

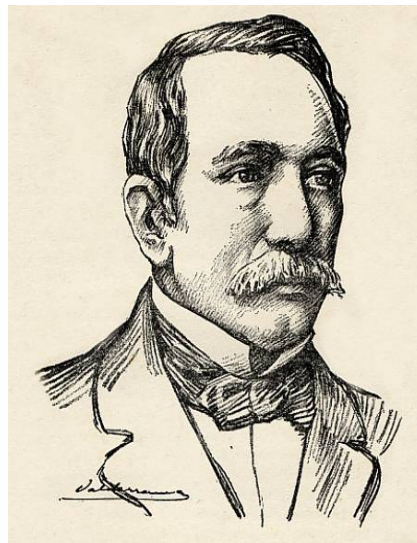


That Cuban Flag... The Original

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Abstract

The Cuban flag had its origin in the United States of America. In New York, the Venezuelan general Narciso López conceived its design; it was then drawn by the Cuban writer Miguel Teurbe Tolón and sewn by his cousin and wife, Emilia Teurbe Tolón (“the Cuban Betsy Ross”), in early June of 1849. Later, another flag, sewn by ladies in New Orleans, became the first hoisted in Cuba, on 19 May 1850, in the city of Cárdenas. The paper traces the history of those first two flags through over a century and a half. Today both historic flags are kept in Havana, Cuba, in the Presidential Palace (today the Museum of the Revolution) and in the Capitol. This essay also includes other relevant facts such as the symbols in this flag and the places where the Cuban flag was first hoisted, on 11 May 1850, simultaneously in the buildings of two newspapers in New York and in New Orleans, announcing to the world the struggle for the Cuban independence.



Narciso López, originator of Cuba's Flag

THAT CUBAN FLAG...THE ORIGINAL



Image taken from Cubarte, website of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Cuba, on 26 April 2010. “Tomb of the seamstress of the Cuban Flag found”, in *Prensa Latina* (Matanzas), News section, at www.cubarte.cult.cu

The history of the Americas has many examples of cultures, especially Cuba’s, that have woven new identities, as with the United States, and continuing in the 19th century and into the 20th. It is no surprise that the Cuban flag was conceived on U.S. soil in 1849 and from there went to Cuba. These pages are dedicated to unraveling those details, and take as their main sources (among others) the first historian of Havana, Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring (1889–1964) and, basically, his *Banderas oficiales y revolucionarias de Cuba* [*Official and Revolutionary Flags of Cuba*] (Colección Histórica Cubana y Americana 7, Municipio de La Habana, 1950, 143 pages), “Homenaje del municipio de La Habana a nuestra enseña nacional en su primer centenario, 1850–19 de Mayo de 1950” [“Tribute from the municipality of Havana to our nation’s flag in its centenary, 1850 to 19 May 1950”]], and his *Cuba y los Estados Unidos de América: Historia documentada de la actitud disímil del Estado y el pueblo norteamericanos en relación con la independencia de Cuba, 1805–1898* [*Cuba and the United States of America: The Documented History of the Dissimilar Attitudes of the North American Government and its People Regarding the Independence of Cuba, 1805–1898*] (“Publicaciones de la Sociedad Cubana de Estudios Históricos e Internacionales”, La Habana, 1949; 279 pages, 21 cm).

Other sources were also very revealing, especially in the *José Martí* National Library and the *Ruben Martínez Villena* Central Library at the University of Havana: Emeterio Santiago Santovenia y Echaide (1899–1968), in his article on *La bandera de Narciso López en el Senado de Cuba* [The Flag of Narciso López in the Senate of Cuba] (Havana, Senate Official Editions,

1945, 47 pages, 18 cm), and above all, Dr. Herminio Portell Vilá (born 1901, Professor of American History at the University of Havana and of Cuban Military History at the War College, considered the definitive biographer of Narciso López, to whom we owe the Cuban flag), with his *Breve biografía de Narciso López* [Brief Biography of Narciso López] (Sociedad Colombista Panamericana, 1950) and *Narciso López y su época* [Narciso López and his Times] (Compañía Editora de Libros y Folletos, Havana, 1952), as well as Ezequiel García-Enseñat's *Estudio de las banderas de Cuba* [Study of the Flags of Cuba].

Although Roig's history goes back to when Spain claimed Cuba under the flag of Castile (allegedly purple but more likely crimson), of particular interest is his inquiry into the flag used when Cuba joined the roll of nations in 1902 after its independence in 1898. That flag had been conceived by Narciso López, a Venezuelan born in Caracas on 29 October 1797: we note that it was created and developed during the era in which Latin American independence flourished, and that among the dreams of López's countryman, the liberator Simón Bolívar, Cuba was never forgotten.

Son of an established merchant and landowner in Valencia and Caracas, and of a lady from an old and distinguished Caracas family, López received in Caracas an education equal to or greater than that of many leaders of the Venezuelan independence, although not as much as that of Bolívar, who had the best private tutors. López studied at the Wantosten Academy of Mathematics, created by the country's supreme governing board. When its students, after Venezuela's declaration of independence of on 5 July 1811, petitioned the military commander of Caracas for military training in service of the country's independence struggle, among the signatories was 13-year-old Narciso López. He was not called, presumably because of his young age (Portell, 1952:4–5).

By the time López was 16, he was trying to join the fight against Spanish colonialism. Despite his abilities, he was not accepted by the liberators (perhaps because of a strongly anti-independence uncle, which led the patriots to distrust him), still he felt the call to fight for Venezuelan independence. According to Portell (1952:5–6), López was among the besiegers ("but as a spectator") when Bolívar besieged Puerto Cabello, in September 1813, and shortly afterwards along with Bolívar, he watched the Spanish reinforcements arrive, and in September he was part of the triumph of General José Félix Ribas at La Guaira ("but without fighting")... without actually joining the independence fighters. He finally acceded to the insistence of his uncle and became a Spanish soldier—the same day that Simón Bolívar was defeated in the disaster of La Puerta, which seemed to be the end of the independence movement, by Boves and his rangers (who, in taking Valencia, killed López's father). López came under the protection of one of the most unscrupulous but brave lieutenants of Boves, who exercised an

unfortunate influence on him. He rose in the Spanish army without wanting to spill the blood of Venezuelans, wearing he would call “that brilliant but ignominious livery”.

In 1819 López was a lieutenant colonel and distinguished himself in the Battle of Carabobo, which led to his promotion to colonel. He was governor of Maracaibo (the last Spanish stronghold) and second in command of the Spanish army when, after the triumph of the Venezuelan Independence in 1823, it evacuated to Santiago de Cuba. At that time Cuba was shaken by the Conspiracy of the Suns and Rays of Bolívar (a Masonic group plotting Cuban independence) and the possible invasion by Paez under orders of the liberator Bolívar, while the annexation movement was beginning in Cuba. Some of his countrymen would later join him in his revolutionary efforts.

López married the sister of a Havana man who would become Count of Pozos Dulces. When he appeared with them in a trial regarding the landholdings of the family in El Vedado, showing contempt of court by refusing to appear in full uniform of a colonel of Hussars of Fernando VII, this attracted the attention of Cubans seeking a gifted and resolute military leader, in spite of his service to Spain and its reprehensible representatives. But in the first months of 1827 he was sent to Spain without a command, the Spanish fearing that he was sympathizing with the Cubans (such as the conspiracy of the Black Eagle), as well as with other officers defeated in America, who were called *Ayacuchos* after the great defeat of Spain in Peru. He did in fact connect with the *Ayacuchos* and Creole residents in Cuba, joining the *Club de La Habana* (Club of Havana).

At the beginning of the Carlist war in Spain, López was recalled to active duty and would save the life of his general Jerónimo Valdes, who assigned him to the international commission to regulate the Carlist War and eliminate the atrocities by both sides, and won the praise of his English colleagues. He was liberal and progressive, and came to be among the most influential reformers, winning high military degrees and defeating Colonel Carlos O’Donnell, earning the undying hatred of his relative, Leopold O’Donnell. When in 1836 the Cuban deputies were expelled from the Spanish Court, he called on all Creole officials to resign *en masse* and promoted protests by the *Club de La Habana*, made personal entreaties to the Spanish legislators, and obtained the support of General Valdes, although in vain. He was associated with in the conspiracy in Spain of the *Triangular Chain and Suns of Freedom* (based in Havana but with branches in Spain) and was betrayed; his ideological evolution toward the revolution is explained by living within the monarchy to its service and meet its ills from within.

In Spain, López (first in Barcelona, then Madrid) contributed significantly to the downfall of the regency of Maria Cristina (1840) and the establishment of the regency of Espartero, which was considered a victory for progress (Portell, 1950). It was López who, as military governor of the

plaza, received Espartero on his arrival at the Court of Madrid, and his liberal friends were placed in positions of power ... until Espartero fell. Meanwhile, he had sent to Cuba for his elderly mother and his niece, Mrs. Rosa Salicrup de Sanchez; another relative of his (Manuel Muñoz de Castro) was the consul of Venezuela in Havana.

Cuba had rebelled against the “scandalous closure of the Courts to the representatives of Cuba and Puerto Rico” and wanted to “free both islands from the clutches of his equally ruthless greedy stepmother” (Roig, 1950) and the United States tried to buy Cuba from Spain. And when the new governor of Cuba, Leopoldo O’Donnell, the mortal enemy of López, arrived in Havana in March 1843, he stripped López of his high office and forced him to leave the military, sowing the seeds of rebellion on already fertile ground. López would be involved in the Conspiracy of *La Mina de la Rosa Cubana* (1847, named after one of the wells of the San Fernanda mining reserve in Manicaragua) in Las Villas.

Three flag designs for Cuba appeared in this era. The first, according to a letter from Cirilo Villaverde to the director of *La Revolución de Cuba* (15 February 1873), used the Republican colors in horizontal stripes: blue, white, and red, in a distant imitation of the flag of Colombia. The second, according to José Sanchez Iznaga on 10 July, had a large star at the hoist from which ran three equal stripes of blue-white-blue; a variant of this flag has a red star at hoist end of the central white stripe, and is shown this way on the shield used on the proclamations of Narciso López in 1850 and described by Dr. Portell in his *Historia de Cuba en sus relaciones con los Estados Unidos y España* [History of Cuba in its Relations with the United States and Spain] (1938). The third, designed by members of the *Club de La Habana* and published by Enrique Gay-Calbó (born in Holguín, 1889) in his *La bandera, el escudo y el himno* [The Flag, the Coat of Arms, and the Anthem] (Havana, 1945), had a blue rectangle at the hoist, with an eight-pointed white star and three wide red stripes separated by two narrow white stripes (according to the design in the files of Dr. Portell).

Meanwhile, López met with the United States consul in Havana, Robert B. Campbell, through whom he learned that in Havana there was another conspiracy—but this one annexationist—headed by landowners and rich Creoles such of those in the *Club de La Habana*. When this plot failed, López managed to escape disguised as a sailor on the *Neptune*, sailing out of Matanzas bound for Newport, Rhode Island, in the United States, while in Cuba, the Spanish government in 1849 sentenced him *in absentia* to death by firing squad. Cuban émigrés had different opinions—some were against annexation, including those who rejected U.S. support, and some were for annexation, both those who preferred the slave-owning South and those who favored the democracy of the North. People in United States also differed in their views and goals in weaning Cuba from Spain—Southerners wanted to turn Cuba into another slave state and were applauded by Cuban slave-owners, while Northerners wanted to annex Cuba and free its slaves,

and introduce other liberties. These same differences, just fifteen years later, would lead to the United States into a civil war to abolish slavery and establish a new order in the northern colossus, which would also defeat the annexation aspirations of the Cuban slaveholders. But in 1850, this future was still unknown.

At that time a traditional and healthy relationship had long existed between the peoples of Cuba and the United States, from the very beginnings of both nationalities. Not surprisingly, among North Americans who have risked their lives for the freedom of Cuba, one of the most important fighters was Henry Reeves, called “the Little Englishman”. In the same way, many Cubans have fought for the just causes of the people of the U.S., among them, the Havana-born José Agustín Quintero y Woodville (1829–1885), who was imprisoned in 1848 (with Villaverde and others) and sentenced to death, but escaped to the United States to fight in the Civil War with the republican North against the slave South, and then to fight with Juárez in Mexico. It is no coincidence that in Portell’s vast work can be found, for example, the biography of Reeves and *Los Cubanos y la Independencia de EUA* [Cubans and the Independence of the United States], (1946). Furthermore, the United States has traditionally long been a refuge for persecuted and disgruntled Cubans, and the influences between the two peoples are many and deeper over time; Cuba’s flag flies atop such influences.

Roig quotes Gerardo Castellanos (p. 139), who analyzed the efforts of López to get all possible support (even that of annexationists) for his campaigns in Cuba; he led U.S. Southerners to believe that Cuba would continue slavery, and at the same time he flattered the Northerners about their freedoms, attracting politicians and businessmen, offering to pay veterans (including Robert E. Lee, who would become the Confederacy’s best-known general, and Jefferson Davis, who would become its president) to participate. For this he would be widely criticized as an annexationist by Cuban independence leaders; Dr. Portell counters this by pointing to the lone star (for full independence) on the flag. However, even in 1888 Manuel de la Cruz (1861–1896), of Havana, accused López of sympathizing with annexation, which led to a famous controversy with Cirilo Villaverde.

Upon arriving in the United States, López joined with others seeking Cuban independence to create the *Junta Promovedora de los Intereses Políticos de Cuba* [Board for the Promotion of the Political Interests of Cuba, or the Cuban Junta of the U.S.], a splinter group opposed to the annexation goals of Cristóbal Madan, and made contact with the plotters of the *Club de La Habana*, which used a very different flag from that which López would design. The propaganda organs of the Cuban Junta of the U.S. were the newspapers *La Verdad* [The Truth] (New York), and *La Patria* [The Nation] and *El Independiente* [The Independent] (New Orleans). They negotiated with politicians and other figures of influence, sought official government support, began recruiting, and set up a camp on Cat Island (in the Gulf of Pascagoula, in the Bahamas).

There they managed in early 1849 to gather some 200 men for an expedition to Cuba. But the sympathy of many sincere North Americans supporting a free Cuba was not matched by the federal government, which had other interests; the expedition to Cuba was denounced by the Spanish governor of the island, the Count of Alcoy, and the government in Washington demanded that López immediately disband the expedition. Similarly, in 1849 the government under President Taylor would demand that he disband his next expedition, organized in Isla Redonda (Round Island).

One of General López's fellow strugglers in exile, the eminent novelist from Pinar del Rio, Cirilo Villaverde (1812–1894), would relate in 1873 on page 3 (backside) of his handwritten notebook *Reseña biográfica del general Narciso López* [Biographical Overview of General Narciso López] (held by Dr. Portell, and reproduced by Gay-Calbó as an appendix to his cited work), that today's Cuban flag was designed by López in 1849, while he lived at the home of Mrs. Clara Lewis, 39 Howard Street, near the corner of Broadway in New York. From that house he frequently visited the home of the patriot from Matanzas, Miguel Teurbe Tolón y de la Guardia (1820–1857), whom López asked to design the national arms for an independent Cuba. Beginning in 1849 proclamations and bonds bear those arms, and they were seen in New York, for example in a tobacconists' shop (Portell, 1952:138). These are Cuba's primary national symbols, whose roots, as is logical and obvious, are inextricably linked. In this revolutionary atmosphere it was no accident that there would even exist a "hymn of the revolution" among the conspirators of Matanzas, and a code with which López would communicate with other revolutionaries underground in Cuba (Portell, 1950:33 and 35)(see Appendices 2 & 3).



Figure 1. 39 Howard Street, near the corner with Broadway, Manhattan (SoHo), New York. The house of Mrs. Clara Lewis, where Narciso López was a guest when in early June, 1849, he conceived the idea of the Cuban flag.

One night, López was there for coffee and he told Teurbe Tolón, “The revolution needs a flag and I did not have time to save the one I had made in Trinidad, which had fallen into Spanish hands ... Here, seeing the flag of the United States, I have thought of some modifications to the original design and today I have been working on a sketch or model ...” (Portell, 1950:21). From this it appears (and it is not disputed by any of the historians consulted) that the flag which would be born that night had an ancestor on Cuban soil (Trinidad) by López himself, and with that background, inspired by the flag of United States, he made “certain modifications” in the arduous process which would lead to what is today our national emblem.

Teurbe Tolón drew López’s idea on paper “with a skillful hand” (Villaverde in Roig, 1950) placing the republican colors in the proper order (beautiful, even though their combination would stretch heraldic rules, as General Pedro Arizmendi would later object), and although “no doubt he had the flag of the United States in mind”, he meant that “... the white of the stripes represents purity or republican virtue, and they divide the field into three blue zones, which represent the three departments into which the island was then divided, the blue revealing the high or heavenly aspirations of the patriots, its favorite sons. The red triangle by its color represents the union of the Cuban people and by its equilateral shape indicates the strength and solidity of their principles. In the center of the triangle is a silver star that illuminates with its light the destiny of the nascent nation under republican colors.”

Cuban nationalism thus used the same colors as the tricolor banners of independence of the 13 Colonies of North America (1776) and the French Revolution (1789), undoubtedly the most progressive milestones of that era. Cuban independence ideals incorporated the liberty sought by the North Americans, and the French extended those to equality and fraternity, and they were hoisted, like a flag of blood and fire, over the ruins of absolutism. By extension, the three colors meant the repudiation of all kinds of exploitation and majority rule by a minority whose power was based on false pedestals of blood, money, or divine influence. The flag proclaimed Cuba as a new society, the antithesis of the old Spanish monarchy. For Cuba the very selection of colors meant a written constitution as the supreme national norm, religious freedom and separation of church and state, and the equality of all human beings without any discrimination, guaranteed, if necessary, against their own rulers.

The five-pointed star symbolized the free, independent, and sovereign state which Cuba should be: rejecting Spanish dominion and all that could entail—annexation, incorporation, dependence, or submission of any kind to any other state, and any foreign or domestic intervention or interference in the national and international issues of the future Cuban republic . . . a lone star to shine always alone, on its own flag, without joining the constellation on the flag of the United States. On the field of blood red, the star illuminated “the laborious and dark path toward freedom and independence of the shackled country” and presided over

the fight to gain independence and to consolidate and grow the republic “without outside assistance, by the efforts of its own sons”.

Since national flags are usually square and rectangular, “... López, as a Freemason, naturally chose the equilateral triangle, a significantly stronger and meaningful geometric figure.” Roig wrote that the Eighth National Congress of History asserted that all these elements, the equilateral triangle, the lone star, and five stripes, show “an obvious Masonic composition”, reflecting the role played by Masonic lodges in the struggle for the Cuban Independence.

Issue no. 62 of the newspaper *La Revolución de Cuba* (New York, 8 February 1873) attributed the Cuban flag to Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros “El Lugareño”, saying “... he had the largest part in the task”. In response, Villaverde affirmed (in a letter dated 12 February 1873 sent from New York to the journal’s editor) that “the creation of our glorious flag was exclusively the work of the illustrious Narciso López”, based on Villaverde’s “reliable eye-witnesses testimony, the execution of the plan conceived by López (...) around an oblong table in the back room on the second floor of a guest house in Warren Street, near the North River, between Church Street and Collene Place, in the first days of June, 1849.”

It is worth mentioning that the same article that Villaverde refuted (published anonymously in *La Revolución de Cuba*) also mentioned Miguel Teurbe Tolón... the correction by Villaverde, published in the same newspaper on 15 February 1873, is accepted as true by García-Enseñat and many others. However, in the 11 June 1898 issue of *El Porvenir* [The Future] (New York), an article (believed to have been written by Enrique Loynaz del Castillo) placed the design of the flag not in New York but in Philadelphia, and insisted that the creators were “El Lugareño” and others, among them Domingo Goicuría, who was in England at the time (Portell, 1952:135).

However, in these documents Roig found a small contradiction by Villaverde: Warren Street versus Murray Street. In the cited notebook, he gives as Teurbe Tolón’s residence—at the time López designed the flag—a house on “Murray St. between Broadway and Church”. He consulted with Dr. Portell, who confirmed that the notes and annotations that appear in this notebook were contemporary to the time that the flag was designed, and that in the same notebook are amendments which offer a third version of that historic event, amendments which Gay-Calbó did not copy in 1945. Portell undertook to clarify this episode in his second volume (then in preparation) of *Narciso López y su época* (Vol. II: 1848–1850, p. 136) He quotes the notebook of Cirilo Villaverde and confirms the address on Murray Street between Broadway and Church, where Miguel Teurbe Tolón lived with his cousin and wife, Emilia. In 1952, in the prologue to that second volume, Portell observed that just as the first volume, of 1930, had been published under the Machadato dictatorship, Cuba was again under another dictatorship, the Batistato.)

Although he does not name the participants in that meeting at Teurbe Tolón's house on Warren Street, Villaverde says that "... nearly all the exiles of the time had gathered there...General López, Betancourt, Aniceto Iznaga, Pedro Agüero, J. M. Macías, Sánchez Iznaga, Manuel Hernández, and others", and as a Freemason López rejected the square and rectangle for the equilateral triangle. Someone (Villaverde thinks it was Hernández) suggested that eye of Providence be placed in the triangle's center, as heraldry might dictate, but López recalled the star on the original flag of Texas, a model for Cuba's lone star, for which Gay-Calbó recognizes a vast tradition in Cuba's patriotic and revolutionary culture, dating back to the 1823 poem *La estrella de Cuba* [The Star of Cuba], by José María Heredia y Heredia (1803–1839) of Santiago de Cuba, who had also suffered exile in the United States ...

and the star of Cuba eclipsed by a century of horror, still abides,

an image repeated in 1825 in the poem *Vuelta al Sur* [Return to the South], in comforting optimism:

When Cuba revives its children, and we see its star shine.

And in 1827, according to Rafael Esténger (1899-1982) of Santiago de Cuba in his *La bandera y nuestros poetas* [The Flag and Our Poets], Heredia himself in his poem *A Bolívar* [To Bolívar] considered "the star simply as an expression of a free state":

Bolivia stands beautiful, and adds a star to the American constellation.

Esténger observes how the star had a different meaning to the poets of the time as relating to the "American constellation", and adds: "Heredia imagined a constellation of independent nations, each represented by its star or each being a metaphorical star (...); while some poets might have interpreted this as representing a stellar addition to the United States, luckily they were not poets of the first line", annexationist poets of whom the "most illustrious" was the Havanan Ramón de Palma y Romay (1812–1860).

That historic night, when Teurbe Tolón drew the flag as López described it, López concluded: "The challenge now is to cut fabric and sew" (Portell, 1950:21). Teurbe Tolón's wife Emilia immediately offered her services. López confessed: "That was my hope when I came this evening, ma'am." She was, according to Santovenia (1950), "enthusiastic and beautiful (...) as patriotic as she was enthusiastic", and according to Portell (1950:22), "a beautiful and enthusiastic Cuban (...) the Cuban Betsy Ross". Hence the first flag made in fabric, as designed by Narciso López and drawn by Miguel Teurbe Tolón, was the work of Emilia Teurbe Tolón as a gift for López, who would later ask Villaverde to preserve that first original flag.



Figure 2. Murray Street between Broadway and Church, Manhattan, New York, where the flag of Cuba was born. This was the home of Miguel and Emilia Teurbe Tolón. Miguel drew the flag as described by Narciso López. It was then sewn by Emilia.

Emilia Teurbe Tolón was born 9 January 1828 in a house in the center of the city of Matanzas, Cuba, and died in Spain in 1902. Her house in Madrid where she spent her final days and her grave in the Madrid cemetery of Our Lady of the Almudena were both recently rediscovered by researcher Clara Enma Chávez with the painstaking support of Ernesto Martínez (a Cuban artist based in Spain) after searching twenty cemeteries and other sites in Madrid. She was the first Cuban woman deported for political reasons, “as an informant of her husband”. When she died she left her property to the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, a Cuban aid group, to underwrite free education in Cuba, a radical idea at that time. In 1950, the centennial year of the Cuban Flag, the Fourth Inter-American Municipal Historical Congress (for which the Cuban Society of Historical and International Studies and the Office of the Historian of Havana convened civic events in all Cuban communities) proclaimed her the “Embodiment of the Cuban Woman”, according to Chávez’s book, *Emilia Teurbe Tolón: Encarnación de la Mujer Cubana* (Cubarte).

However, General López decided to leave New York for two main reasons: because it was too far away for him to mount his expedition—he needed a base of operations closer to Cuba, and because the council of the Cuban Organization and Government in New York had split the Patriots into two groups. López preferred to go to New Orleans, on the Gulf of Mexico, the easier to reach Cuba quickly and where, as in the rest of the United States and despite his lack of fluency in English, his enthusiasm spurred popular support and drew sympathy and

supporters to the cause of Cuban freedom. One particularly enthusiastic supporter was Laurence J. Sigur, editor of *The New Orleans Delta* in New Orleans, who hosted López in his home, introduced him to influential people, put the newspaper at his disposal, gave him everything he had, and served as guarantor for his debts, all the while staying disinterested and without advocating Cuban annexation. It is not surprising that after the failure of the expedition and López's execution, Sigur was ruined.

No wonder either that in this period there were some young ladies of New Orleans ("criollas de Nueva Orleans", Santovenia, 1945:18) who, on seeing the flag design which López had brought, "... made a copy of that model to offer it to the Louisiana regiment of Narciso López, becoming the first Cuban flag to fly in Cuba, in the Plaza de Cardenas." It should be noted that according to Portell Vilá (1952:138) Narciso López carried at least two flags on his revolutionary journey from New Orleans: the Louisiana regiment flag flew on the mast of the *Susan Lind* on the voyage between New Orleans and Isla Mujeres, but the only flag extant was brought by the Kentucky regiment ... with an inscription with which Colonel O'Hara wanted to distinguish it.

It happened that even though the Revolutionary Board and Council had been dissolved, López issued bonds for 40,000 pesos (covered by Cubans and North Americans), which he sold in continuous trips between Washington and New Orleans, passing through Louisville, Natchez, Vicksburg, and Baton Rouge, with stops in Biloxi, Mobile, and Pensacola, and from Key West to Washington, stopping in Jacksonville, Savannah, Charleston, Wilmington, and Richmond, not to mention other support which he continued to receive from his niece from Cienfuegos, Cuba. He enlisted about 600 men of various nationalities (mostly from the U.S. but also British, Germans, Hungarians, and even an Argentine), with high ranks and large salaries; they included very few Cubans (among them Ambrosio José López, Francisco J. de la Cruz, and J. M. Macías). Aboard the steamer *Creole*, the boat *Lincumbily Georgina*, and the brig *Susan Loud*, the expedition left New Orleans bound for the islands of Cuzumel or Mujeres; from there, threatened by water shortages and disease (which led to 42 desertions), it would leave for Cuba on 13 May.

But beginning that Saturday, 11 May 1850, in witness to the expedition, two Cuban flags were hoisted in the United States: one flag was displayed in the New York offices of *The Sun* newspaper (89 Nassau Street, corner of Turton) and the other, a large flag, which flew in New Orleans for two weeks from the third floor of the editorial offices of *The New Orleans Delta* at 112 Poydras Street (Portell, 1952:136; Roig, 1950:95). That same day both newspapers proclaimed the start of the Cuban Revolution, announcing that North Americans, Cubans, and other nationalities had gone to fight for the freedom of Cuba. *The Sun* (which had just revolutionized the newspaper business, was owned by the Beach brothers, and was connected to *La Verdad* and therefore very close to Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros, "El Lugareño", and very

knowledgeable about Cuba) published for the first time the image of the Cuban flag (while describing it as the “cynosure of all eyes”). It began to wave under protest from the Spanish minister in Washington and the Spanish consul in New York.



Figure 3. 89 Nassau Street, in Manhattan, New York—where the newspaper *The Sun* was located and the flag of Cuba was hoisted for the first time, on 11 May 1850, as a show of support for Cuban independence. Number 89 no longer exists and today, where the newspaper’s building once stood, is the Marine Midland Bank, with its main entrance around the corner at 167 Broadway.

Incidentally, the article in *The Sun* (which also described the shield; Portell, 1952:139) said ... “The ideas which the flag covers are broad, as is the glorious cause for which it flies. The star of Cuba—an independent nation—surrounded by a triangle, symbol of strength and representing with its three sides, the executive, legislative, and judicial.”

“These are the shields of the nation: the star in pure white, the triangle of deep red, the five blue and white stripes, the top, bottom, and center blue, the other two white. The blue stripes represent the three departments of Cuba as the country is now divided, namely: Eastern, Central, and West, they have Havana, Santiago, and Puerto Principe as their capitals. Red, white, and blue form the tricolor of freedom.” (Portell, 1952:137 [sic]).

In response, the Spanish newspaper in New York made the published flag the object of scorn through its description as a “kite with ribbons and painted triangle and everything on it” (Portell, 1952:137). At the same time it claimed the triangle meant that things would not come around, that the stripes were the cardinals getting a good spanking, and that the star was something unclean, or money-grubbing.

Upon learning of the expedition, Spain sent the gunboat *Pizarro*, which captured the two sailing vessels (*Lincumbily Georgina* and *Susan Loud*) and arrested the deserters. But on 19 May, the steamer *Creole* entered the Bay of Cardenas, where the expeditionaries landed and took the city for twelve hours, during which the rich silk flag given by the women of New Orleans flew from sunrise to sunset. General López brought with him on the *Creole* a provisional constitution for Cuba, printed as a pamphlet of seven pages which proclaimed the joint struggle of Cubans and North Americans for the freedom of Cuba against Spanish colonialism.

Article 3 of that constitution described this flag for the future Republic: “The Cuban flag consists of the tricolor of freedom arranged as follows: three horizontal blue stripes separated by two of white, with a red equilateral triangle whose base rests on the pole and a white star in the middle of the triangle” (Roig, 1950:94, *sic*).

He also brought two proclamations, as chief of the Cuban forces. One, to the people of Cuba, called on them to rise definitively “that day, as it would be shameful to delay” fighting for the “free and independent country”. The other “To the Spanish Army in Cuba”, invited his “former comrades in arms”, to join him “among the champions of freedom” for “the just cause of a great and generous people” (both transcribed by Juan Arnao in his book *Páginas para la historia de la isla de Cuba*, [Pages on the History of the Island of Cuba] Havana, 1900:103–105).

This flag received its first patriotic-revolutionary consecration when it was raised by its creator, 19 May 1850, on Cuban soil—the city of Cardenas—in military action. That morning (according to Santovenia) Emilia Casanova, the beautiful 18-year-old daughter of a wealthy landowner whose house was adjacent to the local Army Square, heard the shooting and saw the flag waving there.

But in 1850, arriving in Cuba with armed foreign elements was not enough to generate strong support for the movement. When López found that his countrymen did not rise up to support him, and under threat of an attack by numerous Spanish forces, he was forced to withdraw. It was the beginning of a liberation effort with close connections to other Cuban towns such as Trinidad, Camagüey, Havana, and Santiago de Cuba, but in 1850 López could not yet count on a Cuban separatist consciousness. That would come later, in 1868 and especially in 1895 with Martí’s plans (which would also be developed in the United States).

The expeditionaries who fought in Cárdenas saved this flag, and an aide to López in the expedition, Juan Manuel Macías, kept it and someone inscribed in ink: *Kentucky, Primus in Cuba, Mayo 19 de 1850*. And with a rubber-stamped notation *J. M. Macías, mayo 19–1850* (Santovenia, 1945:42, in the deed of gift), it was this flag (“provided by Sánchez Iznaga”, according to Portell) that flew in the ceremony in New Orleans which honored the returning Narciso López and his fighters. That flag would also accompany Macias on his tour of the

Americas; in 1877, Macias himself had the flag cover the coffin containing the remains of Francisco Vicente Aguilera in New York's City Hall. In 1918 Enrique Saladrigas y Lunar, representing Alicia Macías y Brown (the daughter of Juan Manuel Macías), donated the flag to Major General and then-President of the Republic, Mario García Menocal y Deop (according to notes of 14 August 1918, Order No. 157, and 23 May 1928, Order No. 127 to Dr. Alberto Jardines y Navarrete, on file). In 1921 President Menocal presented it to Manuel Sanguily y Garritte—a colonel (major general) of the Liberation Army, eminent writer and illustrious speaker, disciple of Luz y Caballero, journalist, teacher, almost a legend, who had been a senator and president of the senate—according to a letter to Sanguily delivered by Guillermo de Blanck from García Menocal, dated in Havana 4 February 1921.

Meanwhile, on his return, López was indicted by a U.S. federal grand jury and tried in New Orleans, and by proclamation President Fillmore condemned his revolutionary activities undertaken in the U.S. and his expedition to Cardenas. However, López was not convicted, and appeared far from recanting. In fact he continued plotting and his efforts were not as futile as they seemed, as immediately afterwards came Agüero's revolutionary movement and then in 1854 that of Francisco D'Strampes, who would bring another copy of López's flag from the United States, as well as those which had flown before in public offices in Havana. While entering Cuba in 1850 López had not received the local support he had expected and needed, many Cubans later sent him messages of support and encouragement. Then there was the abortive expedition of the *Cleopatra* (led by Anacleto Bermúdez, R. I. Arnao, y Graciliano Montes de Oca)—it was reported to the captain general, Concha, by the Cuban attorney Calixto José Gonzalez. Arnao escaped but Montes de Oca was arrested and garrotted at Havana's esplanade of La Punta. The flag first raised at Cardenas would wave over Camagüey (that of Agüero and later that of Agramonte), Trinidad, and Vuelta Abajo in July and August 1851.

On 3 August 1851 General López, despite his trial, departed for Havana with over 400 men aboard the *Pampero*, again from New Orleans. The next morning, ten miles off of El Morro, they were spotted by the lookout and then pursued by the *Pizarro* and General Manuel Enna, with 750 men and 20 horses. They were able to land at El Morillo, Pinar del Río. López's second-in-command (chief of staff) was the Hungarian brigadier John Pragay, followed by North Americans, British, French, Hungarians, Germans, and 50 Cubans. But in Cuba then, the peasantry and the incipient labor movement, with their Spanish roots so fresh and constantly renewed, were still opposed to independence. Eventually his compatriot José de los Santos Castañeda captured him (an act avenged on 12 October 1854 when the Cuban Nicolás Vignaud Asanza would shoot de los Santos in the head, at the Havana café *Marte y Belona*). López was taken to Guanajay to Mariel Prison and Havana in the steamer *Pizarro*, arriving at dusk on 31 August and immediately entering the chapel. He was executed at 7:00 the next morning, after

having made his final personal arrangements. Vidal Morales, in his *Iniciadores y Primeros Mártires de la Revolución cubana* [Initiators and First Martyrs of the Cuban Revolution] (Havana, 1901, p. 238), refers to his last moments with the verses of a popular lament (which circulated on a broadsheet in the capital, taken from Graciliano Montes de Oca's brother) with his last words: "I have voluntarily surrendered to the Spanish government to save the life of my countrymen", and at the scaffold: "My death will not change the destiny of Cuba."

It is no wonder that while Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, the "Father of the Country", raised another flag of his own design at La Demajagua, then at Yara and Bayamo (1868), the Constitutional Chamber of Guáimaro, in its second public meeting (11 April 1869, almost two decades after the events at Cárdenas), chose "the flag previously raised by López and Agüero". The fifth article of the Constitution of 1940 states: "The flag of the Republic is that of Narciso López" ... absolutely current, 160 years after being raised in Cárdenas.

Meanwhile, Cirilo Villaverde had kept that first flag—the original, which Emilia Teurbe Tolón made for López—in a metal tube which he carried on all his travels. One morning in 1873 his son Narciso opened the tube and saw the flag, which was turning into dust. With the help of his mother he convinced Cirilo to conserve it in a frame, and he inherited the flag upon the death of his father in 1894. So until 1943 the original flag had only two owners: he and his father (Roig, 1950:89). He kept it "in his beautiful residence in the capital" (Portell, 1952). And it seems that in 1943 Narciso Villaverde donated it to the Cuban-American Fund for Aid to the Allies (this was during the Second World War, 1939–1945, with all the fervor of patriotism around the globe focused on the urgent fight against Nazism) chaired by Dr. Cosme de la Torriente. On 9 December the flag was donated to the Republic, headed by General Fulgencio Batista, in what was then the Presidential Palace, and now the Museum of the Revolution in Old Havana, where the flag is preserved today.

According journalist Antonio Prisco Porto, writing Havana's *El Mundo* [The World] on 20 May 1942 (celebrating the 40th anniversary of the birth of the Republic, when the flag was first raised, at El Morro castle in Havana), Narciso Villaverde had told him the flag was the one Emilia made, "... working at home with ribbons of silk, some white and others blue, and a piece of red cloth... in total—a half-hour of work...She gave it to General López, and he gave it to my father, his secretary, for safekeeping."

The other flag, the one which flew in Cardenas in 1850 and at the ceremony in New Orleans honoring the returnees, also resurfaced soon after. The Cuban Senate met in formal session on 14 December 1944 to receive with appropriate ceremony the donation of "a silk flag, two meters long by one wide, with three blue stripes and two white, with a red equilateral triangle, quite faded, whose central figure is a white star of five points ..." It had been donated by Dr.

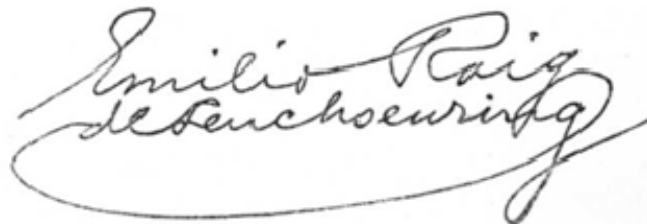
Manuel Sanguily y Arizti, in memory of his father, Manuel Sanguily y Garritte, with the express consent of the other heirs (his mother, Felicia Arizti y Sobrino, the widow of Manuel Sanguily y Garritte and his sister, Fernanda Sanguily y Arizti, as they had zealously guarded the flag as their exclusive property), according to Santovenia (Senator from Pinar del Río). Santovenia's article refers to the speech of Eduardo Suarez Rivas (President of the Senate in extraordinary session when the flag was unveiled in the Senate Chamber) and to the deed of gift from Sanguily y Arizti to the Senate, which promised to conserve it adequately (otherwise the gift could be revoked); it has been preserved in the nation's Capitol.

Cuba's national hero, Havana's José Julián Martí y Pérez (1853–1895), had published in his newspaper *Patria* on 14 July 1894, "D ... R ... says that Narciso López explained the Cuban flag in this way: 'From the triangle of red, strength and blood, will come the radiant star: the three blue stripes are the three departments'" (In Martí, José, *Obras Completas* [Complete Works], Editorial Lex, Havana, Cuba, 1946, Volume II, p. 1774). Martí (who by quirk of fate would fall in battle on 19 May 1895, the 45th anniversary of the flag first flying in Cardenas) had founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party to fight for the independence of Cuba and to encourage and support the independence of Puerto Rico, whose flag, not coincidentally, reflects the historical and cultural links between the two peoples. "From one bird, two wings", as the Puerto Rican poet Lolita Rodríguez de Tió, who died in Havana, wrote. (The comparison of the Cuban and Puerto Rican flags requires another paper.)

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the current national flag had come to represent the goals of emancipation, and the creative soul of the Cuban people watched in eager anticipation for it to fly for the first time as a symbol of the birth of a republic outside of Spanish colonialism. Before it finally flew on 20 May 1902, a popular song in the Cuban streets added to the rich culture surrounding the Cuban flag ...

Lone little star
Of my Cuban flag
When will I see you shine
Over the Morro Castle of Havana!

These verses are also listed in the document cited and signed by Roig, 29 December 1949 ...

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Emilio Roig de Bencheur". The signature is written in dark ink on a light background.

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APPENDIX 1:

Example of the code with which Narciso López communicated with underground revolutionaries in Cuba.

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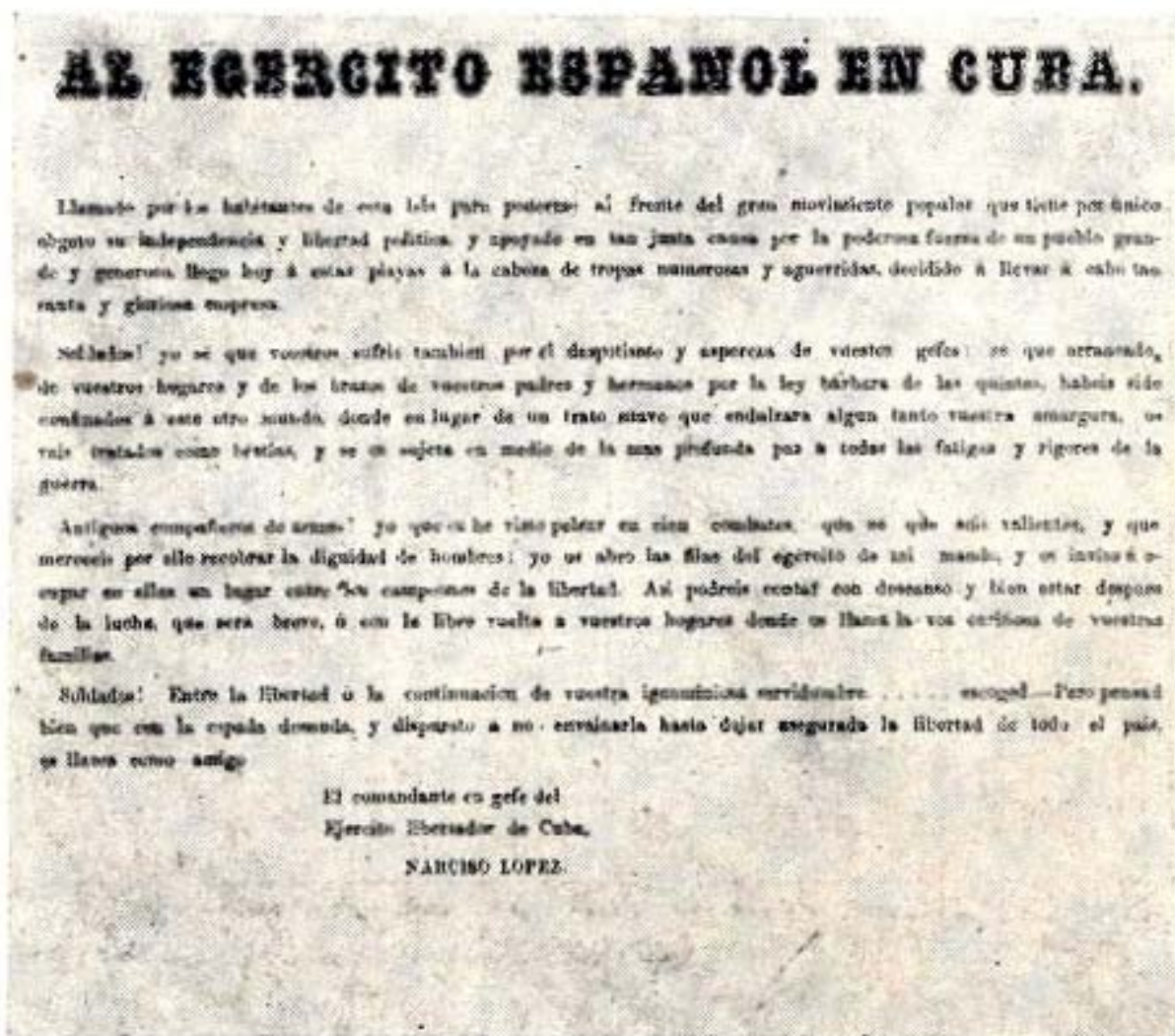
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S A H O X S O & O P J S 2

APPENDIX 2:

Narciso López's proclamation to the Spanish soldiers in Cuba.

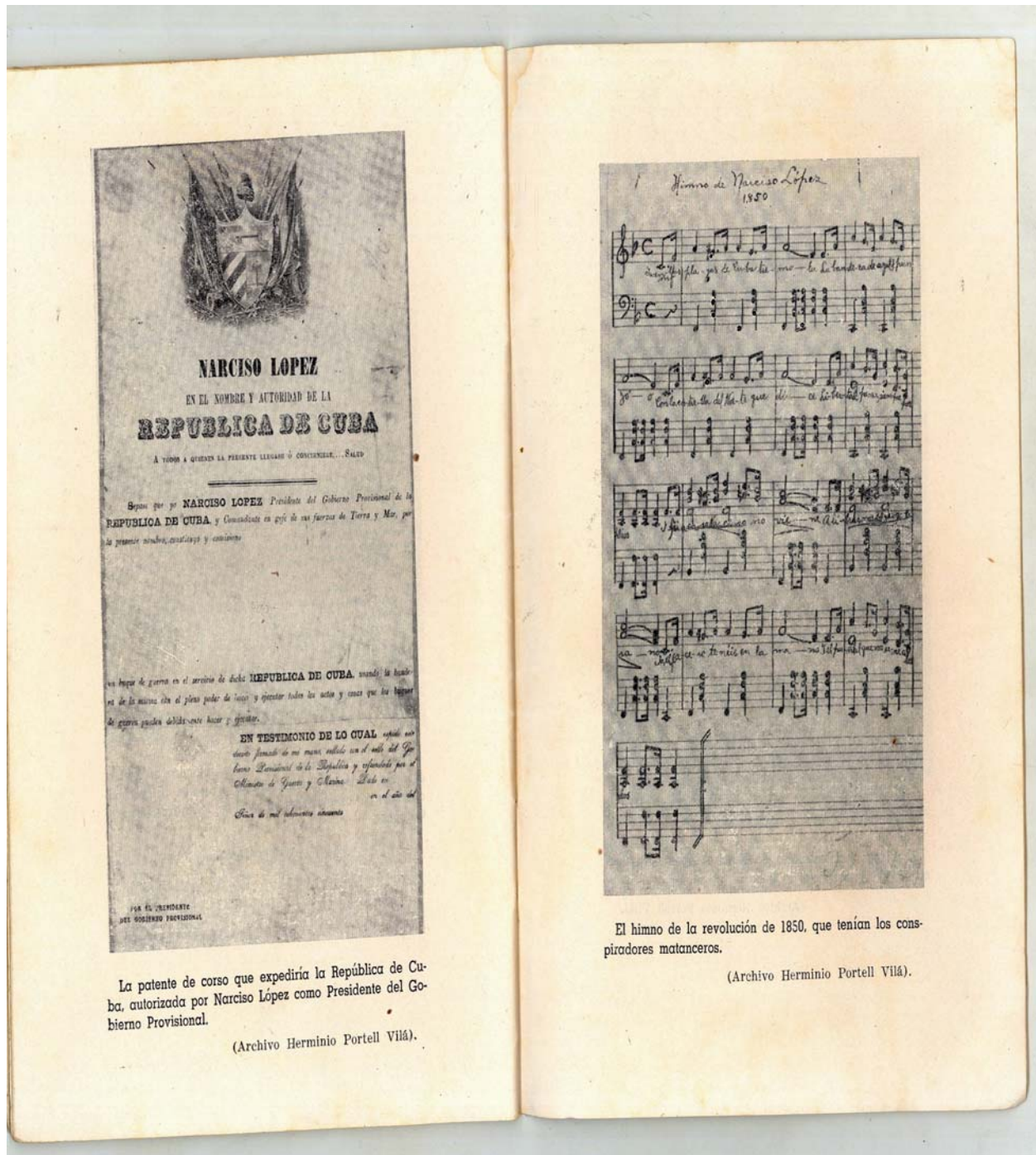


Proclama de Narciso López a los soldados españoles, enviada desde los Estados Unidos y distribuída subrepticamente en los cuarteles, en los días de la expedición de Cárdenas.

(Archivo Herminio Portell Vilá).

APPENDIX 3:

The letter of marque issued by Narciso López and the hymn of the revolution of 1850.



La patente de corso que expediría la República de Cuba, autorizada por Narciso López como Presidente del Gobierno Provisional.

(Archivo Herminio Portell Vilá).

El himno de la revolución de 1850, que tenían los conspiradores matanceros.

(Archivo Herminio Portell Vilá).

About the Author

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Dr. Avelino Couceiro majored in History and Art History at the University of Havana. He also holds a doctorate in Sciences in Art (Environmentalist Cultural Studies) from the Instituto Superior de Arte. Dr. Couceiro is considered the founding father of Urban Anthropology in Cuba and has been recognized with several awards and decorations throughout his prolific career, with more than ten published books and hundreds of articles in magazines, newsletters, and bulletins around the world. For over two decades Dr. Couceiro has been studying communities in his home country, where he holds the highest researcher status. He is currently president of the Scientific Board of Havana's Office of Cultural Affairs and a professor at the University of Havana. In 1989 Dr. Couceiro founded the Cultural Studies Forum, an event that now gathers hundreds of participants each year. In 2007 the forum honored the 50th anniversary of World Vexillology—the only event in Cuba to do so—adjacent to Revolution Square. Organized by Dr. Couceiro (below), it started with a parade of flags and conference led by Maikel Arista-Salado y Hernández.

