







# BRIDGING THE GULF

## ✠ THE ✠ ALABAMA-CUBA CONNECTION

THE HISTORIES OF CUBA AND ALABAMA, INTERTWINED FOR NEARLY FIVE CENTURIES, HAVE CREATED A BOND FAR STRONGER THAN THE POLITICS THAT CURRENTLY DIVIDE THEM.

By LAWRENCE A. CLAYTON

**F**OR MANY ALABAMIANS, Cuba seems a remote and unreachable place, but it has not always been so. Brought into the same family—the Spanish empire—by violent conquest in the sixteenth century, Alabama and Cuba forged ties that survived long after Spanish sovereignty dissolved. Centuries of mutual dependence and affection—in war and peace, need and prosperity, epidemics and cures—created permanent bonds. Four decades ago, political differences opened a rift between us. But



*Above: Detail of a map of the New World by Jode, 1593. (Courtesy W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama.) Previous spread: Maps of the New World began to appear within a short while after Spanish and French expeditions there in the sixteenth century. This map of Cuba and “La Florida” was prepared by French cartographer Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues in 1591, while he accompanied an expedition to the mouth of the St. John’s River in present-day Florida. Although filled with inaccuracies, the map he produced from his expedition was the first detailed chart of the Southeast. (Courtesy Rucker Agee Map Collection, Birmingham Public Library.)*

not even an Iron Curtain can obscure our shared history. That history, presented here in some of its defining moments, reveals a relationship worth preserving.

### ✠ “LA FLORIDA” ✠

Christopher Columbus landed on the island of Cuba in 1492, in search of signs of China and the “East,” both destinations of the great explorer who sought an all-water route from Spain to the Orient. Instead, he bumped into the Americas on his first voyage of discovery, landing first somewhere in the Bahamas, and then coasting along Cuba, before eventually returning to Spain.

On his second voyage, Columbus and Spanish settlers began the conquest of the island of Española

(modern Dominican Republic and Haiti). From here they moved on to the adjoining islands of the Greater Antilles, bringing with them a harsh regimen of slavery and coerced religious conversion that, along with new European diseases, devastated the native inhabitants.

In 1511 they began the conquest of Cuba, searching, as always, for gold, for Indians to enslave, for a way to get rich quick on the newly discovered islands. Cuba yielded little gold, but eventually served as the base for expeditions launched to the

lands to the north, which the Spanish called “Tierra Incognita del Norte” and later “La Florida”—the region encompassing most of the present-day southeastern United States.

It was from the large islands of the Caribbean—especially Española (anglicized to Hispaniola) and Cuba—that the conquest of the Americas radiated outward like spokes of a wheel pointing south, west, and north. Most of the early expeditions to La Florida sailed north from the ports of either Santo Domingo on Hispaniola or Havana, founded on Cuba in 1519, long before any European settlements were actually made in what is now Alabama.

In 1528 Pánfilo de Narváez, sailing from Havana, organized the first major expedition into La Florida. The expedition of three hundred men was virtually wiped out by Indians, storms, and hunger as it made its way north into Florida from the Tampa Bay area. The survivors built boats out of horsehides and drifted across the mouth of Mobile Bay on their way to the Texas coast where the last of them would eventually wreck. One survivor, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca wrote a memoir in which he recalled entering what was most likely Mobile Bay:

*Once in it, we saw an Indian canoe coming. When we called to them, they came to us, and the Governor [Pánfilo de Narváez], whose boat they reached, asked them for water. They offered to give us some if we gave them something in*



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*which to carry it. And a Greek Christian named Dorotheo Theodoro . . . said that he wanted to go with them. The Governor and others tried hard to stop him, but could not, since he insisted on going with them. He went and took with him a black man, and the Indians left hostages from their company. At night the Indians returned and brought us our vessels without water; neither did they bring the Christians they had taken with them. When they spoke to the hostages they had left, the hostages attempted to jump into the water, but our men in whose boat they were prevented them. So the Indians fled in their canoe and left us very sad and confounded at the loss of those two Christians.*

Few of the men clinging to life in makeshift rafts lived to tell the story. Cabeza de Vaca and three other survivors washed up far away on the Texas coast and set off on an epic odyssey, wandering among the Indians of the Southwest for eight years before reaching Mexico. His account, *Relación of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca*, has survived to this day as one of history's great adventure stories.

On June 9, 1538, Spain's new Governor of Cuba and "La Florida," Hernando de Soto, landed in Cuba with an army recruited in Spain to embark on the conquest of Florida. Soto's goals were to replicate the fantastic conquest of Peru and the Incas. He had served as a chief lieutenant to Francisco Pizarro in looting the Inca Empire, and now the ambitious conquistador



*In the spring of 1539, Hernando de Soto (c. 1495-1542) and six hundred men began the first major European exploration of North America. They entered Alabama at its northeastern corner and wended their way southeast, seizing Indian crops, leaders, warriors, and women in a display of force intended to pre-empt resistance. In Alabama, however, they met their strongest opposition in the person of Chief Tuscaloosa, who orchestrated a surprise attack on the Spanish on October 18, 1540, in the Choctaw settlement of Mavilla. It was one of the bloodiest battles ever fought on American soil. The Spanish suffered heavy casualties, but estimates of the number of Indians killed that day range from 2,500 to 10,000. (Library of Congress.)*

dreamed of even greater glory, splendor, and wealth. Soto launched his expedition north to Florida in late May 1539, using Cuba as his base. He landed somewhere around Tampa Bay and wintered near Tallahassee. From there he turned north and scoured the land through Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and in the fall of 1540 marched across the southern Appalachians through Georgia and finally into Alabama.

As he went, he claimed all the lands in the name of Spain. With weaponry and destructive capabilities unlike anything the Indians had ever seen—horses, war dogs, cannons, and worst of all, disease—Soto's army of around six hundred men marched throughout the Southeast, devastating its inhabitants from 1539 until 1543 when the expedition petered out along the Mississippi River.

In what would become Alabama, this first European governor confronted his most determined resistance, led by Chief Tuscaloosa. The Spanish soldiers were ambushed at the native town of Mavilla in south-central Alabama. In a pitched battle, Tuscaloosa's warriors inflicted heavy casualties on the

Spaniards. Bushwacked in the first stages of the battle, the Spaniards took their vengeance. When it was over, the chief was nowhere to be found. Whether he fled or was killed and his body secreted away, Chief Tuscaloosa disappeared from the battlefield. Mavilla was burned to



THE SHIPYARDS OF HAVANA, DRAWING UPON NAVAL STORES FROM THE GULF COAST REGION, PRODUCED SOME OF THE LARGEST FIGHTING GALLEONS IN THE WORLD.



the ground, and certainly hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the chief's warriors perished in its defense.

Leaving the carnage behind, the Spanish army wended its way northwestwards, probably passing near Moundville and modern Tuscaloosa. The men then walked into Mississippi, where they spent a cold winter enduring harassment by the natives. As the army wandered around to the west of the Mississippi River, Soto died and his men threw his weighted body into the great river to hide his mortality from the natives. The small group of remaining Spaniards straggled back to the coast and eventually reached Mexico, penniless and with little to show for the men's efforts.

After the failures of Narváez and Soto, the Spanish attempted one more time to settle the Gulf area. In 1559 Tristán de Luna led a large expedition to the Gulf coast. He vacillated between Mobile Bay and Pensacola Bay, and eventually planted his colony at Pensacola. Veterans of the Soto expedition led reconnaissance parties deep into the interior of Alabama and Georgia searching for the thickly populated towns and Indian chiefdoms they had encountered twenty years earlier. Few or none were found, dramatic testimony to the deadly epidemics set off among the Indians with no immunities to European diseases like smallpox. Hunger, storms, and other privations brought the Luna expedition to its knees, and the Spanish abandoned the Alabama-Florida Gulf region for more than a century.

Havana, on the other hand, grew into a major seaport of the Spanish Empire. Fleets of great armed ships, loaded to the scuppers with silver and other treasures from the Viceroyalties of Peru and New Spain, were assembled and outfitted at Havana. From there they sailed on the long and dangerous voyage back to Spain through the treacherous Straits of Florida, up the east coast of the Florida peninsula, and finally took an easterly turn at the latitude of the Bermudas on their way home. The frontier city of St. Augustine was founded in 1565 to protect these fleets from pirates and to keep the French from gaining a foothold on the Atlantic coast.

For the next two centuries, Spain claimed most of modern Alabama and, indeed, most of the present-day

southeastern United States, though it never effectively colonized the region. The Spanish claims grew more and more tenuous in the eighteenth century as French and English rivals encroached with increasing frequency on the southeastern frontiers of North America.

### ✠ LOST SOULS ✠

Not all of those who arrived in the Americas were merchants and soldiers in search of profits and empire. Many came to save souls. At stake in Alabama and La Florida—or “Louisiana” as the French called the region—were the eternal lives of millions of natives.

Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas became a vocal and effective advocate for the Indians, after witnessing the abuses suffered by natives forced to labor for Spanish settlers in Hispaniola and Cuba. He persuaded the Spanish crown that abuses and cruelties had to be ended if Spanish claims to sovereignty in the New World were to be legitimate. La Florida became a test case of sorts, though not a very effective one. Could the natives be won to the faith and, by extension, to loyalty to the Spanish crown, by persuasion? Or was force and discipline necessary to wean them away from idolatry and paganism?

Jesuits had little luck in the 1570s and 1580s at proselytizing in the Chesapeake Bay region and lost many of their brethren to martyrdom. Unlike the Jesuits, Franciscan friars from Spain sent to establish missions in the Georgia-Florida region in the 1590s included small contingents of soldiers to protect their new missions. They strung more than a dozen missions from the Atlantic coast all the way west to the modern boundary of Alabama.

All of these missions were supported from St. Augustine, which, in turn, was tied to Havana for a vital lifeline of supplies, men, and subsidies. But the missions—with almost fifty thousand mission Indians at one time—were destroyed by wars with the English colonists of Carolina and their Indian allies as the eighteenth century dawned. By 1706 only about four hundred mission Indians remained, all huddled near the fortified city of St. Augustine.



*This view of the entrance to Havana's harbor, engraved by Peter Canot in 1764, shows a Spanish man-of-war towing out past a wreck. (Library of Congress.)*

In a way, the origins of the famed Bible Belt of the South go back much further than the arrival of Anglo-American Protestants later in the eighteenth century. The Franciscans—bearing catechisms and psalters, chanting the Mass in the wilderness, and teaching the rudiments of Christian worship—brought the first face of Christianity to Florida, Georgia, and Alabama by way of Cuba more than three hundred years ago.

The rapid fall of the Florida mission system was due in part to the declining power of Spain in the face of the ascendancy of France and England in the Southeast. As Spain declined, so did her ability to support the missionary work. But the Franciscans sped their own demise by being harsh taskmasters, not endearing themselves to the easy-living Guala or Apalachee Indians of the northern Gulf coast. The friars demanded obedience, tributary work and tithes, along with monotheism. So when the English and French traders arrived with better trade goods, firearms, and alcohol, they easily wooed many Indians away from the strict Spanish.

### ✠ SUPERIOR SHIPS ✠

If the Franciscans were losing the war for lost souls, the Spanish nevertheless remained determined to keep a foothold in the Florida-Georgia-Alabama region. And they had a strategic reason for doing so. Some of the best pine trees in the New World grew in the forests just

north of Pensacola and Mobile. Spain needed pine for tar, turpentine, and wood—essential naval stores for its shipbuilding industry in Cuba.

The Royal Shipyards of Havana were formally established in 1749, although Havana had been producing deepwater vessels since the sixteenth century, probably as early as 1560. Under the reforms of the Bourbon monarchs of Spain, especially of Charles III, Spain's military might grew both on land and at sea. To compete successfully against the English, the Spaniards had to have a strong presence on the water. The shipyards of Havana, drawing in part upon naval stores from the Florida-Alabama gulf coast region, produced some of the largest fighting galleons in the world. These ships not only plied the Atlantic Ocean between Spain and her American colonies, but also were commissioned into the Spanish navy and fought in some of the great sea battles against the English in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Of all the vessels built in Havana, none was more famous than the *Santísima Trinidad*. Launched on March 3, 1769, she was the largest fighting ship of the age, carrying 120 cannons on four decks. It was said by one visitor that her “staterooms on the poop deck were a

miniature palace inside, a fantastic fortress on the outside.” She was a colossus of the sea, a mighty giant that was nonetheless captured by the English at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and sunk in a great storm that followed.

As Spain rebuilt its navy in the eighteenth century, the royal shipyard at Havana played a key role, building almost two hundred ships, from the monstrous *Santísima Trinidad* to the smaller and swifter frigates of the fleets. How good were these ships built of timber and naval stores from across the Gulf of Mexico? Perhaps the ultimate compliment came from the English themselves—those paragons of sea power—who captured more than thirty Spanish ships over the years and quickly incorporated them into the British fleets.



*This French engraving from 1784 shows an explosion at a British magazine during the siege of Pensacola. In the foreground, Spanish troops under the command of Bernardo de Gálvez take advantage of the opportunity to attack and force the surrender of the British garrison. (Library of Congress.)*

### ✦ AMERICAN REVOLUTION ✦

Americans experienced firsthand the power of the British fleets and ground forces as the colonists declared their independence from Britain in 1776. As France and Spain—eager to settle old scores with their rival England—joined the Americans in their fight in 1777, the destinies of Cuba and Alabama intertwined once again.

Staging campaigns from Havana and New Orleans, General Bernardo de Gálvez, governor of Spanish Louisiana, led Spanish troops, many from Cuba, in the capture of Mobile in 1780 and Pensacola soon thereafter. This opened an important second front in the war and drew British attention away from the main theater along the Atlantic coast.

Prominent merchants in Havana raised almost half a million pesos from patriotic residents to support the war effort. The money sent to the Spanish crown proved valuable to the American victory at Yorktown—the engagement that finally broke the British will and ultimately ended the war. The Cubans, much like the Americans, were driven by a mixture of principle and practical materialism. The merchants who raised the

funds were awarded special trade privileges in exchange, particularly the slave trade. And victory brought southern Alabama, including Mobile, back under Spanish rule until 1813.

### ✦ TRADE AND TRAVEL ✦

In the nineteenth century, the United States expanded southwards and westwards, while the Spanish Empire in the Americas shrank dramatically. Spanish-held territories in the Western Hemisphere fought successful wars of independence from the mother country, beginning early in the nineteenth century. While new nations from Mexico to South America emerged as independent entities, only Cuba remained solidly locked in Spain’s orbit.

Heavily garrisoned by Spanish troops, and with a substantial percentage of the free population Spanish-born, the island remained loyal to Spain. And Cuban Creoles—descendants of Spaniards born in the Americas—were reluctant to experiment with republican forms of government that promised liberty and freedom while slavery was expanding to keep up with the growing sugar industry.



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Sugar cultivation on the island flourished in the nineteenth century, driven by improving technologies, the collapse of the Haitian sugar industry, and the massive increase in the slave trade from Africa. (By the mid-nineteenth century, forty percent of the Cuban population was African or of African descent.) U.S. investors drifted south into Cuba, buying ranches or sugar-producing estates and participating in the slave trade.

Many Alabamians, including the prosperous trader and land speculator John Forbes, bought ranches in the Matanzas area. Forbes moved to Cuba in 1816 to his ranch, Canimar, where he lived until his death in 1823. Forbes was one of several prosperous Scottish traders who had flourished on the frontier between Spain, Great Britain, and the United States at the end of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth. The traders received concessions at different times from the English, Spanish, and Americans to sell goods to Indians of the Southeast and operated trading posts across Florida to the Mississippi River. From Mobile and on up through the Upper Creek territories, which included most of modern Alabama, at trading posts such as Fort Toulouse and Little Tallassee on the Coosa River, traders prospered in the quicksilver circumstances of changing frontiers. Many traders like Forbes had maintained close ties with the Spanish in Cuba, and some were among the first foreigners to trade between the newly emerging United States and Cuba in the early nineteenth century.

Trade flourished between Cuba and Alabama. Ships docked at Mobile not only with sugar but also with coffee, pineapples, rum, molasses, and, later in the nineteenth century, bananas, newly “discovered” by the American palate. In turn, pork and rice flowed into Cuba from Mobile and other American ports, especially to feed the growing slave population working the increasingly prosperous sugar estates on the island. Cotton, timber, and paper also were imported from Alabama.

Mobile became one of North America’s busiest ports. After New Orleans, the city had the best access to the hinterland of the Deep South, its river system reaching far into Alabama and parts of Mississippi. And Havana was the largest port with which this Alabama city traded.

Ties beyond trade and commerce bound Alabama to Havana. In 1852 William Rufus King, the only Alabama politician to become Vice President of the United States, was diagnosed with tuberculosis and ordered to seek a warmer, more congenial climate than Washington, D.C. Soon after his election, King took a ship to Havana from Norfolk. From Havana he traveled to Ariadne, a sugar plantation owned by his friend Colonel John Chartrand in Matanzas. But King’s health worsened, so Congress passed a special act and allowed the U.S. consul general in Cuba, William Sharkey, to swear King in as Vice President of the United States. When it was clear that King was dying, he boarded a ship waiting in Matanzas Bay and steamed home to his plantation, Chestnut Hill, near Cahaba, where he died on April 18, 1853. Though King never had the opportunity to take office, he holds the distinction of being the only U.S. executive official ever administered the oath of office on foreign soil.

### ✠ ANNEXATION FEVER ✠

Cuba’s prosperous slave-driven sugar economy made it a logical target for southern expansionists in the mid-nineteenth century as the slavery question began to split the United States. Annexationist sentiments had been percolating in and out of the U.S. government since the presidency of Thomas Jefferson (1801–1809). Americans feared that the British might beat them to it, a most unappealing scenario because at this time Great Britain was the chief rival with the United States for power and influence in the Western Hemisphere. In the 1820s, under President John Quincy Adams, the “ripe fruit” theory emerged—a hypothesis that Cuba would fall into the hands of the United States once the time and circumstances were right. In 1848 the U.S. had even offered Spain one hundred million dollars for the island, which prompted the Spanish to reply that “Sooner than see the island transferred to any Power they would prefer seeing it sunk in the ocean.” As the issue of slavery heated up in the U.S., southerners began to covet Cuba as a potential new slave state.



THE FEDERAL SHIPS CLOSED AS NEAR AS THEY DARED AND MANAGED TO SHOOT A CANNON BALL THROUGH THE *DENBIGH'S* WHEELHOUSE.



In this overheated annexationist atmosphere, several U.S. and Spanish diplomats met in Ostend, Belgium, in 1854 and issued a call for annexation. Spain refused to sell. Even though the Ostend Manifesto failed, it represented the spirit of Manifest Destiny and southern expansionism that persisted until the Civil War.

### ✚ RUNNING BLOCKADES ✚

During the American Civil War, Cuba proved critical to the survival of the South. The Union sought to deny the Confederacy the use of its ports, so vital to the export of cotton, which in turn sustained the war effort. The Union's Anaconda Plan—a metaphor of a snake squeezing the South—materialized in the blockades of southern ports. The blockade was in place by 1862, but Confederate blockade runners from Mobile and other southern ports challenged it successfully for several years. Blockade running was a profitable and patriotic business, but the risks were high. Off the great southern ports of Wilmington, Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans, one in four blockade runners was caught or sunk.

When New Orleans was captured by the Federals in April 1862, Mobile's importance to the Confederacy rose even higher. The principal connection to market

*The Denbigh is one of the most famous blockade runners of the Civil War. Nicknamed the "Packet," a term reserved for ships with regular service between ports, the boat even earned the respect of Federal navy officers, who were impressed with the frequency with which she entered the harbor at Mobile. (Courtesy Dr. Charles V. Peery. Photo provided by Galkeston County Historical Museum.)*

southern cotton to the outside world and to import materials of war was from Mobile through Havana. The Cuban gold and silver received as payment was then translated into precious ammunition and stores for the war effort. But the import and export of vital materials required effective blockade runners.

Arguably the sleekest of the blockade runners making the dangerous trips between Havana and Mobile was the side-wheeler *Denbigh*, built in the shipyards of John Laird & Sons of Birkenhead, near Liverpool, England, in 1860. She was purchased in September 1863 by an international group of English, French, and Confederate investors, and she arrived in Havana in late 1863. There she was prepared for her inaugural run into Mobile through the blockade, which she made in December. Once in Mobile, she took on cotton and other exports and prepared to return to Havana.

Her first try at piercing the blockade was singularly inauspicious, as she ran aground under the safety of the guns of the Confederacy's Fort Morgan guarding the eastern end of the entrance into Mobile Bay. The Federal ships blockading the port closed as near as they dared and managed to shoot a cannon ball through the *Denbigh's* wheelhouse. The fort returned fire and kept the Federals at bay for a few days until the *Denbigh's* crew offloaded enough cargo to refloat the vessel so the ship could make its way back to Mobile.

During the next four months, she made four runs from Mobile through the blockade to Havana. She was sleek and fast, and her captain Abner M. Godfrey used all of his wiles to escape capture. Instead of directly entering the main and deepest entrance channel of the Bay, for example, Godfrey sometimes steered her through the Swash, a narrow, more shallow channel running eastward along the Gulf shore from the mouth of Mobile Bay. In the early morning fogs and mists, the captain hid the profile of the *Denbigh* against beach and sand dunes to the north, until he could reach the safety of the guns of Fort Morgan.

In her short career, the *Denbigh* was such a regular in the port of Mobile that she was known in the local press as the "Packet," a term usually reserved for a ship engaged in a regular service between ports. She slipped out of Mobile for the last time on July 26. Less than two weeks later, Admiral David G. Farragut in his flagship *Hartford* led the Federal fleet on the assault of Mobile Bay. Farragut seized Fort Morgan and closed down the port city for the rest of the war. The *Denbigh* was the last blockade runner between Havana and Mobile to escape. She spent the next year running the blockade out of the port of Galveston, Texas, until she ran aground in May of 1865 and was destroyed by Union troops.

### ✠ CUBAN REVOLUTION ✠

After the Civil War, trade grew even more prosperous between Alabama and Cuba. Important ores, such as copper, nickel, cobalt, silica, and manganese were mined in Cuba and shipped into the United States via Mobile, joining the more traditional food crops of sugar and coffee. More Alabamians invested in Cuba, bought



*Congressman and former Confederate Gen. Joseph "Fighting Joe" Wheeler of Alabama (front) and Lt. Col. Theodore Roosevelt (right) are shown here at the American embarkation camp at Tampa, Florida, in June 1898, just before the voyage to Cuba. (Claude Moore Health Sciences Library, University of Virginia.)*

in Cuba, and sold in Cuba, and learning in the process that Cubans had their own war in the making—a war to liberate their island from Spanish dominion.

Cuba's struggle for independence began with the "Ten Years War" (1868–1878), which failed, but only in the short run. The war for independence erupted again in 1895 and finally culminated in the Spanish American Cuban War (known in the U.S. as the Spanish-American War) of 1898. The United States intervened on the side of Cuban patriots and helped secure Cuba's independence from Spain, finally returning the favor that the Cubans had done in the American Revolution.

Many Alabamians serving in America's army and navy participated in the war. Early in the conflict, Richmond Pearson Hobson of Greensboro became a national hero when he led a daring but ultimately unsuccessful mission to block the Spanish fleet in Santiago harbor. Captured then released by the Spanish army, Hobson was embraced by Americans as an icon of our partnership in the Cuban liberation effort. When Colonel Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders stormed San Juan Hill in the key Battle of Santiago, W. Walton Stewart and William T. Atkins of Selma were among his troopers. Alabama's General "Fighting Joe" Wheeler, of Civil War fame and a



long-time U.S. Congressman, was recommissioned to serve in Cuba, though a case of malaria kept him out of most of the action at San Juan Hill. His son, Joe Jr., was quarantined with two thousand other soldiers during a yellow fever epidemic that swept the army camps in Cuba. Many of the soldiers succumbed to the disease and thirty percent of the black soldiers brought in to nurse the white soldiers died of the epidemic.

### ✠ THE WAR ON PESTILENCE ✠

As disease fatalities exceeded battle deaths in the Spanish-American War, a new war heated up—the battle to end, once and for all, the scourges of malaria and yellow fever. Cuba, long considered a particularly fertile environment for the pestilence, became the meeting place of the doctors who finally defeated the disease. Instrumental to the process were Dr. Carlos Finlay of Cuba and Dr. William Gorgas of Alabama.

Carlos Juan Finlay was born on December 3, 1833, in the city of Puerto Principe (now Camaguey); his family

*On April 25, 1898, the U.S. formally declared war on Spain and joined the fight for Cuba's independence. Eager to make a name for himself, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt resigned his post and personally financed an armed expedition to Cuba. It was Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" who took San Juan Hill away from Spanish defenders on July 1, 1898. Legend tells how Roosevelt, with a saber in one hand and a pistol in the other, led his Rough Riders and the Ninth Cavalry, an African-American regiment, to the sounds of "Charge!" The story became so popular back home that it was even re-enacted on stage, as in this minstrel show from 1899. (Library of Congress.)*

moved to Havana shortly thereafter. His father Edward was a Scottish physician and coffee plantation owner, and his mother, Isabel de Barres, was French. Finlay studied in France, in England, and finally in Philadelphia over the course of a very busy young life. He graduated in 1855 from the Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia, where he first learned about the germ theory of disease, and he returned to practice in Havana in 1857.



RICHMOND PEARSON HOBSON OF GREENSBORO BECAME A NATIONAL HERO WHEN HE LED A DARING MISSION TO BLOCK THE SPANISH FLEET INTO SANTIAGO HARBOR.



In 1881 Finlay participated in a conference in Washington devoted to international sanitation. He presented his theory on the transmission of tropical diseases, especially yellow fever, by independent vectors, in this case by mosquitoes. Another Alabamian, Dr. Josiah Nott of Mobile, was probably the first doctor to suggest that yellow fever was carried by an insect such as a mosquito. In 1848 he had published a paper that suggested the theory. It was ignored by the medical community, until demonstrated decades later by Dr. Finlay.

The Cuban-born doctor thus joined the ongoing debate on how yellow fever was transmitted. If it could be established by experimentation that a species of the mosquito was the carrier, then perhaps the disease could be brought under control and even eradicated. When the Spanish-American War erupted in 1898, American officials were concerned about the potential for an epidemic of yellow fever, which had produced casualty rates as high as eighty-five percent among soldiers during war. Carlos Finlay traveled to Washington to offer his services to the Americans. Already seventy-five, Finlay nonetheless joined the American troops besieging Santiago. In 1898, while a yellow fever epidemic ravaged Havana, Finlay welcomed William Gorgas, the newly appointed chief sanitation officer of the U.S. Army, to the city.

William Gorgas was born in Toulminville, near Mobile, on October 3, 1854, the son of General Josiah Gorgas and Amelia Gayle. After graduating from



*Above left: Physicians sought a cure for yellow fever throughout the nineteenth century, but it took the Spanish-American War to find it. In 1898, William Gorgas of Alabama was named the army's chief sanitation officer in Havana, where he began working on a solution. (Library of Congress.) Above right: In Havana, Gorgas met Cuban physician Carlos J. Finlay, whose work on mosquitoes promised the answer. Together, they proved that mosquitoes transmitted yellow fever. (Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, Florida.)*

Bellevue Hospital Medical College, Gorgas entered the United States Army Medical Corps in June 1880 and was assigned to Texas. There he survived an attack of yellow fever and acquired lifelong immunity, an experience that fostered a desire to eradicate the disease. In Havana, as chief sanitation officer of the U. S. Army, he put Finlay's mosquito hypothesis to the test, adding his own experience to the experiments.

The two doctors soon found themselves instrumental to the success of a larger program. The U.S. Army, determined to control the disease, had established the Yellow Fever Commission in Cuba led by another pioneering doctor, Walter Reed. Reed, Gorgas, and their team finally proved Finlay's theory, demonstrating conclusively that the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito was the carrier of the yellow fever virus.

Gorgas and Finlay had posited the theory that the disease could be prevented by interrupting the life cycle of the mosquito, a theory that they proved correct in Cuba. Then Gorgas transferred the knowledge to Mobile and finally to the Panama Canal. Some even credit Gorgas with having made the Panama Canal project possible, since it had been malaria and yellow fever as much as anything else that doomed the earlier French attempt led by Ferdinand de Lesseps in the 1880s. The cure spread throughout the tropics, reducing the fever dramatically until the day, many decades later, that an effective vaccine was developed.



*This photo of a Havana street was taken in 1900, shortly before Cuba became a hotspot for American tourists. A banner over the street ahead advertises the entrance to the “Bazar Ingles,” a market that catered to English-speakers. (Library of Congress.)*

### ✦ “AMERICANIZATION” ✦

The lives of Alabamians and Cubans remained intertwined for the next century, growing closer at times, estranged at others. Cuban music worked its way into the American scene; American baseball became the Cuban national sport. Even the most famous American sitcom of the 1950s, *I Love Lucy*, featured a Cuban, Desi Arnaz, the bandleader and husband of Lucille Ball, the comedienne star of the show.

Economically, Cuba was integrated more tightly into the U.S. in the first half of the twentieth century than

ever before. Indeed, many claimed that Cuba had become nothing more than a mere “protectorate” of the United States, especially with the inclusion of the Platt Amendment into the Cuban Constitution of 1903. The amendment gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuba if its independence was ever threatened. Interpreted broadly, especially during the period of “Dollar Diplomacy” when the United States moved much more aggressively into the Caribbean and Central American areas, it justified U.S. occupations of Cuba by Marines in 1906, 1912, and 1917.

The Cuban sugar industry expanded dramatically in the twentieth century, especially during the First World War and in the shortages after the war. Cuban sugar brought premium prices on world markets—the “Dance of the Millions” it was called—and the principal buyer was the United States. American investors poured into Cuba in the 1920s, drawn by the potential for profit and by the island’s culture itself.

The trend continued through the 1940s and 1950s. By the middle

of the century, United States investors controlled more than ninety percent of telephone and electrical services, over eighty percent of the railroads, and over forty percent of the rich sugar production. Cuba was becoming, in many ways, “Americanized.”

Thousands of Americans made their home in Havana by mid-century, and tens of thousands vacationed annually in Cuba, a short distance by boat or plane from the United States. Others came on business, to buy and sell cattle, to work in the U.S. banks and insurance firms—to make a living in Cuba, which had begun to feel like a little America. Although New York was the major port for Cuban imports and exports into and out of the U.S., a great deal of U.S.–Cuban commerce continued to flow through the port of Mobile, as it had in the nineteenth century, especially sugar and bananas bound for American breakfast tables and dining rooms.



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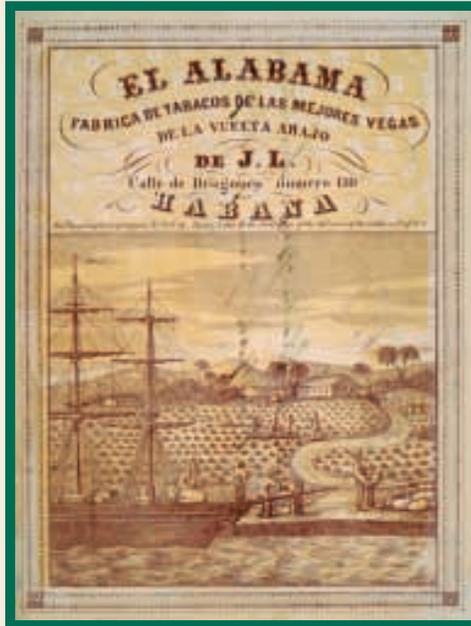


### ✦ THE IRON CURTAIN DROPS ✦

In the early 1930s, the Depression caused Cuba's sugar and tobacco markets to plummet, sharply drawing the lines between rich and poor, between privileged and oppressed. While Cuba's internal tensions simmered, the new president of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, announced his "Good Neighbor" policy in his 1933 inaugural speech, a tentative first step away from the old interventionist policies.

In the summer of 1933, Cuba's tensions erupted as student riots and a military revolt led by Fulgencia Batista coalesced into a revolution, overthrowing the established Cuban dictatorship. From this chaos, Batista emerged as Cuba's new strongman. Persuaded that he could keep Cuba stable and friendly toward the U.S., the Roosevelt administration signed a "Treaty of Relations" in 1934, nullifying the Platt Amendment and limiting the American military presence to one naval station, Guantanamo Bay.

Alabama shared in America's love for Cuba through the 1950s. Dancing girls, casinos, spas, bright lights, casual prostitution, *Cuba Libres* (the wonderful rum and coke combination characteristic of Havana), cigars: Cuba had it all. Havana was an avatar of sensual engagement, a playground for America's fun-seekers. Investment in Cuban enterprises persisted, and trade continued to flourish, much of it through the port



*Top: Cuban cigars were imported into Mobile as early as the 1850s, when this label for "El Alabama" brand cigars was printed. Above: The Cuban sugar industry boomed in the twentieth century; for decades the U.S. remained the island's top buyer. (Both Library of Congress.)*

of Mobile—with a substantial cut of the profits going to the corrupt Batista, now dictator, and to his affiliates in America's organized crime world.

Not all Cubans appreciated being so thoroughly Americanized. A set of forces was working to counter those influences. When Fidel Castro's revolutionary army rode into Havana on New Year's Day, 1959, he chased out President Batista. Most Cubans feared and hated Batista and were glad to see him go.

As Castro sealed his hold on Cuba, he expropriated tens of millions of dollars of U.S. properties, shut down the casinos, extended diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, and nationalized the richest property owners. The U.S. imposed a trade embargo. The Cold War dropped its Iron Curtain on the narrow Florida Channel that separates the U.S. from Cuba. Castro brooked no opposition to his régime, and many Cubans started to flee the island, first by the hundreds, then by the thousands.

By the summer of 1960, plans were well under way in Washington to overthrow the dictator. Alabama Air National Guardsmen were in the small corps of U.S. advisers and flyers chosen to assist anti-Castro Cubans bent on dislodging the head of state in the

spring of 1961. The resulting Bay of Pigs invasion—an unmitigated disaster—brought relations between the U.S. and Cuba to a halt for decades.



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### ✝ NEW BEGINNINGS ✝

Few Americans could have foreseen that Castro's administration would outlast ten U.S. presidents or that the trade embargo would continue almost five decades. In recent years, however, light has begun to shine through the Iron Curtain.

Mobile led the way by seeking and establishing a sister-city relationship with Havana in 1993. In a way, the establishment of the Society Mobile-La Habana was natural, since these two great port cities have been tied by trade, commerce, culture, and even shared in the fight against diseases for centuries. Other U.S. cities have followed Mobile's example in the last decade with similar relationships springing up between Pittsburgh and Matanzas; Bloomington, Indiana, and Santa Clara; Madison, Wisconsin, and Camaguey; and Oakland, California, and Santiago.

Stirred by common sentiments of curiosity and mutual interest in each other's world, Cubans and Americans have begun to develop academic and intellectual ties that transcend politics and commerce. A major conference on Alabama and Cuba was held in November 2003 at the University of Alabama exploring issues related to science, history, archaeology, and religion. A second conference will be held in Havana in November 2005.

The political differences between Washington and Havana continue to color the development of these new relations. Alabama farmers and exporters want to enter the Cuban markets, while Cubans wish to re-enter the United States through ports such as Mobile with cigars, rum, sugar, and other tropical products. But the political climate continues to make this type of commerce extremely difficult.

For the people of Alabama and Cuba, something greater is at stake than government licensing, embar-



*On New Year's Day, 1959, Fidel Castro led the armed revolution that overthrew the U.S.-friendly Cuban dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. The Cuban Revolution was more than the exchange of one regime for another. It was also a social revolution that installed communism as the official social order, and relations with the U.S. began to deteriorate. Here Castro arrives at MATS terminal in Washington, D.C., on April 15, 1959, four months after coming to power. (Library of Congress.)*

goes, approval, or disapproval. We share a common history—almost five hundred years of trade, travel, war, and peace. That history is a bond that endures, regardless of the politics. As the last vestiges of the Cold War fade, many hope that we will once again bridge the gulf and continue our shared story.

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