

## **An Overview of Freemasonry in the Spanish Antilles**

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The Spanish Antilles Masonic tradition differs from the American one in several ways. First, said Freemasonry developed as an important social and educational institution. For, the *Autochthonous Freemasonry* was composed of Creole<sup>1</sup> membership, and *provided the vehicle* that allowed Cuban and Puerto Rican intellectuals and politicians to gather, interact, develop the speaking skills and new ideas, and thus help to improve the governments of their islands.

Freemasonry in the Spanish Antilles started in the 1790s, as a consequence of the Haitian Slave Revolt. Thousands of white French settlers escaped to neighboring Cuba, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic, taking with them their Lodges and Freemasonry knowledge. At the time, Freemasonry was outlawed in Spain and its colonies, so this was their first exposure to The Craft. The new Lodges worked in French and only some rich aristocrats were admitted to them, as the Spanish Antilles socioeconomic development, at the time, was very incipient.

Previously, Spain had invested in its rich Mexican and South American colonies, spending very little time or capital in the Spanish Antilles. Only after Spain lost all its continental colonies, it started dedicating serious time and money to the socioeconomic development of these islands.

In 1808 France invaded Spain, and many French left, or were expelled from its domains. The Lodges they created, which had few Cuban members, closed their doors. Afterwards, there were two Liberal revolutions in Spain (1812 and 1820) that allowed Freemasonry to bloom in the Antilles, now with more Creole members, mostly of the Cuban and Puerto Rican aristocracy. Spain's Conservative King was restored; thence after 1830 Freemasonry was outlawed again.

In 1859 some Liberalization took place in Spain, and a group of Cuban Freemasons, remnant of the original Lodges, approached the Grand Lodge of North Carolina and, through Bro. Albert Pike obtained a charter to organize a Grand Lodge. Pike arranged for Bro. Andres Cassard, a Cuban Mason exiled in the United States, to travel to Santiago de Cuba, and organize the Grand Lodge, and the Supreme Council of Colon. The Supreme Council followed European traditions, thence controlled the Grand Lodge. There was a constant struggle between Grand Lodge and the Supreme Council, trying to impose its authority. Bro. Pike then sent another Cuban, Bro. Vicente A. DeCastro who, instead of fixing these problems, created another, competing obedience, GOCA, *Gran Oriente de Cuba y las Antillas*, in 1862.

In 1868 the War of Independence, in large measure organized in Cuban Lodges, started, and Freemasonry was again under assault. Grand Master Puente Badell, of Grand Lodge of Colon, and several of his Grand Line officers, were murdered in 1870. Most Cuban Lodges then went dark or disbanded. Small Masonic activity was developed until the end of this war, in 1878.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the word *Creoles* for those individuals born and raised in the Spanish Antilles, independent of their race.

Cuba's first War of Independence ended with a Peace Treaty. Shortly after that, all Cuban Grand Lodges merged under Grand Master Antonio Govin thanks to the efficient work of Grand Secretary Aurelio Almeida. Govin was also the President of the Liberal Autonomic Party. Their key philosophy was that *Freemasonry would strive to obtain, by evolution, what had not been achieved by war*. The Autonomist Party leadership included many prominent members of the Grand Lodge (now renamed of Cuba), and many Cuban intellectuals were Freemasons.

In the Dominican Republic, things occurred differently. First, Lodges stemmed from French emigres from Haiti, and French soldiers sent to subdue the slave revolt. These founded Lodges and made new Creole masons. But, after the French left, in 1809, said Lodges also folded.

After a short span of Independence, Dominican Republic was invaded by the Haitians, who occupied it from 1822 until 1844. Freemasonry then came via Haiti, who had a Grand Lodge, and whose President (Boyer), and many important generals were Freemasons. After a brief war, Dominicans separated; Haitians left, and most Lodges again folded. In 1859 remnant of earlier Masons were reorganized by Grand Master Tomas Bobadilla, who founded a new Grand Lodge.

But in 1861, Dominican Republic was annexed to Spain, and Lodges were again suppressed. Dominicans fought the War of Restauration, won, and again became an independent nation. The Craft had sided with the republic, and thus became legal again. After the war, many if not most Dominican Presidents, generals, and eminent intellectuals were Freemasons.

Puerto Rico's Freemasonry came from Cuba. The Grand Lodge of Colon's Charter gave it authority over Puerto Rico. Cuban Grand Master Antonio Govin and Grand Secretary Aurelio Almeida gave Bro. Santiago Palmer, the father of Puertorrican Freemasonry, authorization to create new Lodges. In 1880, a Provincial Grand Lodge was formed. In 1885, said Provincial Grand Lodge became independent on its own. And as had occurred in Cuba before, Puerto Rican Masons also created and operated an Autonomist Party, seeking more political and economic freedom for their island. However, responsibility for Spain losing these two islands was not due to disloyal Cuban and Puertorrican Creoles, to Freemasonry, or to American Imperialism, as some have claimed. It was due to the XIX Century disastrous Spanish colonial policy.

Until late 1800s, neither Cuba nor Puerto Rico had political parties, clubs, unions, or civic organizations. For, most of these institutions were forbidden by the colonial authorities, or had not yet been created. There were few schools, especially mid-level education, and one university in Havana. *Freemasons grew intellectually by participating in the Lodges and literary societies. Freemasonry became, for most masons, their school, as well as the vehicle through which they prepared themselves to become future leaders, able to undertake their patriotic endeavors.*

*The fundamental contribution of Freemasonry to Cuba and Puerto Rico nation-building, was through three key functions: the connective, the disseminating and the incubating functions. Masons honed their speaking and organizing skills, learned new topics, and spread them.*

*Autochthonous Freemasonry functioned as a true school of political and socio-economic leaders, especially for Brethren lacking the opportunity to obtain a formal higher education. This was, without doubt, the greatest contribution of Freemasonry in the Spanish Antilles.*

We now quickly overview the XX Century Freemasonry in Cuba and Puerto Rico.

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Cuba became independent in 1902. After Independence, Freemasonry developed very fast throughout the island. Most every town had its own Lodge building and the big cities had more than one. Havana's metropolitan area included 25% of the country's population, and about 1/3 of all Cuban Lodges, plus the Appended Bodies and the Grand Lodge. Cuba had three presidents who were Masons. Many social, political and economic public figures, such as cabinet ministers, university deans, newspaper editors, business executives etc. joined; and several became Grand Masters. The first 40 years after its independence was Cuba's Masonic golden age.

In small towns, leading local figures such as doctors, judges, pharmacists, schoolteachers, chiefs of police, mayors, political boss, and the priest, usually became members. Many local and national issues were informally considered in the Lodge rooms and in Grand Lodge meetings.

In Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, a similar situation occurred. Several Dominican presidents, and the heads of Puerto Rico's pro-statehood and pro-independence parties, were also Freemasons. Many educational and social organizations were created by the Craft.

After 1940 the economic situation improved, and Freemasonry spread much faster, doubling in members and Lodges. New Lodge buildings had now two-stories: the first floor was rented out for income, and the Lodge used the second one. In Havana, a Grand Lodge skyscraper was built, using three floors for Lodges and the Masonic University, and renting the rest. Ever more social, political and economic public figures joined, enhancing Freemasonry public standing.

Cuba's political corruption and mismanagement fostered the 1959 revolution that overthrew Batista's government. Castro then took over all private enterprise, education system, and media, and banned all political parties. Citizens were required to fill long forms, where their religious and fraternal activities, past work history, family abroad or jailed, etc. was reported. Citizens present and future work and study opportunities were often based on such information. Those individuals classified as "non-government supporters", were not offered opportunities..

In Cuba, Freemasonry was never directly banned, as occurred in Russia, Germany or Spain. The Craft had a long and distinguished history forging the Cuban nation. Masons were severely affected by government measures. Masonic Lodges were required to submit to the Ministry of Interior, within 72 hours after each session, a report detailing who was present, what matters were discussed, etc. Hence, many younger and still economically active Brethren ended (or decreased) attendance, due to said government measures. These measures effectively choked Cuban Freemasonry and its membership fell to less than half of its 1958 total.

Such situation lasted until mid-1980s, when Cuban government allowed religious believers and Masons to join official institutions, and pressure on membership and attendance eased up. Membership grew again and the Grand Master travelled abroad to visit other Grand Lodges, including those of New York and Puerto Rico. And some American Grand Masters, such as New York's, visited the Grand Lodge of Cuba.

The Cuban Grand Lodge is again having problems with the government. In the recent past, the Grand Master and the Scottish Rite Commander have issued written protests regarding the severity used by government forces, to suppress popular dissent in the island.

A longer, more complete paper on this topic will be published by HEREDOM, this Fall.