




WHERE THE PALM TREE GROWS

 “*Yo soy un hombre sincero, de donde crece la palma*” (“I am an honest man, from where the palm tree grows”), wrote José Martí in one of his most famous poems.¹ That is exactly what early Cuba was to most of the world—the land “where the palm tree grows”—and not much more. The first Europeans to visit Cuba were sailors from Columbus’s first voyage in 1492. Columbus landed there only briefly, in order to claim it for Spain, and then moved east to a nearby island that he named Hispaniola. Since Cuba did not have much of the gold and silver that

the Spanish were searching for, it was not considered as important as the other lands around the Caribbean Sea. It was made a colony in 1511, but was used mostly as a stopover for the Spanish ships that were carrying soldiers and missionaries to the rich lands farther to the west. Havana thus became an important seaport.

A few settlers stayed on the island and established small farms or plantations on which they raised cattle and a little coffee, tobacco, and sugar. For workers, they used the Arawak and Ciboney natives of the island and the few slaves that the Spanish government allowed them to bring over from Africa. The native people suffered greatly from the hard working conditions and cruel treatment imposed by their Spanish masters. They also caught many diseases from the Spanish, notably smallpox. The native people, who had lived apart from the rest of the world, had built up no resistance to these diseases, and they soon began to die off. Since Cuba contributed little in the way of wealth to the Spanish Empire, the government in Spain paid little attention to it and its problems.

Havana, now the capital city of Cuba, was occupied by the British for a brief time (1762 to 1763) during Europe's Seven Years War; and for the first time, Cuban landowners were able to sell

some of their products to the rest of the world, not just to Spain. Ironically, the greatest improvement in Cuba's economy came in the 1790s as a result of a slave rebellion on the nearby island of Hispaniola, which today is divided into the independent republic of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. France controlled Haiti for several years, mainly as a result of Spain's lack of interest in the western part of the island. For years, English and French pirates had used it as a base for their raids on Spanish ships. Eventually, some of the French settled on the coast and began working farms and sugar plantations. Within a few years, Haiti had become the world's leading sugar producer. In order to work this large crop, the French imported great numbers of African slaves, who soon began to outnumber their French owners.

During the French Revolution of 1789, the French government lost control of its overseas empire, and the slaves of Haiti took this chance to overthrow their masters. After a bloody war, they took complete control of the colony. The French planters and plantation owners fled to Cuba, where they started up their sugar plantations again. Soon the production and shipping of sugar became Cuba's major industry and source of wealth, and it was based almost wholly on slave labor.

Spain now began to take an interest in the colony. It sent over more government officials and increased taxes on all of Cuba's exports and imports, along with heavy taxes on land. The wealthy landowners of Cuba were mostly Spaniards who had been born in Cuba. They were known as *Criollos*. Those who were born in Spain and who usually represented the Spanish government in Cuba were known as *peninsulares* because they came from the Spanish peninsula across the sea.

The Cuban *Criollos* resented Spain's control over their trade with other nations and its heavy taxation of them. They were also angry because they had no control over their government but were completely at the mercy of the *peninsulares*. The Cuban *Criollos*, however, did not go so far as to call for a complete break from Spain. By this time, the population of Cuba was almost one-quarter African-Cuban, due to the increasing number of slaves used to work on the sugar plantations. The Cuban *Criollos* had learned from the violent revolution in Haiti that any troubles between them and the mother country might give the slaves the opportunity to revolt, so they did their best to get along with Spain, asking only that they be given a say in their own government.

By the 1820s, Cuba and Puerto Rico were the last remaining Spanish colonies in the Western



Hemisphere, and Spain guarded them closely. Any attempt by the Cuban Criollos to change either the government or the way of doing business was discouraged and opposed by Spain. A small group of Cuban Criollos was so dissatisfied with Spain's treatment of them that they began to talk about becoming part of the United States, their close neighbor to the north.

At that time, the world was moving toward a complete ban on slavery; the United States and Cuba were almost alone in continuing to use slave labor. The United States was also Cuba's greatest customer, so the two countries had a dual bond. At this time also, the United States was acquiring Texas and other lands from Mexico, so it seemed logical to make Cuba part of its lands around almost the whole of the Gulf of Mexico. The American Civil War and the consequent end of slavery in the United States, however, put an end to this talk.

The Cuban Criollos wanted more control of their government, and they wanted to keep their slaves, but they realized that Spain would never allow it. The only solution to their problem seemed to be to win their independence from Spain, by war if necessary.

In October of 1868, a Cuban Criollo landowner named Carlos de Céspedes issued the





Carlos Manuel de Céspedes issued the "Cry from Yara," which started the Ten Years War on October 10, 1868.

"Grito de Yara" ("Cry from Yara"). This declaration of Cuba's independence and call to action was issued from the town of Yara in southeastern Cuba. Céspedes called upon all Cubans to take up arms and expel the corrupt and greedy colonial government.

The war that followed lasted for ten years (1868–1878) and was waged mostly in the rough eastern part of the island, Oriente province. The army of the Cuban rebels consisted primarily of poorly armed and organized Criollo farmers and freed slaves. They quarreled among themselves, sometimes refused to fight away from their homes, and were never able to win a battle important enough to rally the rest of the Cuban people behind them. They were also unable to win the support of the western part of the island, Occidente province, where the wealthy Cuban Criollo landowners continued to support Spain.

However, two heroes arose from this conflict. The first was not a Cuban, but a native of the Dominican Republic, which shared the island of Hispaniola with Haiti. He was Máximo Gómez, the leader of the Cuban Liberating Army, which was one of the few traditional military organizations on the rebel side. The other, Antonio Maceo, was an expert in the type of guerrilla warfare waged by Cubans in the



General Máximo Gómez, a citizen of the Dominican Republic, was a hero of the Ten Years War.

mountains and plains of Oriente province. Although the war was finally lost, these two men remained an inspiration to Cubans in the years to come. The war also inspired a sense of patriotism in ordinary Cubans, who felt pride in their stubborn battle against the better equipped and much larger Spanish army.

The war, which became known in Cuba as the Ten Years War, ended with the Treaty of Zanjón in 1878. The Spanish government promised various reforms, including the granting of government representation to native Cubans, but their promises were not kept. What followed was another period of discontent. The war had had a terrible effect on Cuba's economy, and many sugar plantations had been ruined. Some rebels who had never surrendered continued fighting in the mountains over the next seventeen years. General Gómez retired to his home in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic but continued to keep in touch with Cuban affairs.

Antonio Maceo refused to surrender and denounced the Treaty of Zanjón in ringing words that made him famous at home and abroad. In exile in Mexico, he continued to urge Cubans to resist the Spanish and to work toward the goal of independence. Maceo was part African-Cuban, and he was particularly interested in ending slavery





General Antonio Maceo was another Cuban hero of the Ten Years War.

in Cuba. He became a national hero in Cuba and kept alive the pride of ordinary Cubans in themselves and their country. The poor farmers and slaves, both freed and unfree, were strong supporters of Maceo.

Due to increasing pressure from the nations of Europe, especially England, Spain formally abolished slavery in 1886. Now the Cuban Criollos no longer had the protection of the government in their relations with their slaves, so the last reason for a tie with Spain was broken. Complete independence now seemed more and more attractive to all native Cubans.

