

Bridging the Caribbean: Puerto Rican Roots in 19th-Century America

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A group of Puerto Ricans at Newark Airport in 1947, who had just arrived by plane from Puerto Rico, waiting to be transported to New York City. Photograph from Library of Congress

In recent years, the media has tended to describe U.S. Latinos of Hispanic Caribbean ancestry as new immigrants. Someone is Latino if they come from Latin America, while they are Hispanic if they are from a Spanish-speaking country.

Thinking of Latino immigrants as new ignores the long history they have with the United States. The "Memoirs of Bernardo Vega" (1984) shed light on the immigrant experience. The memoirs are about the Puerto Rican and pan-Latino community that thrived in the United States from the 1860s to the 1950s. Pan-Latino refers to all the different cultures that live in the Caribbean and Central and South America.

In his book, Vega describes a defining moment at "El Morito." This was a factory in New York City where he worked during World War I. News came of an upcoming strike in the Puerto Rican sugar industry. This inspired Vega's fellow cigar workers, who wanted to change their harsh working conditions. They discussed ways to support the Puerto Rican workers, and one man named Antonio Vega caught Vega's attention. The man turned out to be his father's long-lost brother. Antonio had arrived in New York at the age of 19 in 1857, and lived there for over 60 years.

Antonio became the face of countless Cubans, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans who immigrated to the United States in the 1800s. They came as artisans, laborers and labor leaders. They came as political exiles, students, merchants and travelers.

But the exchange between the islands of the Caribbean and North America had started much earlier, from the 1400s onward. One example was the founding in 1565, of St. Augustine, a city in Florida founded by Spanish colonizers.

Spain was the main colonial power in the Caribbean, which is why many of its islands now speak Spanish. In the 19th and early-20th centuries, increased trade between Spain's Caribbean colonies and American cities along the coast gave rise to more Spanish-speaking communities in North America. In 1808, *El Misisipi*, published in New Orleans, Louisiana, became the first Spanish-language newspaper to arise from U.S. Latino communities.



Immigrants who came to the U.S. were also involved in its political troubles. One example was the American Civil War in 1861, between southern and northern states. The southern states had formed the Confederacy and fought to keep slavery and gain more independence from the central U.S. government. The northern states were called the Union, and they fought to have a strong central government and to get rid of slavery. One of the people who supported the Confederates was a Cuban woman, Loreta Janeta Velazquez, who disguised herself as a man to join the fight.

Trade and politics had continued to bring a stream of merchants and well-off visitors to the Northeast in the years before the Civil War. A group of prominent Cuban families, the Quesadas, Arangos and Mantillas, made their home near Central Park in New York City. The family of José de Rivera, a wealthy sugar and wine trader, settled in Connecticut.

Between 1868 and 1898, conflicts in Latin America forced people to move to the United States. Cubans expanded their island's cigar industry to Florida and even New York City. This led to the growth of communities that set the stage for more migrations.

Intellectuals and activists living in the U.S. discussed the need for their countries to be independent. Cubans and Puerto Ricans were ruled by the Spanish at the time, and they formed closer bonds during that period. These bonds took a toll during the Spanish-Cuban-American War in 1898. Within a few years, Cuba gained its independence while Puerto Rico went from being a Spanish colony to a U.S. colony. The passage of the Jones Act (1917) made Puertorriqueños American citizens. By 1900, half of the more than 7,500 Latin Americans in New York City came from the Caribbean, mainly Puerto Rico.

Working conditions for immigrants in the U.S. were not great, but members of the Latino community found various ways of increasing solidarity. One practice, called *La Lectura*, involved reading out loud in the factories to make people more aware of workers' struggles. The only woman to read in the cigar factories was union activist Luisa Capetillo. Her work ranks among the earliest feminist writings in modern America.



The Hispanic population of the United States is still growing today. Historians and students of history should remember that the story of Hispanic Caribbeanans in the United States is not new. It begins long before the mid-20th century.

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with Marysa Navarro, and "Teaching U.S. Puerto Rican History" (1999), and co-editor with Vicki Ruiz of "Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography and Community" (2005) and "Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia" (2006).

Quiz

1 Read the following selections from the article.

1. *In his book, Vega describes a defining moment at "El Morito." This was a factory in New York City where he worked during World War I.*
2. *In 1808, El Misisipi, published in New Orleans, Louisiana, became the first Spanish-language newspaper to arise from U.S. Latino communities.*
3. *One practice, called La Lectura, involved reading out loud in the factories to make people more aware of workers' struggles.*
4. *The only woman to read in the cigar factories was union activist Luisa Capetillo. Her work ranks among the earliest feminist writings in modern America.*

Which two selections taken together provide the BEST evidence to support the idea that Caribbean immigrants have a long history in the United States of sharing their ideas through writing?

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 2 and 4

2 Read the section "Wars in the new home, wars in the old home."

Select the paragraph that explains how the legal status of Caribbean immigrants in the United States changed as a result of war.

3 How did Spanish colonization affect the number of Spanish-speaking communities in the United States?

- (A) Spanish colonization of St. Augustine caused many more Spanish-speaking communities to grow in the northern cities of North America.
- (B) Spanish colonization of free Caribbean islands caused many Puerto Ricans to found their own colony at St. Augustine in Florida.
- (C) Spanish colonies formed in the Caribbean attracted many people to leave their Spanish-speaking cities in what would later be the United States.
- (D) Spanish colonies formed in the Caribbean and North America developed Spanish-speaking trade cities that were later part of the United States.

- 4 Why did Bernardo Vega write his book, "Memoirs of Bernardo Vega"?
- (A) to explain his lifelong search for the uncle he had lost as a child
 - (B) to bring attention to an upcoming strike in the sugar industry
 - (C) to describe the experience of a generation of Latino immigrants
 - (D) to outline the jobs that Latino immigrants could get in America