba, fishing boats from Cuba would be waiting for them at a designated site. They would then exchange an equal

number of men from the two boats to fool the agents upon their return to the Key. The key rebel leaders preferred to enter Cuba on these small skiffs in order to avoid being detected by Spanish authorities in Cuba. Arrangements were also made with certain fishing boats from Cuba to transport explosives. For about \$500, these fishing vessels, called smacks, would carry explosives back to Cuba after having fished illegally within the three-mile limit of the U.S.³⁰

In order to transport a large contingency of soldiers and a considerable cargo of arms and weapons, another scheme was devised. Large commercial fishing boats were contracted to carry a considerable number of men and munitions. The commercial boats could transport about 200–250 expeditionary soldiers in addition to a large cargo of arms and munitions. Once these fishing vessels were in international waters, they would head for Cuba and wait for the signal to transfer the soldiers and cargo to smaller boats that would take them to the coastline. If the authorities questioned the commercial vessels, they would simply claim they had experienced a mechanical problem or they were blown off course.³¹

Several key patriots abroad assisted in the purchase, manufacture, and transportation of explosives. Explosives were often purchased from companies headquartered in New York or were manufactured in private homes in Key West. J. D. Poyo, Bruno Alfonso, and Dr. Gil Marrero were primarily responsible for the manufacture of homemade bombs in Key West.³² J. D. Poyo remained in contact with his conspirators in Cuba as they planned to destroy key buildings in Havana including the Casino Español and the *Captanía General*. On June 3, 1884, a new nihilist club was organized in New York to support the club's activities in Key West. Gil Marrero, a well-known expert in explosives, was sent to New York to purchase materials needed to manufacture the bombs in Key West.³³ When Marrero returned to Key West, he was arrested for carrying two packages of fuses and other explosive devices, but he was promptly released after posting a \$1,000 bond.³⁴ Bruno Alfonso, and J. D. Poyo were also implicated in the Marrero incident, and their trial was set for July 1884. When the police searched Poyo's house they found weapons, munitions, and dynamite Poyo claimed had been left over from a former expedition led by Carlos Agüero. Marrero, Poyo, and Alfonso were tried and found not guilty. At the end of the trial, Judge Locke returned the fuses and other mechanisms to Marrero.³⁵



Cuban Insurgent Headquarters. Courtesy of Monroe County Public Library.

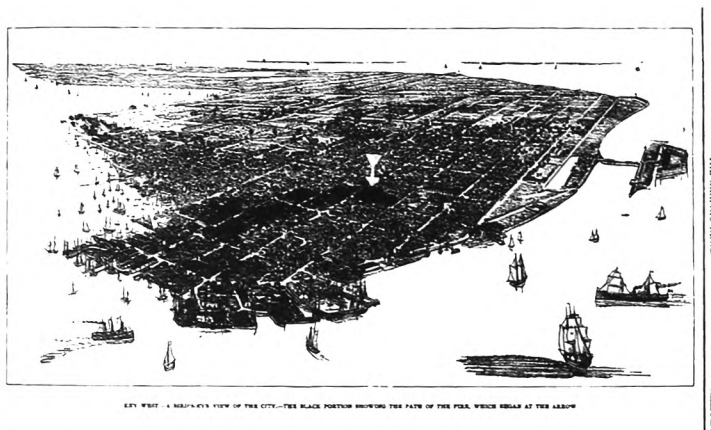
The military leaders in Key West realized by the mid 1880s the need to establish a broader based organization to unify the political clubs in Key West with those in Cuba, Central America, and the Caribbean. The date for the foundation of this new organization, called the Cuban Convention, is disputed in the literature on this topic. According to Raoul Alpizar Poyo, Major Gerardo Castellanos founded the Cuban Convention in Key West in the latter part of 1884.³⁶ To maintain its secret identity, the organization operated under another name, Club Luz de Yara, and each of its members was known only by their number. Members were charged with the task of establishing as many clubs as possible in order to collect the necessary funds for a new revolution. Within a short period of time, over seventy clubs were established in Key West and in Cuba.³⁷

Reverend Manuel Deulofeu acknowledged the important role that the Cuban Convention played: “Among the various patriotic clubs formed in Key West after the Pact of Zanjón, there was one which because of its membership, its rules, and its resources achieved

significant revolutionary accomplishments.”³⁸ Through the formation of new clubs, a network was extended beyond Key West to other rebel centers in Cuba and throughout the Caribbean.

In 1885, Máximo Gómez, a Dominican and a skilled military strategist who fought with Cuban Revolutionary Forces, arrived in Key West where he met with the presidents of the local organizations and with key rebel leaders to update them on the preparations underway for the invasion of Cuba. Gómez reminded the group assembled that the success of the invasion depended on their continued support. Shortly afterward, he left Key West for Tampa to meet with the leaders there. When he left Tampa for New York, he was carrying \$8,500 that had been donated by the Cuban émigrés in Key West and Tampa.³⁹

By the mid-1880s, Key West solidified its position as the most important center for the insurrectionist movement in the United States and abroad.⁴⁰ According to the 1885 census, Key West had a population of 13,945, which was divided as follows: 34% (4,741) cited their birthplace as Key West; 32% (4,517) as Cuba; and 25% (3,458) as the Bahamas. A number of those who cited Key West as their birthplace were first generation Cuban Americans. Approximately 5,100 residents were employed; 41% of this workforce (2,111) worked in the cigar industry.⁴¹ In addition to the large number of Cuban exiles on the island, Key West was also home to the largest contingency of military officers who served in the Cuban army during the 1860s–1880s. The entire nucleus of the revolutionary



Great Fire of 1886. Courtesy of Monroe County Public Library.

movement was led by of seventeen generals and various colonels who had fought in the Ten Years War (1868–78) and La Guerra Chiquita (1879–80).⁴² Many of these high-ranking officers lived in Key West at one time or another, including Serafín Sánchez, Carlos Roloff, Juan Ruz, Rogélio Castillo, Gerardo Castellanos, José R. Estrada, Fernando Figueredo, Rosendo García, Emilio Aymerich, Fermín Valdés Domínguez, Carlos Agüero, Francisco Javier Urquiza, and Ramón Bonachea. A major setback occurred in 1886 that temporarily halted the growing authority of the insurgents in Key West.

The Great Fire of 1886 was devastating for the residents of Key West. The fire began at 1:30 a.m. on March 30, and it raged through the commercial district until dusk. By the time the fire was extinguished, only three or four factories remained. The supply of tobacco leaves stored in the warehouses was destroyed, forcing the few remaining factories to close due to the lack of tobacco leaves. Within one week of the fire, 283 passports were processed and about 500 Spaniards were repatriated to Cuba.⁴³ Seizing the opportunity to extend humanitarian assistance, the Spanish government deployed a ship to return the Spaniards and others who wished passage to Cuba. Within one month, very few pro-Spanish residents remained on the island. A rumor circulated that the fire was set by the Spanish government to put an end to Key West as the revolutionary center and to destroy the tobacco industry in order to boost the one in Havana that had fallen into decline because of the competition in the U.S. However the fire was started by a dispute between two Cubans who were gambling at an adjoining café. When a fight ensued between the two, one of the players shot at the other and in an attempt to escape in the darkness, he knocked over a kerosene lamp that ignited the café and the adjoining building, the San Carlos. From there, the fire spread throughout the southwestern section of the city.⁴⁴

In spring of 1888, a new organization was formed in Key West to unite the Separatist clubs in Ybor City along with other clubs in New York, Panama, Kingston, Puerto Principe, and New Orleans. The new organization, Partido Independiente Cubano, was modeled after the National Irish League. Its military mission was to initiate a revolution in Cuba, and its political mission was to endorse the candidates running for public office who would support their cause.⁴⁵ Funds were needed to support a new rebellion, so once again pressure was put on the cigar workers to donate a portion of their earnings. At this same

time, General Sabas Marín proclaimed a state of martial law in the Cuban provinces of Havana, Matanzas, Santa Clara, and Pinar del Rio in an attempt to curb the growing problems of robbery, kidnapping, and extortion.⁴⁶

Kidnapping and extortion were popular ways of raising money for the revolution. One of the most notorious kidnapers in Cuba was Manuel García, who extorted large sums of money from wealthy businessmen and farmers. An article published in the *Tampa Tribune* reported that he had been paid \$17,000 as ransom for a rich Cuban that he had kidnapped.⁴⁷ The situation was becoming so dangerous in Cuba that cigar manufacturers in the United States would no longer travel to Cuba to purchase tobacco for fear of being kidnapped. The Board of Trade in Key West, alarmed by the growing criminal element on the island, orchestrated the arrests of several alleged extortionists: Emilio Díaz, Emilio García, and Vicente de Armas. Perico Torres and five others were also imprisoned but they posted bond and were released. Isidoro Leijas, Jose Rodriguez (alias Matagás), and two others fled to Nassau while ten others left for Tampa and Jacksonville.⁴⁸ The British authorities arrested Isidoro Leijas in Nassau and agreed to extradite him to Cuba where he had been charged with murder and robbery. While awaiting extradition, he hung himself in his cell.⁴⁹

Demoralization and disorganization characterized the revolutionary movement in 1889. By fall of 1889, only five hundred cigar workers remained in Key West due to the general strike in the cigar industry.⁵⁰ Disappointed by failed attempts to invade Cuba, key military leaders lived in the Caribbean and Central America: Máximo Gómez was at his farm in Santo Domingo, Flor Crombet was in jail in Jamaica, and Antonio and José Maceo were in Costa Rica. Also disappointing was the number of veteran officers living in Cuba who had joined the Autonomist Party in hopes of gaining certain concessions for Cubans without war. By 1890, it was obvious that a change of leadership was needed in order to keep the revolutionary movement alive. While the émigrés continued to organize clubs such as the Liga de Cubanos Independientes whose purpose was to equip and train recruits for future expeditions, the need for a change in leadership was apparent. Veteran leaders like Gómez, the Maceo brothers, Serafín Sánchez, Carlos Roloff, Mayía Rodríguez, Flor Crombet and Francisco Carrillo appeared lethargic as if they were waiting to be called into action.⁵¹

Jose Martí, the Delegate

In November 26, 1891, José Martí, a revolutionary leader was invited by the Club Ignacio Agramonte in Tampa to deliver a speech commemorating the death of eight medical students in Havana on November 27, 1871. Martí delivered an emotional speech that began with the phrase, “For Cuba, who suffers,” and ended with the popular phrase, “With all and for the good of all.”⁵² The next day, J. D. Poyo, who had returned to Key West in 1888, printed Martí’s speech in *El Yara* describing how Martí’s passionate speech had ignited the crowds in Tampa. When Martí returned to New York, he read Poyo’s article and was moved by the enthusiastic reception his speech had received in Key West when it was read to the cigar workers in the factories. Martí knew that it was time for him to visit the Key; however, he knew that the veteran leaders would have to extend an invitation to him first.

On December 5, 1891, José Martí wrote to J. D. Poyo, his agent in Key West, and in his letter, Martí compared the Island City to an empty bottle of perfume whose scent brings back memories of when its aroma was robust.⁵³ Martí explained that the purpose of his visit was to bring his message that men should be able to live in a free society where they could express their opinions as openly as they did in Key West. J. D. Poyo printed a copy of Martí’s letter in *El Yara* and copies of the article were read in the cigar factories. After listening to Martí’s letter, Francisco Sacramento, a cigar worker in Eduardo H. Gate’s factory, stood up and asked his coworkers to invite Martí to Key West. Consequently, J. D. Poyo appointed a committee to oversee the arrangements for Martí’s visit.⁵⁴ Alpizar points out that these committee members did not represent the Cuban Convention so it was not their purpose to invite Martí to Key West so that he would assume the leadership in the secret revolutionary work already underway by the Cubans in Key West, since Serafín Bello was the only person on the committee who was also a member of the Cuban Convention.⁵⁵ The invitation to visit the Island City was extended to José Martí, who graciously accepted.

José Martí stopped over in Tampa on December 24, 1891, on his way to Key West. There he met with local leaders of the revolutionary clubs, who decided to accompany him to Key West. On Christmas Day, Martí arrived in Key West. Gerardo Castellanos describes the scene on his arrival:

The wharf was crowded with thousands of Cubans who were waiting for him to arrive on the steamship, *Olivette*. Representatives of the various revolutionary clubs throughout the island were present with their pennants and banners. As Martí stepped off of the steamship, a band of musicians played the patriotic Himno Bayamés and the crowds became ecstatic. José Francisco Lamadriz, a leading veteran and President of the Cuban Convention, was the first to welcome Martí to the Key. With a trembling voice, Martí embraced Lamadriz and said, "I am embracing our past revolutionary efforts," and Lamadriz answered him, "And I embrace our new revolution."⁵⁶

The crowds on the wharf proceeded to accompany Martí down Duval Street towards the San Carlos. When they reached the San Carlos, it was impossible for them to continue down Duval because of the large crowds who were emotionally overwhelmed by Martí's presence in Key West. Fernando Figueredo describes Martí's reaction, "He stood up in the carriage, and with his head uncovered, he looked up at the sky and then at the people, who adored him. The crowds were emotionally overwhelmed by his presence; with tears streaming down their faces, they applauded him wildly." Later, the procession continued to the home of Teodoro Pérez where a banner reading "Sartorius and Martí" was hung from the second floor balcony.⁵⁷

Due to illness, Martí was unable to deliver his first speech in Key West until several weeks later on January 3, 1892, at the San Carlos. His speech was enthusiastically received by the émigré colony that lovingly referred to him as "Maestro." Bolstered by the reception he had received, Martí focused on his plan to establish a new revolutionary organization that would unite all of the émigré colonies.

On January 3, 1892, José Martí summoned three local leading patriots, who were also officers of the Cuban Convention: President José Francisco Lamadriz, Vice President J. D. Poyo, and Secretary Fernando Figueredo. After listening to their reports about the work already in progress by the Cuban Convention, Martí was so impressed by their organization that he remarked, "The work has already been done here in Key West. Now, I need to focus on organizing the other Cuban émigré centers."⁵⁸ According to Alpizar Poyo, Martí revised his draft copy of the *Bases* for the Cuban Revolutionary Party in order to incorporate the principles of the Cuban Convention. Alpizar Poyo

notes that the Partido Revolucionario Cubano (PRC) [Cuban Revolution Party] was not founded until Martí became aware of the details and the organization of the Cuban Convention even though similar resolutions had been drafted in Tampa prior to Martí's visit to Key West.⁵⁹

José Martí presented his plan to the club representatives from Tampa and Key West at a meeting on January 5, 1892, at the Hotel Duval in Key West. Martí explained that the purpose of the PRC was to unite the activities of Cuban residents abroad

and to maintain communication with those in Cuba who had historical or political ties, and who would contribute to the rapid success of the war by working collaboratively.⁶⁰ Poyo explains Martí's brilliant plan: "Martí constructed a revolutionary organization containing the democratic and pluralistic structure considered essential by some, while including the concept of a centralized authority and immediate revolutionary action called for by others."⁶¹ On April 10, the Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC) was announced in Key West, Tampa,



José Martí with members of the Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC) in Key West, 1890s. Standing: Genaro Hernández, Serafn Bello, Aurelio C. Rodríguez, J. G. Pompéz, Frank E. Bollo, and Francisco M. González. Seated: Gualberto García, José Martí, and Angel Peláez. *Revista de Cayo Hueso*, May 1898.

and New York by all of the clubs that had joined the association. José Martí was elected as the delegate and Benjamín J. Guerra, treasurer. The title of delegate gave Martí the authority to direct the activities of the organization that was spread throughout the U.S., Cuba, Latin America, and the Caribbean. According to True, "José Martí was the chief architect of Cuba's revolution for independence and the man most responsible for creating a revolutionary psychology among the Cubans in exile. From 1891 to 1895, Martí and the political party that he created fanned the revolutionary spirit of Cubans everywhere."⁶²

The organization of the Cuban Revolutionary Party reignited the enthusiasm and support of the émigré colonies. By April 10, thirty-four clubs from eight émigré colonies had approved the *Bases*: thirteen in Key

West, seven in New York Party, five in Kingston, five in Tampa, and one in Philadelphia, Boston, Ocala, and New Orleans.⁶³ On June 29, 1892, Martí asked the presidents of the various clubs to meet with the veterans from the Ten Years War so that they could elect their army's commander-in-chief. By mid-August the votes were counted and General Máximo Gómez was elected commander-in-chief of the Cuban Revolutionary Army.

In 1895, the stage was set for the invasion and events unfolded rapidly. In January 1895, Martí traveled to Santo Domingo to meet with Commander-in-Chief Máximo Gómez. On February 24, the war for



Partido Revolucionario Cubano payment to General Carlos Roloff's Wife, 1898. Private Collection of Consuelo Stebbins.

independence began in Cuba. In a letter to Gonzalo de Quesada dated March 2, 1895, Serafin described the climate in Key West: "More than 500 Cuban men on the key are following me around begging to know when they will sail for Cuba; there are two Spanish gunboats headed for the Key and another is already here; there are Cuban and American spies in the streets; an American gunboat is patrolling the area; custom agents are on alert; we are hemmed in on all sides."⁶⁴

The Spanish Consul in Key West was aware that an expedition was being organized to transport 150 soldiers under the command of generals Serafin Sánchez and Carlos Roloff from Florida. General Serafin Sánchez was expected to land near Holguín and Carlos Roloff was headed for Cardenas. The consul informed the minister in Madrid that the presence of the Spanish warship *Infanta Isabel* in Key West was preventing the departure of the expedition.⁶⁵ In order to avoid being detected by the authorities, the insurgents in Key West set up a campsite on No Name Key near Pine Key and during the early part of June, they started sending soldiers to their site. In July, Mayia Rodriguez joined the Key West expedition on Pine Key with an additional 50 soldiers. On July 24, the expeditionary force landed in the province of Las Villas around 9:30 p.m. By 11:00 p.m., they had unloaded 300 rifles; 200 machetes; 300,000 bullets; 650,000 pounds of dynamite; and other supplies. Consul Pedro

Solis filed a complaint against the owner of the *Childs* alleging that the it had been used to transport the expedition.

The authorities detained the steamer, *Childs*, several weeks ago after I filed a complaint against this vessel because she was used to transport an expedition. The *Childs* was permitted to leave port even though the vessel had transported an illegal cargo of weapons and munitions. The owner of this vessel is now free to continue his illegal operations in spite of the warnings he has received. I plan to file another complaint against this vessel in order to put pressure on the local authorities; however, I doubt if it will be acted on because the authorities continue to protect the Cubans here.

It is difficult to maintain surveillance because I don't have enough paid informants who are willing to work for our government. The Separatists control this island, and they continue to act independently of other insurgent centers. The few Spanish residents that live in Key West live in fear of the many revolutionary Cubans that reside here. The Americans sympathize with the Cubans and criticize our government. The authorities don't seem to be concerned about the fact that the Cubans are engaged in illegal activities and they continue to ignore my complaints.

Due to this present state of affairs, I recommend that you send a gunboat to patrol this area. If an expedition leaves, I can send a signal to the gunboat to seize the vessel. We cannot rely on the U.S. Navy to pursue suspicious vessels. Everyone knew that the *Childs* was carrying soldiers and weapons, yet nothing was done to prevent the vessel from landing its expedition in Cuba and then when the *Childs* returned, it was cleared of any wrong doing.⁶⁶

The Cuban War of Independence ended on October 10, 1898. Spanish rule over Cuba had ended. After three decades of struggling to liberate Cuba, thousands of the Cuban émigrés assembled at a monument in the Key West cemetery to honor the loss of their heroes who died in battle, including José Martí and General Serafín Sánchez. The gathering at the cemetery brought closure to thirty years of heroic sacrifice by the émigré colony in Key West. Many of the leading insurgents returned to their homeland while others remained on the other island, Key West, where they raised future generations of Cuban Americans.

Notes

- ¹ Fermín Valdés Domínguez. *Diario de Soldado*, 4 vols (Havana, Universidad de La Habana, 1972-1974), 2.
- ² For more details on the activities of the New York junta and their involvement in the expeditions in the 1850s, see Gerald E. Poyo, *With All and for the Good of All* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1989), 8–10.
- ³ For more information on Narciso López and his failed expedition, see Rolando Espinosa, *Elementos de Historia de Cuba* (Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1967), 65–69.
- ⁴ Jefferson Browne, *Key West: The Old and the New* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1973), 115–116, provides a description of López' narrow escape on the *Creole* and the reaction of the islanders to the naval confrontation in front of Fort Taylor. It's interesting to note that Jefferson A. Browne was the first appointed Spanish Consul in Key West. His correspondence to the Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (MAE) covers the time span of 1842–1851.
- ⁵ See Raoul Alpizar Poyo, *Cayo Hueso y Jose Dolores Poyo* (Havana, Imp. P. Fernández y Cia, 1947), 14.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ⁷ Walter C. Maloney, *A Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1968), 24–26, provides an early history of the cigar industry in Key West that dates back to 1831; see also Loy Glenn Westfall, *Key West: Cigar City, USA* (Key West, Key West Cigar City USA, 1997).
- ⁸ An account of the murder can be found in José B. Fernández and Jerrell H. Shofner. "Martyrs All: The Hero of Key West and the Inocentes," *Tequesta* 33 (1973), 31–39.
- ⁹ Juan Pérez Rolo, *Mis Recuerdos* (Key West, Fla., Rolo, 1933), 10, notes that Reyes began printing his newspaper in 1870.
- ¹⁰ The article, "The Late Tragedy" was printed in the *Key West Dispatch* on 1 February 1870. A copy of the article is attached to the MAE document, H 1868, 2/22/70.
- ¹¹ Details concerning Castañón's death and articles about the incident can be found in MAE, H 1867, 2/22/70.
- ¹² For a list of the pro-Spanish supporters who left Key West, see MAE, H1868, doc. no. 8, 2/4/70.
- ¹³ A copy of the proclamation is in MAE, H 1868, 2/22/70.

- ¹⁴ See MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 3, 6/1/71.
- ¹⁵ Alpizar Poyo, 62.
- ¹⁶ Alpizar Poyo, 63. See also Fermín Valdés Domínguez, *Mi Ofrenda: Los Obreros Cubanos de la Florida* (Key West, Impr. M. Trías, 1898), 15.
- ¹⁷ Alpizar Poyo, 56.
- ¹⁸ C. Neale Ronning, *José Martí and the Émigré Colony in Key West* (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1990), 57–59.
- ¹⁹ Salvador Albacete reports the activities of Carlos Roloff and Calixto García to Ultramar, MAE, Leg. P. L. 19, F. 126, 5/29/79.
- ²⁰ For more information on the political relationship between the Cuban émigrés in Key West and certain politicians known as the Court House Ring, see MAE, H 1868, doc. no.12, 5/19/83.
- ²¹ Spanish Consul in Key West reports on the formation of the new organization in MAE, H 1867, doc. no. 24, 6/12/83.
- ²² Spanish Consul in New York describes the activities of the junta in New York in MAE, H 2894, doc. no. 46, 8/21/83.
- ²³ Spanish Consul in Key West describes the trafficking of contraband in MAE, H 1867, doc. no. 37, 11/4/83.
- ²⁴ See Samuel Proctor, *Napoleon Bonaparte Broward: Florida's Fighting Democrat* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1950), 98.
- ²⁵ Spanish Consul describes the abuses practiced by boat captains that operated between Key West and Cuba in MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 33, 8/2/83.
- ²⁶ Spanish Consul in Key West feels threatened by the émigrés. See MAE, H 1867, doc. no. 37, 11/4/83.
- ²⁷ For more information on the formation of the nihilist clubs, see MAE, H 1867, doc. no. 49, 12/9/83.
- ²⁸ For a description of the filibustering activities in Key West, see the report from Ultramar, MAE, H 1868, 4/430/84.
- ²⁹ A copy of the article can be found in MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 46, 6/7/84.
- ³⁰ For more information on how explosives were sent to Cuba, see MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 70, 7/31/84.
- ³¹ Spanish Consul in Key West reports on filibustering activities in MAE, H 1868, 4/30/84.
- ³² Spanish Consul in Key West to minister in Madrid on the involvement of Poyo and Marrero in the manufacturing of bombs in MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 50, 6/10/84.

- ³³ See “Spanish Consul in Key West warns minister in Madrid of dynamite being sent to Cuba” in MAE, H 1868, doc. no.53, 6/12/84.
- ³⁴ Hubbs who worked in Customs gave copies of letters and documents found on Gil Marrero to the Spanish Consul. A code used for the purchasing and transportation of the explosives was among the papers. See MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 54, 6/12/84.
- ³⁵ During the trial, the District Attorney argued that since the transportation of the explosive substances had originated in New York, then Marrero could not be tried because he hadn’t committed any crime in Florida. A relieved Judge Locke dismissed the case against Marrero. The Spanish Consul in Key West reported the proceedings of the trial in MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 62 7/5/84; MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 63, 7/6/84; and *Key of the Gulf*, 14 June 1884.
- ³⁶ Alpizar Poyo, 71.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Manuel Lleonart Deulofeu, *Heroes del Destierro. La Emigración* (Cienfuegos, Imprenta de M. Maestre, 1904), 79.
- ³⁹ Spanish Consul in Key West to minister in Madrid, see MAE, H 1868, doc. no.6, 2/25/85.
- ⁴⁰ Ronning, 23.
- ⁴¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1885 Population Schedules, Monroe County, Southern District of Florida. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- ⁴² Jorge Ibarra, *José Martí: Dirigente e Ideólogo Revolucionario* (Havana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 1980), 58.
- ⁴³ The effect of the fire on the local population is described in MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 35, 4/3/86.
- ⁴⁴ The origin of the fire is described in MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 34, 4/3/86.
- ⁴⁵ See MAE, H 1868, 6/8/88.
- ⁴⁶ The proclamation was printed in *Las Novedades*, 27 April 1888. A copy of the article is appended to MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 35, 4/24/88.
- ⁴⁷ See MAE, H 1868, 6/8/88. For more information about the infamous Manuel García, “King of the Bandits” see Francisco Meluza Otero, *Manuel García, una Vida Extraordinaria* (Havana, 1941).
- ⁴⁸ The pressure exerted by the Board of Trade in Key West in the expulsion of the militants in Key West is described in MAE, H 1868, doc. no. 43, 6/15/88.

- ⁴⁹ Details on Leijas' arrest and suicide in Nassau are in MAE, H 1868, 11/19.
- ⁵⁰ For more information on the cause of the strike, see Loy Glenn Westfall, *Key West: Cigar City, USA*, Key West: 1997, 49.
- ⁵¹ Castellanos, 252.
- ⁵² For a copy of the speech, see Deulofeu, 51-63. For a detailed description of Martí's activities in Tampa from November 25–28, see Westfall, *Tampa Bay*, 119–123.
- ⁵³ Alpizar Poyo, 83.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 83–84.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.
- ⁵⁶ Castellanos, 259-260.
- ⁵⁷ Fernando Figueredo's article, "En Cayo Hueso," can be found in *Revista de Cayo Hueso*, 18 May 1898.
- ⁵⁸ Alpizar Poyo, 88.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 89. The foundation of the PRC in Key West is also described by Fernando Portuondo del Prado, *Historia de Cuba* (Havana, Minerva, 1950), 502.
- ⁶⁰ For a review of the minutes of this meeting, see *Borrador Original de la Constitución y Estatutos del Partido Revolucionario Cubano* (Havana, El Siglo XX, 1958), 5-8; and Castellanos, 268–270. A copy of the *Bases* was printed in *La Patria*, 22 October 1892.
- ⁶¹ Poyo, "Cuban Émigré Communities in the United States and the Independence of their Homeland, 1852-1895," Diss, University of Florida, 1983, 296.
- ⁶² Marshall MacDonald True, "Revolutionaries in Exile, The Cuban Revolutionary Party 1891–1898," Diss, University of Virginia, 1965, 23.
- ⁶³ Ronning, 80.
- ⁶⁴ Luis F. Moral, *Serafin Sánchez: Un Carácter al Servicio de Cuba*, (Havana, Ediciones Mirador, 1955), 245.
- ⁶⁵ Spanish Consul in Key West refers to the Sánchez/Roloff expedition in MAE, Ultramar 2894, doc. no. 16 3/8/95. For more information about the Sánchez/ Roloff, see Rolando Alvarez Estevez, *La Expedición Roloff*, (Havana: Academia de Ciencias de Cuba, 1969).
- ⁶⁶ MAE, Ultramar 2894, doc. no. 70, 8/25/95.