

# KEY WEST AND THE CUBAN TEN YEARS WAR

by GERALD E. POYO\*

ACTIVIST EMIGRE COMMUNITIES have always been a prominent factor in the Cuban historical experience. Because of its proximity to the island, Florida became a traditional gathering point for dissatisfied Cubans seeking to influence the political situation in their homeland.

When the final phase of the Cuban wars for independence erupted in 1895, emigres in Florida were in the forefront of organizing efforts, and the importance of their contribution in reinitiating hostilities against Spanish authority has been recognized in historical literature. Limited attention, however, has been focused on the Key West origins of the exile communities and the molding of their revolutionary tradition during the Cuban Ten Years War, 1868-1878. This period in Cuban history has been the subject of considerable scholarly research, but the role of Key West in its historical development has not been adequately detailed.<sup>1</sup>

For Key West the independence struggle was a thirty-year endeavour and a constant factor in the daily life of the Cuban community of that city. It was during the first decade, however, that the independence ideal became firmly embedded in the consciousness of the tobacco workers, which allowed them to carry on after most others had despaired.

Cubans began their exodus to Key West at the outbreak of the independence war in October 1868. As the pro-Spanish *Voluntarios* imposed their authority in Havana, thousands departed and established the exile communities that eventually served as the vanguard for the independence movement.<sup>2</sup> The three major destination points within United States borders were

---

\* Mr. Poyo is a doctoral student in Latin American history at the University of Florida, and librarian/research associate at the Center for the Study of Human Resources, University of Texas, Austin.

1. See Ramiro Guerra, *Guerra de los Diez Años*, 2 vols. (Havana, 1972), for the most comprehensive account of the war.
2. New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, February 19, 1869.

New York, Key West, and New Orleans. Many of the emigrating Havana elite moved to New York, hoping to obtain support from wealthy and influential Cubans. Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, the initiator of the rebellion, was more than willing to turn over to them the diplomatic and expeditionary organizing tasks of the movement. Key West, on the other hand, became the congregating point for Cubans of more modest origins, the majority with middle and working class backgrounds.

The arrival of Cubans in Key West proceeded steadily. By 1870, they numbered approximately 1,100, and more continued to arrive weekly. In December 1871, the influx intensified as a result of an order by the captain-general requiring all natives to enlist with the Voluntarios or leave the island. By 1873 the Cubans in Key West constituted a majority of the population.<sup>3</sup>

One of the earliest arrivals was the Spanish tobacco capitalist Vicente Martínez Ybor, who had been involved in pro-independence conspiracies, but who had fortunately escaped before he was captured. High import duties on cigars and relatively low taxes on tobacco leaf made it advantageous for Ybor to reestablish his cigar enterprise in Key West. Shortly thereafter the New York based firm, Seidenberg & Co., opened a factory on the isle, thereby firmly establishing the foundations of the Florida cigar industry. Cigar making induced further immigration to Key West, molding the primarily working class character of the Cubans in the community.<sup>4</sup>

Usually, however, it was not members of the working class who became the community leaders. It was more affluent Cubans who were living in Key West primarily because of political persecution who began to organize the community, emphasizing a revolutionary orientation. <sup>5</sup>These leaders included José Dolores Poyo and Juan María Reyes, both journalists from Havana. Poyo had worked for *La Gazeta de la Habana*, and Reyes had collabo-

3. United States Census Office, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, microfilm population schedules, Monroe County, Florida; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, December 12, 1871; Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Florida Union*, January 10, 1874.

4. L. Glenn Westfall, "Don Vicente Martínez Ybor, the Man and His Empire: The Development of the Clear Havana Industry in Cuba and Florida in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1977), 21-25; Willis Baer, *The Economic Development of the Cigar Industry in the United States* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1933), 106.

5. Manuel Deulofeu y Lleó, *Héroes del destierro. La emigración: notas históricas* (Cienfuegos, 1904), 26.

rated with the noted reformist organ *El Siglo*. Because of their involvement in conspiratorial activities they were forced to abandon their homeland. In their capacities as *lectores* in the cigar factories, Poyo in the Martínez Ybor factory and Reyes with Seidenberg & Co., they propagandized for the revolution and aided in the organization of the Cuban community.

A sense of solidarity and common destiny emerged as more and more Cubans arrived in Key West. At first there were many jobs available in the newly-established cigar industry, but these were filled quickly, and the number of unemployed increased. When the steamers arrived from Havana, crowds waited on the docks to welcome the immigrants and to find homes for them.<sup>6</sup> By February 1869, a benevolent society was organized to aid those in need of support, and during that month and the following, a Cuban-sponsored fair raised over \$3,000 to help the refugees.<sup>7</sup> What became the symbolic institution representing the cohesiveness of the community, however, did not appear until late in 1871. On November 11, the Club San Carlos, named after Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, opened as a combination political, educational, and social institution. Generations of Cuban-Americans received their education at San Carlos, and the needy found security during periods of hardship. In 1879 the Key West *Key of the Gulf* observed, "The Cubans here not only provide for their poor, but educate them in a manner that others ought to emulate. The San Carlos Benevolent Association stands as a bright star in our city."<sup>8</sup>

Just as Cespedes recognized the advantage of establishing contacts with the Cubans in New York, he also took steps to insure the cooperation of his exiled compatriots in Key West. In early 1869, Ambrosio Valiente, an agent representing the revolutionary government, arrived in the city to aid in organizing the colony. Under his auspices Pedro Franchi Alfaro gained election as the official agent for the revolution in the community.<sup>9</sup> Soon after, the Key West colony dispatched a company of forty-two men, the *Rifleros de la Habana*, to Nassau where they joined the

---

6. Juan Pérez Rolo, *Mis Recuerdos* (Key West, 1928), 9.

7. Luis Fernández Marcané, *La visión grandiosa de Vicuña Mackenna* (Havana, 1943), 22-23; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, April 19, 1870; Key West *El Republicano*, January 22, February 26, March 5, 1870.

8. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, September 23, 1879.

9. Fernández Marcané, *Visión grandiosa de Vicuña Mackenna*, 22-23.

*Salvador* expeditionary force. Organized by the New York junta, the expedition landed on the northern coast of Camagüey on May 13, initiating Key West's contributions to the Cuban independence struggle.<sup>10</sup>

The revolutionary effort gained additional structure in July 1869, when the *Asociación Patriótica Cubana* was formed under the presidency of Franchi Alfaro. The organization proclaimed its intention to support the activities of the New York junta by collecting at least \$150 weekly. During the next year, the Cubans of Key West continued to demonstrate their enthusiasm by organizing other revolutionary clubs and organizations.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout this period, the revolutionary press exerted important influence on the various Cuban communities in the United States. Key West was no exception, and a vigorous press there propagandized for the revolution. Founded by Juan María Reyes, *El Republicano* was the first of a series of Spanish-language newspapers that flourished in Key West. Reyes's publication became an important tool for the revolutionaries and established itself as the focal point for a community hungry for news about Cuba. *El Republicano* was not strictly speaking a newspaper, but more accurately a propaganda organ dedicated exclusively to furthering the cause of independence.

To reemphasize community support for the insurrection, on October 10, 1869, the first anniversary of the declaration of Cuban independence, a large gathering of Cubans and supporters assembled at the Key West cemetery, where they participated in ceremonies paying homage to their compatriot dead. Afterwards, the group, 1,200 strong, marched through the streets of the city to the *Ateneo Democrático Cubano* to listen to speeches by their leaders.<sup>12</sup> Such fervent demonstrations created tensions that sometimes resulted in violence and bloodshed. In July and October 1869 riots erupted involving pro-revolutionary Cubans and anti-insurgent elements made up of a substantial number of Spaniards.<sup>13</sup>

---

10. Juan J. E. Casaus, *La emigración cubana y la independencia de la patria* (Havana, 1953), 85.

11. *Ibid.*, 149-51.

12. Manuel Deulofeu y Lleonart, *Martí, Cayo Hueso y Tampa. La emigración: notas históricas* (Cienfuegos, 1905), 38-51.

13. Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet* (Gainesville, 1974), 239.

Early in 1870, the political activism of the Cubans culminated in an incident that led to heightened passions against the Spanish and to greater determination to continue revolutionary organizing. Editor Reyes of *El Republicano* became involved in a polemic with the Havana-based Voluntario organ *La Voz de Cuba*, edited by Gonzalo Castañón. After exchanging insulting articles, Castañón travelled to Key West, having challenged Reyes to a duel. Shortly after his arrival, however, the Spaniard became involved in a fatal gun battle in the Russell House where he was staying. The subsequent arrest of several Cubans for his murder kept the city in a tense atmosphere, but when it became apparent that the events leading to Castañón's death were obscure and that there was no proof of the defendants' involvement, charges were dropped.<sup>14</sup> Frustrated by the loss of their leader and intent on terminating the subversive activities of the Key West Cubans, the Voluntarios attempted to undermine the financial base of the community. They were able to intimidate Martínez Ybor and force him to close his cigar factory. *El Republicano* vehemently criticized Ybor's decision to yield to Spanish pressure and lamented the precarious situation of the 250 cigar makers left unemployed. Further indignation was expressed by the strongly pro-Cuban newspaper, the *New York Sun*; it sarcastically suggested that Key West be turned over to the Spanish if they were strong enough to force Ybor to shut down his operations.<sup>15</sup> Voluntario efforts to disrupt the community were not successful; Key West continued to grow and revolutionary activities remained the primary pursuit of the exiled Cubans.

When the Ten Years War erupted, Cubans from all walks of life, from all regions of Cuba, and representing vastly divergent interests and attitudes joined the insurrectionary effort. This broad support for the movement made it difficult to define goals and tactics and to create the necessary harmony for a successful outcome. Although the rebellion established a strong foothold

---

14. Juan Ignacio de Armas y Cespedes, *Combate de Russell House* (Nassau, 1870; facsimile edition, Havana, 1938); Luis F. LeRoy y Gálvez, "La muerte de castañón, raíz de los sucesos de Noviembre de 1871," *Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional José Martí* (May-August 1970), 37-70; Key West *El Republicano*, February 12, 1870.

15. Key West *El Republicano*, February 26, March 5, 1870.

on Cuban soil, by the end of 1869 it became clear that dissensions within revolutionary ranks threatened to undermine the effort. The initial source of controversy for the nascent republic-in-arms was Manuel de Quesada, commander-in-chief of the revolutionary armed forces. An aggressive individual with an authoritarian manner, Quesada alienated the primarily youthful, idealistic, and democratic members of the legislative body. Strictly a military figure, Quesada advocated centralizing power in order to carry on the revolution more effectively. In sympathy with Quesada's tactical considerations, President Cespedes was also criticized by the legislature. The first major confrontation between Cespedes and the legislature came in December 1869, when Quesada was removed from his position, initiating a struggle that created negative consequences for the rebellion.

Apart from these developments in Cuba, the New York Cuban community also succumbed to internal dissensions. Upon arriving in New York, that sector of the Havana elite supporting the rebellion gained the leadership of the exile revolutionary effort. Designated as the official representative of the government in the United States, a wealthy Havana planter, Miguel de Aldama, took charge of the New York junta known as the *Agencia General*. Controversy developed over the way in which the new arrivals allegedly usurped authority from the patriot junta already in operation. Division had deepened so much that by 1870 exiles were publicly airing their differences in extremely vehement terms.<sup>16</sup>

The disputes in Cuba and New York became intimately linked when General Quesada, with a special commission from President Cespedes, arrived in the United States to prepare an expeditionary force. Quesada's presence in the United States prompted another round of disputes, this time involving the general and the agency. The anti-Aldama elements supported Quesada, resulting in the establishment of two factions that battled throughout the Ten Years War. Cubans everywhere took sides, and in Key West in 1870, a Quesada faction emerged led by José D. Poyo who kept close contact with Carlos del Castillo,

---

16. Cirilo Villaverde, *La revolución de Cuba vista desde New York* (New York, 1869), reprinted in Comisión Nacional Cubana de la UNESCO, *Cuba en la UNESCO: Homenaje a Cirilo Villaverde* (Havana, 1964), 26.



José Dolores Poyo y Estenoz, 1880. Photograph courtesy of the Felix A. Mesa family, Key West.



José Martí and José D. Poyo standing with tobacco workers in front of the Ybor factory in 1894.



a leading supporter of Quesada in New York.<sup>17</sup> Prior to arriving in New York in early 1870, Quesada had passed through Key West where he likely established contact with Poyo. The latter aided in the formation of the local *Club Patriótico Cubano* to ensure organized support for President Cespedes and General Quesada.<sup>18</sup>

By 1871, President Cespedes, realizing that the disruptions in the United States were seriously damaging the independence struggle, persuaded Vice-President Francisco Vicente Aguilera to go to New York to reunite the exiled Cubans. Arriving in September, Aguilera commissioned José María Izaguirre to travel to New Orleans, Key West, and Philadelphia as his special envoy, with the task of consolidating the revolutionary associations in each community. Izaguirre found the Key West colony willing to cooperate, and on November 17, 1871, the *Asociación Patriótica del Sur* emerged as the organization representing a tenuously conciliated emigre population. Poyo became president of the association and also editor of *El Republicano*, to which he had been contributing since its inception. The newspaper was designated the official organ of the new organization.<sup>19</sup>

By 1872, the Cubans in Key West were not only involved in supporting the revolutionary movement in Cuba, but were also active in local and Monroe County politics. José Ramos, the official representative of the New York Agency in Key West, was elected as alderman on the city council in 1872. The Quesada faction, led by Poyo, argued that Ramos's official capacity as local agent of the Cuban revolution was incompatible with his new office.<sup>20</sup> Maybe Poyo felt that time expended on local political affairs would hurt rather than help the revolutionary cause. The Cubans in Monroe County, however, continued their active involvement in United States politics.<sup>21</sup>

17. Aleida Plasencia, ed., *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años* (Havana, 1968), 187.

18. Gerardo Castellanos y García, *Motivos de Cayo Hueso* (Havana, 1935), 221.

19. Eladio Aguilera Rojas, *Francisco V. Aguilera y la revolución de Cuba de 1868*, 2 vols. (Havana, 1909), I, 502; Castellanos y García, *Motivos de Cayo Hueso*, 221; Casasus, *Emigración cubana y la independencia de la patria*, 150-51.

20. Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 187.

21. See Gerald E. Poyo, "Cuban Revolutionaries and Monroe County Reconstruction Politics, 1868-1876," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LV (April 1977), 407-22.

Despite the political differences within the Key West Cuban community, every attempt to raise expeditions met with an outpouring of enthusiasm. In August 1871, when news arrived of the landing in Cuba of Colonel Rafael de Quesada with arms and munitions for the rebel forces, 200 Cubans and their supporters paraded through the streets of the city.<sup>22</sup> Two months later, Comandante Carlos García arrived in Key West with a commission and \$4,000 from the New York Agency to fit out a small expedition for Vuelta Abajo. In the midst of the preparations, however, the Spanish consul discovered the plan and revealed it to the local authorities, inciting an angry mob to stone his home.<sup>23</sup> Enthusiasm did not wane, and shortly thereafter, when Melchor Agüero, another patriot who had recently taken one expedition to Cuba and was organizing another, arrived in the city, he was received warmly. All available funds were given to him. One Cuban resident raffled off some property and donated the proceeds to the filibusterer, and others gave clothes, shoes, and other items.<sup>24</sup>

With the arrival of Aguilera in New York and the forging of stronger connections between the centers of revolutionary activity, Key West began to contribute to the independence movement in a more systematic manner. The *Asociación Cubana del Sur* was the most important revolutionary organization. Mainly from contributions received from the tobacco workers, the association, by February 1872, was sending approximately \$700 monthly to New York. The other large society in Key West, *Obreros de la Libertad*, raised another \$250 per month. The contributions from Key West were considerably higher than those collected by the New York and New Orleans revolutionary organizations.<sup>25</sup>

Patriots continued arriving in Key West and were warmly received. In May 1872, thirty Cubans carrying \$1,000 contributed by Key West citizens, departed for New York to join an expedition. Later that year, former chief of the Cuban revolutionary armed forces, General Thomas Jordan, visited Key West.

---

22. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, August 12, 1871; Aguilera Rojas, *Francisco V. Aguilera*, I, 63.

23. Guerra, *Guerra de los Diez Años*, II, 133.

24. Aguilera Rojas, *Francisco V. Aguilera*, I, 459.

25. *Ibid.*, I, 120, 183, 197.

The following year General Bernabé Varona, who commanded the forthcoming ill-fated *Virginus* expedition, was welcomed and "extensively feted by the Cuban refugees and citizens generally." It was reported that the community had "subscribed \$20,000 toward fitting out a new expedition," undoubtedly Key West's contribution to the launching of the *Virginus*.<sup>26</sup>

In Cuba the political situation continued to deteriorate. Cespedes's decision to send Quesada to New York in 1870 was denounced by the legislature because they were not consulted in the matter; Aguilera's departure was viewed by some as Cespedes's manner of consolidating his own power in Cuba. When it became apparent that the vice-president could not conciliate the exile communities, however, the president recalled Aguilera and named Quesada the official representative in the emigration. This action evoked a strong reaction from the anti-Quesada legislature, as well as from Aguilera and the Aldama faction in New York. Political disagreements continued to rock the Cuban government, and in October 1873, the final confrontation between the executive and legislative bodies took place resulting in the constitutional removal of Cespedes from office.

Sometime later, in his capacity as editor of *El Republicano*, Poyo received official notification from acting-President Salvador Cisneros Betancourt of what had taken place. He informed Cisneros that these developments had not been well received in Key West and that he personally lamented such a "violently extreme" solution to the discords in Cuba.<sup>27</sup> One of the first measures taken by the new administration was the removal of Quesada from a position of authority in New York, replacing him with Aldama. Poyo's position as editor of *El Republicano* became untenable as Antonio Ríos, a supporter of Aldama, assumed the presidency of the *Asociación Patriótica del Sur* in February 1874. Another patriot, Federico de Armas, became the new editor of the Cuban newsweekly.<sup>28</sup>

Although Quesada had lost his official capacity in New York, he was able nevertheless to launch the *Virginus* in December

---

26. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, May 21, 1872, August 26, November 25, 1873; Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 187.

27. Raoul Alpizar Poyo, *Cayo Hueso y José Dolores Poyo: dos símbolos patrios* (Havana, 1947), 53-54.

28. Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 188.

1873. Tragedy struck, however, for the ship fell into enemy hands, and the Spanish began systematically executing the expeditionaries. United States-Spanish relations neared the breaking point as naval vessels gathered at Key West to await the final rupture.<sup>29</sup> Excitement grew in that community, and there even were reports that the black population was "ready and willing to make war upon the Spanish butchers in Cuba."<sup>30</sup> Though "war fever" ran high, the executions in Cuba ceased, and the United States accepted Spanish offers of reconciliation.

Soon after his deposition, Carlos Manuel de Cespedes died in a Spanish ambush. Upon receiving news of this tragedy, Key West Cubans held religious services in his memory and "hundreds of ladies dressed in deep mourning added a melancholy interest to the scene."<sup>31</sup>

The death of Cespedes failed to alleviate the disunity. Besides personal rivalries and tactical considerations, regional jealousies and class antagonisms created divisions and animosities. There was much factional infighting in Key West. The Quesada group's position was strengthened with the arrival in Florida of Colonel Carlos Manuel de Cespedes y Cespedes, son of the late president. He and Poyo became closely associated, and they organized the *Comité Revolucionario Cubano* in April 1874 to counter the Aldama-controlled *Asociación*.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile in New York, Agent General Aldama and Aguilera, who would become president of the republic-in-arms upon arriving in Cuba, coordinated efforts to organize an expedition. Although anxious to return to his homeland to assume his office, Aguilera agreed to visit New Orleans and Key West with Hilario Cisneros, agency secretary, to raise funds and to try to unite the revolutionary groups. They arrived in February 1874, conferred with the Cuban community leaders, and were able to raise \$5,000 in the cigar factories. During his stay Aguilera also met with city and Monroe County dignitaries who praised the Cubans for their diligent work ethic and their respect for law and order. The mayor noted that although there had been

---

29. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, December 16, 1873, January 6, 1874.

30. *Ibid.*, December 9, 1873.

31. Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Florida Union*, May 28, 1874.

32. Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 188; Casassus, *Emigración cubana y la independencia de la patria*, 153.

a large increase in the Cuban population, the city had not needed to increase the police force. This demonstrated, Aguilera felt, "the best proof of the morality of the Cubans." He found, however, that Cuban black residents had not participated in the revolutionary organizing efforts in Key West. He met with their leaders and assured them that the revolution was also in their best interests. Aguilera won their trust, and prior to his departure for New York, they held a banquet in his honor. The Cuban president left Key West satisfied that he had unified that community.<sup>33</sup>

The cooperation between Aldama and Aguilera in New York rekindled the hopes of the exile communities. Expeditionary leaders continued to travel to Key West to raise funds for the revolution. Later Colonel Fernando López de Queralta collected \$2,500 for the cause in Key West. Early in 1875, Colonel Juan Pacheco y Cespedes and Colonel Pio Rosado raised additional funds, and in March, the workers in the Ybor and Wolf tobacco factories sent more money to New York.<sup>34</sup>

By mid-1874 the ever-present distrust and intrigue so characteristic of the exile communities again threatened to damage the rebellion. Now residing in Paris, General Quesada felt that it was imperative to dispatch an expedition as quickly as possible, and he offered Aguilera in New York \$21,000 to purchase a steamer. After a number of misunderstandings between Aguilera and Aldama concerning the terms under which they would accept Quesada's funds, preparations commenced in September to organize the enterprise which the President would command. As the official agent, Aldama carried the organizational responsibilities of the project, but by April of the following year he could still not announce a departure date.

Relations between the two men deteriorated, and Aguilera's anxiety about departing grew. Further tension developed during January and March as community differences were aired in the city's Cuban press and more partisan organizations formed. During the latter part of April, after two months of polemical

---

33. Pánfilo D. Camacho, *Aguilera, el precursor sin gloria* (Havana, 1951), 139-42; Casasus, *Emigración cubana y la independencia de la patria*, 137; Francisco V. Aguilera, *Francisco Vicente Aguilera: epistolario* (Havana, 1974), 137-43; Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 188.

34. Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 189, 289.

disputes with Aldama, Aguilera decided to depart for Cuba on his own.<sup>35</sup>

These dissensions in New York encouraged partisan politics in the Key West Cuban community. The news of Quesada's contribution to the New York Agency was congratulated and the cigar makers of the Ybor factory dispatched a message of gratitude to the general. The agency representative in Key West did what he could, however, to minimize the importance of the contribution. A struggle developed in December 1874, when Poyo attempted to regain control of the *Asociación Patriótica del Sur* and *El Republicano*, but the incumbent president and editor, Federico de Armas, successfully resisted.<sup>36</sup>

Relations between Armas and the Aldama group, however, grew strained also. In New York, Hilario Cisneros received complaints that Armas was publishing "socialist" articles in *El Republicano*, creating even greater controversy within the Key West community. In addition, local agent Carlos Díaz Silveria accused Armas of attempting to abolish the official agency in Key West and impose his own authority. Armas did not succeed in this endeavour, but he refused to cooperate with Díaz Silveria and left him isolated from the association's activities.<sup>37</sup> Community disunity reached alarming proportions, much to the detriment of the revolutionary effort in South Florida.

There were still other problems in Key West which aggravated the situation there. In September 1873, the national financial crisis and economic depression that enveloped the country brought havoc to the local cigar industry. The manufacturing had grown significantly since the arrival of Ybor in late 1868. During 1869-1870, annual production of cigars reached 8,250,000, and by 1873 output stood at 25,000,000. When Ybor came to Key West only a couple of small cigar establishments existed, but five years later fifteen factories were in operation. The economic dislocations that affected the industry during the latter part of 1873 caused factories to begin laying off employees, and the largest operation, Seidenbert & Co., reduced its labor force significantly.<sup>38</sup>

35. Camacho, *Aguilera*, 139-61; Aguilera, *Francisco Vicente Aguilera*, 161-221.

36. Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 189, 191.

37. *Ibid.*, 190-92.

38. Tallahassee *Sentinel*, September 17, 1870; *New York Times*, January 11, 1874; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, December 23, 1873.

Concerned about their welfare, the cigar makers organized the Cooperative Union of Cigar Makers.<sup>39</sup> The expected occurred in July 1875, as the factory owners announced a reduction in wages. A committee, which included Federico de Armas, promptly organized to lead a strike and initiated efforts to raise the necessary funds to ensure its success. The strike committee held a mass meeting which voted to request from Aldama \$2,000 for the strike fund. The official representative of the Cuban government in New York did not even acknowledge receipt of the request, increasing the general resentment toward him. Secretary Cisneros, however, forwarded to the committee \$77 that he had managed to raise in New York. By mid-August the strikers surrendered to the terms outlined by the factory owners, and the cigar makers returned to work. The remaining strike funds were given to Martin Herrera, president of San Carlos Club, for utilization by the school.<sup>40</sup>

Unable to resolve their grievances with the factory owners, Key West Cubans renewed their interest in local politics. Cespedes announced his candidacy for mayor of the city, and with solid Cuban support he was elected to that office in October 1875. Although the Cuban community had involved itself in politics from the beginning, this was the first time that a Cuban had run for an important office and had won. The full effects and implications of this successful campaign would not become clear until the following year.<sup>41</sup>

After several unsuccessful attempts to land on the coast of Cuba during June through October 1875, Aguilera arrived in Key West en route back to New York. The president's failure to reach Cuba caused a great deal of disappointment and disillusionment among the exiles. There was more disheartening news when it was learned that Aldama's expedition, finally launched in late June, had fallen into the hands of authorities in Jamaica, thus failing to reach the rebel forces.<sup>42</sup>

Aguilera, however, continued his efforts. In mid-November 1875, a commission representing him arrived in Key West, but they found that the series of failures had caused many to wonder

39. Jacksonville *New South*, July 18, 1874.

40. Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 191.

41. Poyo, "Cuban Revolutionaries and Monroe County Reconstruction Politics," 417-22.

42. Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 191, 289.

about the future of the revolution. The difficult economic situation and the low morale hampered the commission's work. Though they managed to collect \$1,200, Poyo informed Aguilera that the apathy and the general demoralization within the community made it difficult to raise the patriotic fervor of the populace.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, Aguilera planned his second attempt to reach Cuba. In April, accompanied by General Quesada and others, he embarked once again on a last desperate effort to assume the presidency of the republic-in-arms. But after five months of successive failures, Aguilera returned to New York, where he died early the next year.

The ineffectual activities of the exiles generally reactivated and intensified divisions in New York and Florida during the next year. In Key West, Cuban political successes achieved in 1875, spurred interest and involvement in the political campaign of 1876. To the detriment of the insurrection in their homeland, Cubans became embroiled in American politics.<sup>44</sup> In January, General Quesada arrived in Key West to raise funds, but not enough supporters could be rallied, and an insignificant sum was collected. Poyo founded a new paper, *La Igualdad*, to replace the defunct *El Republicano*, in an attempt to revive community commitment to the rebellion.<sup>45</sup> Throughout the year, however, Cuban energies were expended on United States politics, and the exile effort diminished to its lowest ebb since the outbreak of the rebellion eight years before.

Reinforcements, arms, and ammunition were critically needed by the patriot forces, and once again, the authorities turned to the emigre communities for support. President Tomás Estrada Palma commissioned General Julio Sanguily and his brother, Colonel Manuel Sanguily, to travel to the United States for the purpose of getting help. On the evening of March 11, 1876, Cubans gathered in New York to hear the representatives of the revolutionary government plead for unity, requesting the community to put aside partisan interests for the benefit of the

43. Ibid., 192; Aguilera Rojas, *Francisco V. Aguilera*, I, 369.

44. Poyo, "Cuban Revolutionaries and Monroe County Reconstruction Politics," 417-22.

45. Aguilera, *Francisco Vicente Aguilera*, 247; Alpizar Poyo, *Cayo Hueso y José Dolores Poyo*, 61-62; Castellanos y García, *Motivos de Cayo Hueso*, 221.



cause. They also outlined their plans to organize a large expeditionary force.<sup>46</sup>

In the tradition of the previous eight years, the Sanguily brothers planned a visit to New Orleans and Key West, hoping to mobilize the generally cooperative tobacco workers. After the disheartening news earlier in 1876, the Florida exiles seemed once again ready to turn their attention to the problems of their homeland. At the annual bazaar, pamphlets of the Sanguily brothers' speeches delivered in Jamaica and New York sold well. Aldama received reports from Key West that promised renewed cooperation.<sup>47</sup>

On July 3, after a stop-over in New Orleans, General Sanguily and his brother docked at Key West. They were greeted enthusiastically by a large crowd who escorted them to their lodging. The general reprimanded the community for its partisan dissensions, and he reminded the populace that while they lived in relative comfort, their brothers in Cuba lacked even the basic essentials required to carry on the struggle. He asked them for greater sacrifices in order to guarantee the necessities for the insurrection. Responding vigorously, the cigar makers signed pledges for between \$10 and \$25, and manufacturers extended credit to be repaid during a four week interval. Before departing Key West the two leaders raised \$6,637.50 for their proposed expedition.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, disturbing reports regarding peace negotiations began filtering out of Cuba. The *New York Sun* carried an interview with a recent arrival from the revolutionary camp who denied the reports. The *Jacksonville Daily Sun and Press* also ran a denial by José Antonio Echeverría, the Cuban diplomatic agent in Washington, that a compromise peace was being sought.<sup>49</sup>

Still skeptical of Aldama's ability to organize successful expeditionary forces, and noting that the Sanguilys had become associated with the agent general, others continued organizing

---

46. Julio Sanguily, *Revolución de Cuba. Discursos del Mayor General Julio Sanguily y el Coronel Manuel Sanguily. A la emigración cubana.* (New York, 1877).

47. Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 193.

48. Cuba, *Boletín del Archivo Nacional*, XX (1921), 125-26, 135-37.

49. *Ibid.*, XIX (1920), 71; *New York Sun*, October 10, 1877; *Jacksonville Daily Sun and Press*, October 21, 1877.

independently. Leoncio Prado, son of the president of Peru, was one of the young militant supporters who initiated an independent enterprise, hoping to reinvigorate the exile effort. Prado was in Key West in early February 1878, to confer with Poyo who agreed to become his agent in that city. Prado informed the workers that he needed funds to purchase a steamer that he intended to convert into a gun-boat. One thousand dollars was collected.<sup>50</sup>

Rumors of impending peace negotiations in Cuba continued to circulate throughout the United States, but it was not until the last of February that it was learned that the Peace of Zanjón had been signed earlier that month, on February 12. The emigre groups in Key West and elsewhere reacted immediately to the news. In New York, Cubans protested the treaty and established a *Comité Revolucionario* to replace agents Aldama and Echeverria who had resigned their positions after receiving news of the pact. Spirits lifted somewhat when notification arrived that the noted Cuban insurgent Antonio Maceo had rejected the peace and that a new revolutionary government had been created to carry on the fight.<sup>51</sup>

Community leaders in Key West worked to keep the revolutionary ideal alive. On March 11, 1878, Cespedes called a meeting to protest the Zanjón Treaty, raise additional funds, and enlist men for the revolutionary army.<sup>52</sup> Later that month, Prado, now a prominent member of the Comité in New York, arrived for a brief Key West visit on his way to Nassau. In order to protect revolutionary activities in the city, Prado arranged to make Poyo the Peruvian consul. Then, with diplomatic immunity, the revolutionaries could store arms in Poyo's residence.<sup>53</sup> The *Comité Revolucionario de Cayo Hueso*, with Cespedes as president and Poyo undertaking secretarial duties, was formed to replace the *Asociación del Sur* as the official revolutionary club in Key West. Since the Cuban press had not survived the internal strife that struck the community in 1876, Poyo established a new

---

50. Alpizar Poyo, *Cayo Hueso y José Dolores Poyo*, 56-57; *Boletín del Archivo Nacional*, VIII (1909), 96.

51. Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Publicaciones, *Documentos para servir la historia de la Guerra Chiquita*, 3 vols. (Havana, 1949-1950), I, 3-4.

52. *Boletín del Archivo Nacional*, VIII, 98.

53. Alpizar Poyo, *Cayo Hueso y José Dolores Poyo*, 62.

journal for the cause, *El Patriota*. In it were printed the resolutions adopted by the newly-formed insurgent organization.<sup>54</sup>

Enthusiasm in favor of Cuban independence continued in Key West, and when the community received notice of a rebel military victory in early May, there was great rejoicing. According to one Florida paper, "Some 2,000 Cubans formed in procession with torchlights, banners and flags, and headed by a brass band marched through the streets bearing a coffin containing the Spanish peace proclamation." After the procession, the crowd gathered at San Carlos Hall, and "a number of speeches were delivered which were highly applauded and which . . . show the determination of all patriots to fight to the death for independence."<sup>55</sup>

The general economic situation, however, made it increasingly difficult to retain the undivided attention of the tobacco workers. Although the cigar industry had expanded during these years, and would continue to do so, a recession had set in which damaged the financial base of the exile community. In February the depressed situation forced the cancellation of the annual San Carlos bazaar.<sup>56</sup> During April, Poyo sent the Comité in New York \$925 collected for the cause, but apologized for not being able to send the full \$2,000 requested. He cited the "almost general and unexpected paralization of work here."<sup>57</sup> By mid-May the cigar factories had laid-off approximately two-thirds of their labor force, and unemployment in Key West had reached 5,000. Throughout April and May many Cubans departed for Havana, hoping to find employment there, but the situation was no better and the exodus ceased.<sup>58</sup>

The determined efforts by the Key West community to keep the insurrection alive slowly dwindled as news arrived from Cuba in early June 1878 that the provisional government could no longer hold out and had submitted to the peace treaty. The Ten Years War came to an end.

---

54. Archivo Nacional, *Documentos para servir la historia de la Guerra Chiquita*, I, 7; Castellanos y García, *Motivos de Cayo Hueso*, 221.

55. Jacksonville *Daily Sun and Press*, May 12, 1878.

56. Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 193.

57. Archivo Nacional, *Documentos para servir la historia de la Guerra Chiquita*, I, 7.

58. Jacksonville *Daily Sun and Press*, May 5, 15, 25, 1878; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, April 30, May 21, 1878.

Morale among the tobacco workers in Key West remained low throughout the summer. During the early part of July, labor disputes resulted in a strike that became so aggravated that the cigar makers threatened to depart for Havana en mass.<sup>59</sup> Disillusioned with the emigre leaders, the workers demanded that the New York Comité return the money collected by Julio Sanguily the previous year since no expedition had ever departed.<sup>60</sup> For the tobacco workers, a moral and financial bulwark of the emigre effort during the Ten Years War, the events of the last six months were disturbing. Their economic security was endangered, and the decade-long commitment to Cuban independence seemed lost. The spirit that had sustained them in the past was not totally extinguished, however. No exodus to Havana developed, and since the independence ideal was still not achieved, conspiratorial activities continued.

On the afternoon of August 4, a group gathered at Poyo's home to establish a secret organization whose function included seeking Cuban freedom and propagating the principles of "Liberty, Fraternity and Union." The *Orden del Sol*, as it was designated, ensured that the ideal of independence would continue to thrive within the Key West community. In order to promote Cuban liberty, on October 12, Poyo published the first issue of his noted newspaper, *El Yara*. It was the last of his journalistic endeavours, and *El Yara* continued publication until Cuban independence was secured from Spain twenty years later.<sup>61</sup>

The Ten Years War was the first phase of a revolutionary movement that culminated in Cuba's political separation from Spain in 1898. In Key West, the establishment of an economically and politically influential Cuban population committed to its homeland's freedom was the result of the first decade of struggle. The seeds of liberty were sown, and they spread to Tampa, Jacksonville, and other Florida communities, and were passed on to a younger generation of Cubans, many born in the United States. The independence ideal became an integral part of the consciousness of the exile communities.

---

59. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, July 9, 1878.

60. Archivo Nacional, *Documentos para servir la historia de la Guerra Chiquita*, I, 20; Plasencia, *Bibliografía de la Guerra de los Diez Años*, 193.

61. Alpizar Poyo, *Cayo Hueso y José Dolores Poyo*, 57-59.

While the Key West community succumbed to the same personality conflicts, regional jealousies, class antagonisms and tactical disagreements characteristic of the entire rebellion, the Cubans there demonstrated great loyalty to the cause of independence. Time after time expeditionary leaders sought support, and in most cases Key West responded with enthusiasm and pride. The tobacco workers consistently contributed portions of their modest incomes for the benefit of the insurrection, and it became almost axiomatic that when extra funds were required for a revolutionary enterprise, Key West could be called upon to contribute.

Insurrectionary conspiracies continued to thrive in Key West throughout the decade of the eighties, and when José Martí arrived there for the first time in 1891, the revolutionary clubs and press still existed and the separatist enthusiasm of the Cuban inhabitants had not diminished. As Martí noted upon arriving in the community and observing Key West in action, "Everything is already done here." Only his catalytic presence was required to unify the Florida exile communities and to initiate the final confrontation with Spanish authority in Cuba.<sup>62</sup>

---

62. Jorge Mañach, *Martí: Apostle of Freedom* (New York, 1950), 280.