

The Establishment of the Cuban American Community

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On December 15, 1823, during a heavy blizzard, the ship *Draper C. Thorndike* sailed into New York's harbor from Gibraltar. It carried salt, almonds, and a handful of passengers. Among them was a Cuban priest named Félix Varela, a prominent figure in the nascent movement to free Cuba from Spanish control. The story goes that shortly after disembarking, Varela slipped and fell on an icy Manhattan street. As he was being helped up by friends and former students who greeted him at the dock, one of them jokingly told the priest that there was a legend in New York that predicted that all foreigners who fell on the snow when they arrived were destined to spend the rest of their lives in the city. The priest must have thought the prediction amusing and very far-fetched. After all, he was only 35 years old and found himself in New York almost by accident. The *Thorndike* happened to be the first ship out of Gibraltar after Varela had to literally flee Spain when his pleas for greater Cuban autonomy were violently rejected by the Spanish monarch, Ferdinand VII, who proceeded to imprison and execute those who sought liberal reforms. Varela probably regarded New York only as a way station until he could return to his native island.

But the legend became reality. Varela would spend the next thirty years of his life in lower Manhattan, establishing parishes and ministering to his flock of poor immigrants, most of them Irish. He never returned to Cuba.

As with Varela's arrival, all major waves of Cuban immigrants throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been triggered by political conditions in the island. It is an immigration that cannot be understood without reference to its political and policy contexts. Cubans have arrived in the U.S. as did Varela: "reluctant migrants," defining themselves as exiles who await the opportunity to return and recover the island from the political order that compelled them to leave. Many did return, but most shared Varela's fate, spending the rest of their days without ever seeing their island again. The legacy of exile has punctuated the Cuban presence in the U.S.

CUBAN MIGRATION TO THE U.S. BEFORE 1959

It is widely recognized that the contemporary Cuban presence in the U.S. is linked to the conditions created by the Revolution of 1959. The flow of Cubans to the U.S., however, dates back to Varela, and although that earlier immigration never reached the levels of the post-1959 exodus, it should not be overlooked. The struggle to oust Spain was an arduous and protracted one, lasting from the early stirrings of separatism of Varela's time to the armed conflicts that started in 1868 and 1895 and culminated in the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898 and the subsequent U.S. occupation of the island. The Cubans would have to wait until the twentieth century, 1902, before they could finally have their own government.

The severely autocratic nature of Spanish rule created an important presence of exiles in the U.S., and it was in this country, especially in New York, that many

important chapters of Cuban history were written. In the decades after Varela arrived in 1823, almost every prominent Cuban separatist found himself at one time or another in New York in response to the political situation in Cuba. In 1870, the year of the first decennial U.S. census that tabulated the Cuban-born separately, New York City had 1,565 Cubans, by far the largest of all concentrations of Cubans in the U.S. In 1880, the census counted more than 2,000 Cubans in that city.

José Martí is regarded as the intellectual architect of the modern Cuban nation. Through his essays, letters, and speeches he crafted the ideals upon which Cubans should construct a sovereign country. More importantly, he forged the political movement that in 1895 launched the final and definitive armed struggle for the independence of Cuba. All of this he accomplished almost entirely during those fifteen years he was an exile in New York City. That he was able to achieve so much in those years is a testament not only to his abilities, but to the size and political activism of the Cuban community in New York and throughout the U.S., which backed the efforts of the articulate young revolutionary to build a new nation.

Among Martí's staunchest supporters were Cuban cigarworkers in the United States. The ten-year conflict that started in 1868 had disastrous consequences for the economy of the island. Cigar manufacturers found it increasingly difficult to maintain normal business operations, especially since the Spanish government had placed high tariffs on all exported tobacco products.

One of the cigar manufacturers who left the island was the owner of a well-known brand, *El Príncipe de Gales*, Vicente Martínez Ybor. Although Spanish-born, he had arrived as a youngster in Cuba and had pro-Cuban sentiments. He barely escaped arrest, fleeing in a schooner to Key West. By 1870, Key West was a boomtown and a leading center for cigar manufacturing in the U.S. The census that year counted more than 1,000 persons born in Cuba. Only New York had a larger Cuban community.

Martínez Ybor's cigar manufacturing business flourished in Key West. But Key West had the disadvantage of not having a direct rail connection to New York, the distribution center for his cigars. By the 1880's he was looking to move to a location that would offer better transportation links to New York. In 1885, with financial incentives offered by the local Board of Trade, Martínez Ybor bought 40 acres northeast of Tampa, enough land to build not only cigar factories, but an entire town. It would be known as Ybor City and it would rapidly become the largest nineteenth-century community of Cuban Americans.

The end of Spanish rule in Cuba, followed by a U.S. occupation and the establishment of the Cuban Republic in 1902, ushered in an era in which political stability was essentially guaranteed by the U.S. through the Platt Amendment, a provision of the Cuban Constitution of 1901 that, among other things, gave the U.S. to intervene to maintain a stable government that would “protect life, property, and individual liberty.” The armed struggle and unfavorable business climate that compelled Martínez Ybor and many others to leave Cuba decades earlier were in the past at the start of the new century. The factors that gave rise to the Florida cigarmaking communities were no longer present at the dawn of the twentieth century. The Depression, mechanization of cigar production, and the growing popularity of cigarettes dealt the final death blows to the manufacture in the U.S. of fine cigars handmade from Cuban tobacco. All the conditions favored the return of the industry to Havana. By 1930, the Cuban-born population of Ybor City had declined to the point where New York regained its historical primacy as the most important Cuban-American community.

During the Depression and World War II, Cuban immigration to the U.S. reached all-time lows. The close economic, cultural, and political relationship between the U.S. and Cuba resulted in substantial travel between the two countries. Yet the political factor was not entirely absent even in this period. Three Cuban presidents and members of their governments felt compelled to leave Cuba for the U.S. after abandoning power.

The Establishment of the Exile Community: 1959-2007

The most visible and recurring manifestation of the Cuban saga over the past four decades has been emigration. The waves of migration from the island since 1960 have all taken place within that enduring climate of hostility and international confrontation. Each wave has a particular historical motivation for leaving the island and is received in a different socioeconomic and political context than the other waves. Some waves are intense and receive considerable national attention, as were Mariel and the 1994 “balsero crisis” while others are barely ripples.

The first post-revolutionary wave of approximately 250,000 Cubans arrived from 1959 to 1964. As with most revolutions, the first people to be affected, and thus the first to leave Cuba, were those in the middle and upper classes. The second wave of about 300,000 Cubans arrived during the “freedom flights” from 1965 to 1973. More technical workers arrived in the 1965 to 1973 cohort group than with the earlier group. The first two cohorts laid the foundation for the creation of a viable Cuban economic enclave in south Florida. The economic enclave founded by middle-class Cubans in these two cohorts accommodated all subsequent arrivals from Cuba and served as a magnet for immigrants from all over Latin America.

The third cohort consists of those who came to the U.S. between the periods of 1974-1979, when the migration between the U.S. and Cuba was diminished. The third wave is also highly educated and includes more professionals than post-1980 cohorts.

The six-year period of reduced migration came abruptly to an end during the Mariel Crisis of 1980. After Peru refused to turn over Cubans who had killed a guard in the process of crashing through the gates of the Peruvian Embassy, the Cuban government withdrew the remaining guards and thousands of Cubans rushed into the Embassy seeking asylum. Subsequently, Cuban officials opened the port of Mariel to allow all Cubans who wanted to leave the island to do so in an orderly fashion. While the exodus proceeded rather chaotically, 124,776 Cubans did leave from the port of Mariel, and most of them ultimately settled in the South Florida region. Unlike the earlier cohorts, these 1980 Cubans lived most of their adult lives in Cuba's new revolutionary society. This has prompted some analysts to conclude that this migration included more individuals "pushed" by economic necessity rather than by political motives. Although felons comprised less than 3 percent of the Mariel Cubans, this cohort received a hostile reception in the U.S. Yet, in spite of the odds against them, they demonstrated patterns of adaptation similar to those of the Cubans who had arrived earlier.

Throughout the years of 1981–1989, the migration between the U.S. and Cuba was severely diminished. The few Cuban Americans who came to the U.S. during this period of time constitute the fifth wave cohort.

The sixth cohort consists of those who came to the U.S. throughout the years of 1990-1996. After the fall of the Soviet Bloc in 1989, Cuba's economy entered a period of severe restrictions. Known as the "periodo especial en tiempo de paz" (the special period during times of peace), the era spawned new economic difficulties and stimulated illegal exits from the island, mostly in form of makeshift rafts. In 1994, a dramatic influx of migrants from Cuba facilitated the historic policy change that officially ended the preferential open door for Cuban immigrants and introduced the current "wet-foot/dry-foot" policy (immigrants found at sea are returned to the island while those who make it to land are granted asylum) as well as established the minimum number of visas to be granted to Cubans on the island at 20,000.

The arrivals from 1996 to 2004 are grouped as the seventh post-revolutionary wave. This cohort, like the 1990-1996 group, is different from previous Cuban immigrants in that they left their homeland with tacit approval from the Castro government. Black and mixed race Cubans are more represented in this cohort as are many who considered themselves revolutionaries for many years until the opportunity to emigrate presented itself. Consequently, the cultural diversity within the Cuban community is now more extensive than ever.

Since 1995, about 20,000 Cubans have arrived each year through a legal and orderly process. Unauthorized migrations, however, persisted, although many no longer came in rickety rafts. The migration agreement forced those wishing to leave the country to not only elude the Cuban patrols, but also the U.S. Coast Guard. To be reasonably sure of reaching U.S. shores a powerboat was needed. The paid smuggler entered the picture, transporting human cargo across the Florida Straits at top speed under the cloak of night, ushering in yet another dramatic and bizarre chapter in the migration of Cubans to the U.S.

At the close of the twentieth century, the U.S. Bureau of the Census estimated that there were about 1.2 million persons of Cuban “origin or descent” living in the U.S. By far most of them, more than 700,000, were actually born in Cuba and arrived after the 1959 revolution. By century’s end an overwhelming majority (nearly 65 percent) of all Cubans in the U.S. lived in southern Florida and will probably continue to concentrate there well into the 21st century. Miami is the principal stage of the Cuban-American community, where most of the recurring dramas of exile have taken place.