

500th Anniversary of Camagüey



Five hundred years ago, on February 2, 1514, Spanish colonizers founded one of the first seven cities established in Cuba at Güincho Point, Nuevitas. It was named Santa María del Príncipe, today known as Camagüey.

The rough land where it was founded, however, was not good enough for growing pasture or any other crop, so two years later the city founders took their tools, rustic furniture, seedlings and animals to Caonao, whose very slow development was based on the hard work of colonizers and the indiscriminate exploitation of the Taino Indians who had lost their freedom once they had been “discovered” by the Spaniards.

Natives were so mistreated and exploited that they rebelled at the Saramaguacán estate and, though they were defeated at the end, they managed to destroy the settlers’ makeshift houses. The population was then forced to wander through lush forests until they arrived exhausted in the domains of the Camagüebax Indian chief. The region’s noble Indian chief gave them a good area between the Tínima and Hatibonico Rivers where they finally settled in January of 1528.

The development of that community that reinitiated its work in 1528 was not very peaceful. Most settlers were absolute predators, including its leader Vasco Porcayo de Figueroa, who was formally married to Tínima, the daughter of Indian leader Camagüebax. Porcayo de Figueroa enjoyed hunting and selling Indians as slaves, including children, and sentenced the already exhausted elderly natives to the fangs of the dogs. And when a decent mayor rebelled against him with the support of local authorities, Porcayo de Figueroa fired the aldermen and ordered the mayor’s death.

Since the beginning, cattle-raising in the favorable conditions of the area's plains was a success; later sugar cane grew in the fertile farms protected and safeguarded by rough riders, who were the predecessors of those who Major Ignacio Agramonte turned into the legendary combatants of the 1868 independence war against Spain.

Emigration toward other lands on the continent, almost always in expeditions such as that of Hernán Cortés, depopulated the precarious settlements and accentuated the melancholic loneliness of the plains, where sometimes a guitar accompanied improvised quartets.

In 1570, Pichardo Moya said that Bishop Castillo visited Santa María del Puerto del Príncipe, the city that would later be known as Camagüey, finding it in a decaying state and already devoted to cattle-raising. He said that the Bishop had found witchcraft or black magic in the city.

In 1608, a notary from the Canary Islands named Silvestre de Balboa y Troya de Quesada, who lived in Puerto Príncipe, wrote a poem entitled **Espejo de Paciencia** in which he told the story of a bishop kidnapped by a French pirate in the eastern city of Bayamo four years earlier and rescued later. However, **Espejo de Paciencia** was not printed until the 19th century.

Many years later, once the war of independence against Spain had come to an end, there was an event that was not sufficiently highlighted on the occasion of its centennial. The historic event took place on April 22, 1903, when Puerto Príncipe's Provincial Council ruled to make the city's Taino name of Camagüey official. And on June of the same year, local authorities also decided that that would be the name of the province's main municipality.

Definitive shape

Between the 17th and 18th centuries the city was filled with parks, squares, small plazas and some meeting rooms and sites for recreation and entertainment, but mainly numerous religious and social assistance buildings that gave the definitive shape to the village, which was granted the title of city by Ferdinand VII as late as in 1817.

Wealthy neighbors at a time when Cuban capital prevailed over Spanish capital donated large amounts of money to build La Merced Church in 1748, the Parish Church, which was larger than Havana's Cathedral, the Jesuit School, the Women's and the San Lazaro Hospitals, the Church of El Carmen and that of La Caridad and the San Juan de Dios Refuge.

Economically the community not only traded with the rest of the country and other neighboring islands but also broke government laws, supplying pirates who sailed the Caribbean Sea under different flags. That is why, if the city's population was 10 thousand people in 1841, in 1874 there were more than 30 thousand inhabitants living in the territory, becoming Cuba's first city, after Havana, and one of the most populated urban areas on the continent.

An event contributed to the development of the community: the transfer of the high court of justice from Santo Domingo to Puerto Príncipe, whose venue was located on the city's main street as of the year 1800. Its illustrious members developed a very notable social activity until Spanish colonial authorities transferred it to Havana to punish numerous rebel citizens who already publicly raised their voices against the state of affairs.

These characteristics prompted citizens to write documents such as the radical report sent by Ignacio

Zarragoitia to the Royal Consulate in March of 1805, in which he lashed out at the privileges of a few which, in his words, had resulted in the slavery and misery of the rest.

The people of Cuba, he said in his report, “should be a single family, and their assets and evils should be distributed among the members of this single family, without distinction or privileges.” The foiled struggle to achieve that Nuevitas be declared a free port, and other petitions denied by Spanish authorities, distanced the island’s central power structures from Camagüey residents.

In the 1820’s they already talked about releasing the country from Spanish colonial rule. And in 1826 Francisco Agüero, better known as Frasquito, who five years earlier had written a march urging his fellow countrymen to fight, headed the first armed rebellion against the Spaniards on the island and was killed in the heroic gesture. As did Joaquín de Agüero in 1851, the same person who released his slaves and founded schools for the poor in 1843.

Obviously these are not the only examples confirming that culture and social struggles have gone hand in hand since the very beginning of the Cuban nation. Let’s mention the case of the Philharmonic Society, set up in 1842, which soon became a foundry of heroes. The Marquee of Santa Lucía, Salvador Cisneros Betancourt, Ignacio and Eduardo Agramonte and other members nurtured their spirit at the society by cultivating and promoting arts and literature, while passionately conspiring against Spain until 1868, when they took up arms to join the revolution.

The island’s national consciousness was forged, without a doubt, in the 19th century. That century set a milestone in the history of Camagüey with Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros, Getrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Enrique José Varona, Esteban Borrero Echevarría, Aurelia Castillo, Luis Casas Romero and other outstanding writers and artists, many of whom joined the independence cause.

Few of them were able to live beyond the establishment of the 1902 Republic, subjected to the dictates of US imperialism. However and despite the difficulties that that submission imposed, new theater and dance ensembles were set up in Camagüey, fine artists, musicians, radio experts and writers in the 20th century such as Cuba’s National Poet Nicolás Guillén, Mariano Brull, Emilio Ballagas, Felipe Pichardo Moya, Raimundo Lazo, Rolando Escardó and others kept the fire of creation alive and contributed with their work to lay the groundwork for culture to reach the overwhelming majority of the people in a socialist society and to become a collective work that, far from suffocating individual talent, provides a splendid space for creation.

So, Camagüey celebrates its 500th anniversary with the creative spirit that has always characterized its people.

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