

Sugar, Cigars, and Revolution: The Making of Cuban New York

by Lisandro Pérez

Barely a week after arriving in New York, the young poet wrote to his mother: “One reason I am inclined to remain here is the constant communication there is with Havana; it is where I can easily and frequently receive news of my family.” [\[1\]](#) That José María Heredia concluded in 1823 that New York was the closest place to Havana in terms of communications was a testament to the volume of ship traffic that had already developed between the two cities by the dawn of the nineteenth century. As with most New York stories, the story of Cuban New York begins with the port. As with most Cuban stories, it begins with sugar. [\[2\]](#)

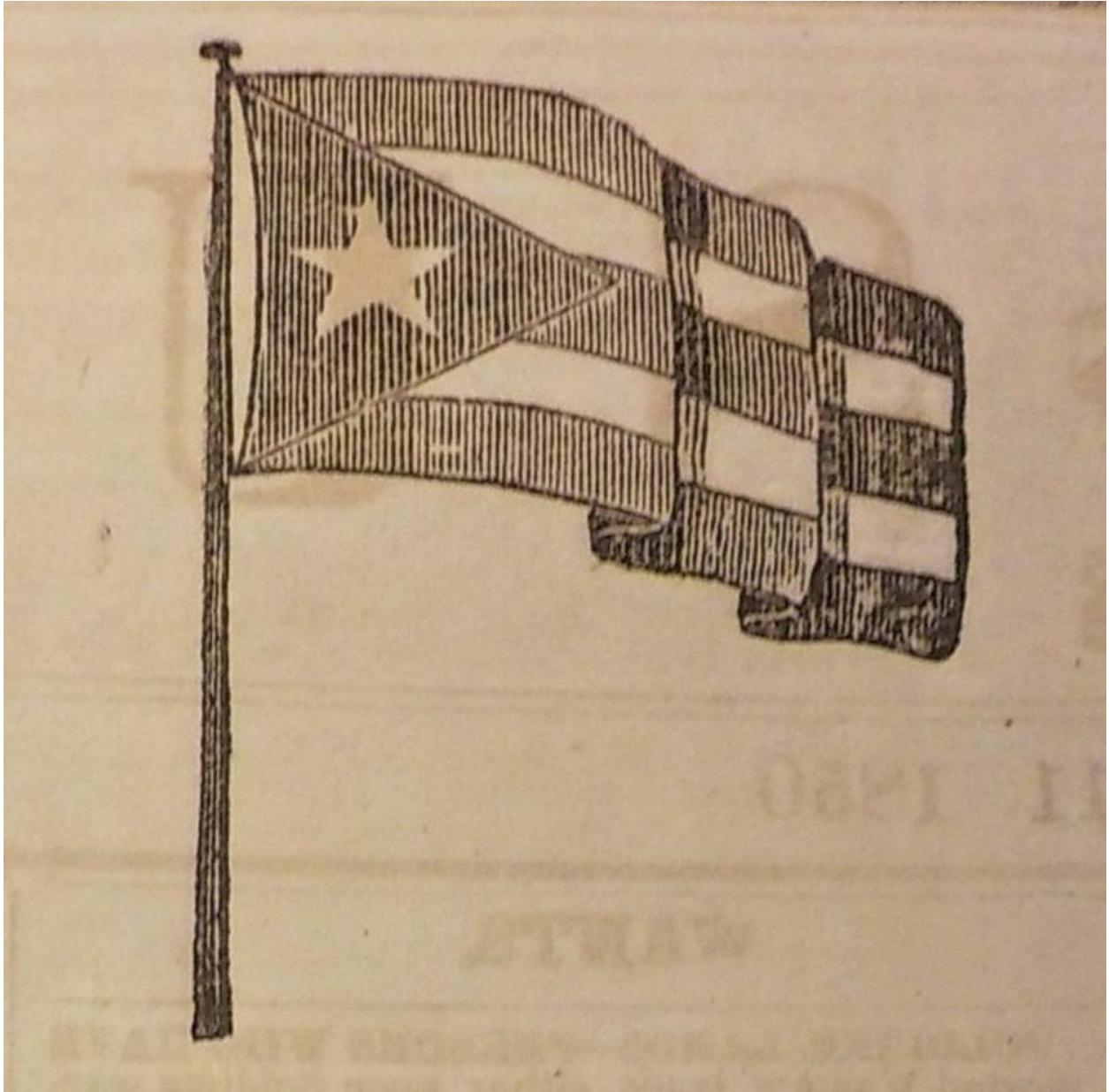


Gathering cane on a Cuban sugar plantation, Detroit Publishing Co., ca. 1900–1906 (Library of Congress) Sugar imports were the principal driver of the intense ship traffic between Havana and Manhattan, as Cuba became the world’s largest producer of raw sugar and New York, a major center for sugar refining, its principal market. In time, the importation of both cigars and leaf tobacco to satisfy New York’s demand became an important part of what was known as the Cuba Trade, as did the exportation to the island of the manufactured goods the wealthy sugar plantation owners were eager to buy, such as machinery for their mills, carriages, and luxury items to furnish their Havana mansions. Between 1835 and 1865, one historian noted, “the combined exports and imports for the Cuba Trade consistently ranked third or fourth place relative to the total commerce of the United States.” [\[3\]](#) During that time, ships arriving in New York from Cuban ports far outnumbered all ships arriving from the rest of Latin America and Spain.

On the back of New York's Cuba Trade rode an extensive network of social, economic, and political linkages that would cement the New York–Cuba connection and begin the process by which New York replaced Spain as the “other” place in the Cuban consciousness, that place beyond an island's constraining boundaries that sparks the imagination and becomes the primary destination, real or imagined, for those who seek to transcend their insularity. New York became the place of reference for style, ideas, progress, culture, and economic advancement, where Cubans went to acquire an education, opportunity, and wealth, start a new life or forget an old one, evade royal authority, escape justice, plot a revolution, experience freedom, or buy and sell. It was through New York that the nascent game of baseball made its way to Cuba to become the island's national sport. [4] It was through New York that Cuban music was introduced into the United States and influenced American music, notably jazz. [5]

Starting early in the nineteenth century and for more than a century thereafter, virtually all significant intellectual, artistic, business, and political figures in Cuban history went to New York, some for a lifetime, others, as the poet Heredia, for defining sojourns. Until 1886, when it was surpassed in size by Ybor City in Florida, Cuban New York was not only the largest community of Cubans in the United States, but also the largest community of Latin Americans in the Northeast.

In the mid-nineteenth century, separatist political activities replaced the Cuba Trade as the most important stimulus to the migration flow from the island as an increasing number of opponents to Spanish rule in Cuba sought refuge in New York from the repression unleashed by the colonial authorities. The earliest separatist activities in New York were organized by the annexationists, who advocated the end of Spanish colonialism and the annexation of Cuba to the American Union. It was a movement supported by the Cuban slaveowners who sold their sugar in New York and regarded annexation as the best way to preserve slavery in the island. They were joined by pro-slavery interests in the United States, especially southerners, who saw the opportunity to add another slave state. [7] The annexationists organized military expeditions to the island and attempted to have the US government buy Cuba from the Spanish, but those initiatives failed, and the movement declined after 1855.



The first published depiction of the Cuban flag, appearing in the *New York Sun* on May 11, 1850, the day the flag flew for the first time anywhere. (“The Flag of Free Cuba,” *New York Sun*, May 11, 1850, p. 2) One of the most lasting legacies of the annexationists was the creation of what is to this day the Cuban flag, designed and sewn in a New York boardinghouse and flown for the first time outside the *New York Sun* building on Nassau and Fulton Streets on May 11, 1850.

Cubans tried various peaceful means to persuade Spain to enact liberal reforms that would ease the stifling colonial rule that Madrid exerted over the island. But the Crown was intractable, and with the failure of annexationism and reformism, the only solution left for Cuban nationalists was to wage war for total independence. The first war broke out on October 10, 1868, and lasted ten years, a period during which Spanish repression and the destructive effects of the conflict led an unprecedented number of Cubans to leave the island. Following an already well-established

route, the bulk of the emigrants went to New York. Prominent in the exodus were the sugar plantation owners who had been selling their sugar in New York and had kept most of their money in the mercantile houses of the city. Their presence was noticeable in the gatherings of Manhattan society and in the hotels, balls, and casinos of Saratoga Springs, at the time the fashionable playground of the city's elite. As the war dragged on, they were joined in New York by working-class Cubans, especially cigar workers. During the 1870s the size of Cuban New York reached its highest number, with more than three thousand Cuban-born persons living in the city.

The war ended in 1878 without achieving independence. Many New York Cubans returned to the island, but others continued to find their way to the city, especially cigar workers and those forced to leave the island because of their continued activism on behalf of Cuban independence.



José Julián Martí, monument located at the Artists' Gate entrance to Central Park at 59th Street and Avenue of the Americas in New York City, sculpture by Anna Vaughn Hyatt Huntington, 1959 (Central Park Conservancy) Among the latter was José Martí, the most important figure in Cuban history, who lived in New York most of his adult life, from 1880 to 1895.^[8] Martí was a writer, poet, orator, and political organizer who wrote some of his most consequential works in the city, and it was in New York that he accomplished what no other Cuban émigré had been able to do: organize a successful political and military movement that would take an armed rebellion to Cuba and start a war for independence. Martí did not live to see the end of that war; he was killed on a Cuban battlefield only three months after returning to the island in 1895, the fatal moment immortalized in an equestrian statue of him in New York's Central Park.

The war ended in 1898 when the United States entered the conflict and defeated Spain, taking control of the island and frustrating Martí's dream of a sovereign Cuba. Eventually the United States allowed the establishment of a Cuban government that remained politically dependent on Washington, paving the way for Manhattan-based corporations to make huge investments in the island, thereby reinforcing the economic, social, and cultural connections that throughout the nineteenth century had made New York that important "other" place in the Cuban imagination.