

German scientist Alexander von Humboldt's Visit to Cuba



Alexandre von Humboldt

The German scientist Alexander von Humboldt's first visit to the island lasted for three months, from December 19, 1800 to March 15, 1801. In Havana, Humboldt met many eminent politicians, scientists, and scholars; they became friends and crucial to his growing network of collaborators. Before returning to Havana in 1804, Humboldt traveled through South America and New Spain, which included present-day Mexico. Departing New Spain via the port of Veracruz, Humboldt returned to Cuba to retrieve the portion of the botanical collection that he had stored in Havana.

During his second stay in Cuba, March 19 to April 29, 1804, Humboldt completed his data gathering with the help of his network of well-informed friends. He would maintain this network for years to come, drawing from it valuable information up to and during the time when he was revising his *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*.

Humboldt determined the exact geographical positions of Cuba's towns and cities and charted its coastline with unparalleled precision. By updating and correcting earlier maps, he gave Cuba the

shape that it still has on maps today.

Humboldt drew two maps of Cuba. The first is dated 1820; the second is a corrected version from 1826. He printed both in his *Atlas géographique*.

In his *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, Humboldt frequently mentions the *Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País*—literally, Economic Society of the Friends of the Country. He often simply calls it *Patriotic Society*.

This influential Society had been founded in Havana in 1793, when governor Luis de las Casas y Aragonri (1745–1800) approved a petition from twenty-seven prominent Cubans to create an independent body to promote scientific, economic, and cultural endeavors. Foremost among the petitioners was Francisco de Arango y Parreño, who became Humboldt's longtime correspondent.

In 1817, the Society gave Humboldt an honorary membership.

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