

Tampa's Splendid Little War: Local History and the Cuban War of Independence

On the morning of 9 February 1898, subscribers to the *Tampa Morning Tribune* read: "The battleship *Maine* will be relieved from her station in the course of a few days." The account ended on an eerie note, pointing out that "the ship's crew must feel uncomfortable lying close in the harbor of Havana." Six days later, news of the *Maine*'s explosion rocked Florida and accelerated America's path to war.

The shockwaves cascading from the *Maine* tragedy interested all Americans; however, for the fifteen thousand residents of Tampa, Florida, the events preceding and succeeding 15 February 1898 resonated with special meaning. Dramatically, the Spanish-American War brought not only patriotic outpourings, but also an arriving and occupying army and navy. The Spanish-American War seemed to mirror the recently introduced "news reel": in quick fashion, treacherous Spaniards blew up the *Maine*, Admiral George Dewey triumphed at Manila Bay, and the Rough Riders and foot soldiers registered a series of rapid victories. The war brought a quick resolution (even if the peace did not). For Tampans—and especially *Tampeños*—the Spanish-American War represented both a continuum and a break from the complex and often intense events of the Cuban War of Independence (1895-1898).

Tampa provides an ideal setting for students to study the intersection of local, national, and international history. An extraordinary array of primary materials invites study: newspapers, government reports, photographs, movies, autobiographies, and memoirs.

The Setting

Tampa's modern history dates to 1824 with the founding of Fort Brooke. A military cantonment located on the Hillsborough River, Fort Brooke kept a check on the displaced Seminole Indians. When the Second Seminole War (1835-42) erupted, Fort Brooke emerged as the frontier hub of a far-flung and costly military operation.

Cuba played an especially important role in the development of nineteenth-century Tampa. In 1859, Captain James McKay inaugurated a highly profitable cattle trade with Cuba. Cattle—descendants of the original Spanish cows imported from Spain and Cuba—roamed the Florida interior. Florida cowboys rounded up the open range cattle, branded them, and drove them to Tampa or Punta Rassa. Barges transported the stock to Cuba, earning the adventurers huge profits.

The decade of the 1880s dramatically altered Tampa's future. In 1880, census takers counted only 720 residents. Yellow fever and isolation seemed to doom Tampa. However, the coming of the railroad in 1884 integrated Tampa into a modern transportation and communications system.

Henry Bradley Plant invested heavily in the future of Tampa. The robber baron built Port Tampa and also established steamboat routes to Cuba. To embellish his rail empire, Plant built lavish hotels, most notably the Tampa Bay Hotel.

In 1886, Spanish-born entrepreneur Vicente Martínez Ybor chose Tampa as the site of a cigar manufacturing center. Persuading Cuban and New York manufacturers to follow him, Martínez Ybor founded Ybor City, which became a part of Tampa and a center for the production of hand-rolled cigars. Thousands of Cuban and Spanish immigrants followed, creating a vibrant Spanish-language culture. Black and white Cubans lived side by side in a remarkably tolerant enclave. In the 1890s, several thousand Sicilian immigrants also carved a niche in Ybor City. The Italians quickly learned Spanish and helped build a "Latin" culture.

Ybor City earned a richly deserved reputation for labor unrest and revolutionary politics. Spaniards, Cubans, and Sicilians each brought to Florida a heightened sense of class consciousness. Such solidarity fostered a virulent nativism from Tampa's "Anglo" business community.

Increasingly in the 1890s one cause dominated political debate in Ybor City: *Cuba Libre* (Free Cuba)—Cuba's independence from Spain. Immigrants established an intricate institutional network to

foster Cuban independence. Newspapers, schools, debating clubs, and patriotic organizations embraced *Cuba Libre*. Trade union activity largely ceased in deference to the cause.

No institution symbolized the intellectual fervor of the cigar makers and catalyzed the workforce more than *el Lector* (the reader). *Lectores* read the novels of Zola, Hugo, and Cervantes, as well as items from the radical and labor press. A revered figure, the reader served notice to owners as to who controlled the workplace. Cigar workers, *not* owners, decided how readers would be chosen, what selections would be read, and how much the reader would be paid. The workers jealously guarded customs such as the reading.

Readers served as a lightning rod for the labor movement and figured prominently in agitation for *Cuba Libre*. *Lectores*, such as José Dolores Poyo, Ramón Rivero y Rivero, and Nestor Carbonell, also edited newspapers (*Cuba*, *La Revista de Tampa*, and *La Patria*) and organized associations (Los Independientes and the Club Ignacio Agramonte). In 1891, the Club Ignacio Agramonte invited exiled leader José Martí to Tampa to raise funds for the struggle.

José Martí occupies a near-mythological status in Tampa history. No less than a half-dozen statues and busts honor him, despite the fact he spent only a few weeks of his brief life in Ybor City. Called “the Apostle of Cuban liberty,” Martí emerged in the early 1890s as the one person to unify the disparate elements struggling with the issues of economic oppression, racial injustice, and Spanish colonialism. Martí electrified *Tampeños* during his 1891 visit, helping organize the Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC) in 1892. Cigar makers financed the movement. Over forty patriotic clubs formed in Tampa.

The revolutionary *junta* selected 24 February 1895 as the beginning of the insurrection. The incendiary orders were

written in Tampa, rolled into a cigar, and smuggled into Cuba. “The news of the breakout of the revolution in Cuba,” announced the *Tampa Tribune*, “has kindled the sacred flames of patriotism of every Cuban altar in the city.” Huge crowds gathered in front of cigar factories to hear news of the revolution; inside factories, workers listened to readers’ accounts of the battle fronts. Not without reason did Spanish General Martínez Campos curse Tampa as “the very heart of the American conspiracy.”

Women played an active role in promoting and sustaining the cause of *Cuba Libre*. One such leader was Paulina Pedroso, an African Cuban who had moved from Cuba to Key West to Tampa. When Martí visited Tampa, he made a point of staying at the home of Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso. Women such as Pedroso organized fiestas, parades, and raffles to raise funds and consciousness. Others organized revolutionary clubs, such as the Discipulas de Martí and Obreras de la Independencia. Still others, such as Pennsylvania Herrera and María Luisa Sánchez, became renowned for their oratory on behalf of the movement.



The Fourth Illinois Volunteers, Company G, surrounding an alligator shot by the company commander. (Courtesy of the Ensminger Brothers Collection, The University of South Florida, Tampa.)

Tampa, 1898

In January 1898, patrons in Tampa cafés predicted imminence for Cubans fighting for their independence from Spain. The sinking of the *Maine* dramatically shifted the terms: the Cuban War of Independence effortlessly became the Spanish-American War. On 19 April 1898, President McKinley asked Congress for a declaration of war. The War Department announced that Tampa would serve as the port of embarkation for the army of invasion.

Tampans and *Tampeños* contemplated the meaning of 1898. Merchants and urban boosters expressed giddiness in expectation of profits and publicity. "Business here is on the rush," a merchant gushed. "Every man and boy that can muster sufficient capital to purchase a dozen lemons and a pound of sugar, establishes a lemonade stand." Cubans' sentiments ranged from patriotic flag waving to a sobering realization that one empire was about to replace another. Spaniards lamented the inevitable defeat, but also feared that they might become the targets of a new nativism. A city of fifteen thousand prepared for an invasion of sixty-six thousand soldiers on their way to Cuba.

A galaxy of celebrity journalists and illustrators arrived in Tampa, many of them veterans of the earlier Cuban campaign. Frederic Remington, Richard Harding Davis, George Kennan, Poultny Bigelow, and Howard Chandler Christy described and sketched the action in Florida for magazines, such as *Leslie's Weekly*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Outlook*, and *McClure's*.

Journalists dubbed the period from April to June of 1898, the "rocking-chair period of the war." Reporters from the more affluent papers stayed with military officers at Plant's palatial Tampa Bay Hotel. The military issued at least 128 press passes. Journalists from Toronto, London, and Manchester joined American reporters.

The Fourth Estate gave high marks to the sumptuous accommodations at the Tampa Bay Hotel, but generally lampooned Tampa as a southern wasteland. "Only God knows why Plant built a hotel here," noted one observer, "but thank God he did." Richard Harding Davis, he of the pith helmet, found Tampa a "city chiefly composed of derelict wooden houses drifting on an ocean of sand. . . . The hotel. . . was like a Turkish harem with the occupants left out." George Kennan, writing for *Outlook*, profiled: "It [Tampa] is a huddled collection of generally insignificant buildings in an arid desert of sand." A *New York Tribune* reporter noted, "Tampa combines in a curious way a certain Southern shiftlessness with the bustle and enterprise of a Western boom town."

In their wanderings around Tampa, reporters discovered one neighborhood which both fascinated and repelled them. Ybor City exuded tropical charm and exotic pleasures, but writers preferred the immigrant setting to the immigrants themselves. Intrigued by the cafés and cigar factories, journalists were frequently appalled at the immigrant lifestyles. "These Cubans have the financial recklessness of their Key West brethren," observed the *New York Tribune*. In a cigar factory, the reporter noted, "the young white women are often of great attractiveness; the older ones are nearly all hags." Others scolded Cubans for having donated so generously to the cause of *Cuba Libre*. Most journalists, however, made no connection between those

sacrifices and the war they were covering.

The troops also found Ybor City enticing. "Some of the regular soldiers are giving the people of Ybor City considerable trouble," reported the *Tampa Tribune*. "They demolish saloons, theaters and restaurants and other places of amusement with avidity and as regular as the click of a Waterbury watch."

Journalists and soldiers, often unable to distinguish between Cubans and Spaniards, distrusted the Ybor City inhabitants. "Dark scowls lurk upon the faces of American men as Spanish is heard spoken . . . whether by Cuban or Spanish refugee, the language is hated," noted A. Rouse of the *New York Times*. Fears that Ybor City's Spanish residents might act as a fifth column aroused suspicion. Interviewed during the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s, Bautista Balbontin, a Spanish immigrant, reminisced, "One day a picket of soldiers under a superior occupied the Centro Español [Spanish Club] building ..." General Shafter ordered agents to read the mail of suspected Spaniards. Hundreds of Spanish immigrants fled Tampa.

The Army of Invasion

Led by Major-General William Rufus Shafter, a gouty veteran of the Civil War, the first regiments arrived in early May 1898. Shafter's staff included "Fighting Joe" Wheeler, who had bedeviled Sherman's supply lines in 1864. Wheeler symbolized the war's healing powers; leaders from the North and South posed together and rallied around the U.S. flag. Still, memories of Shiloh and Chickamauga haunted veterans. Leading a troop charge in Cuba, Wheeler shouted, "Come on, boys, we got them damn Yankees on the run."

Soldiers suffered during Tampa's sultry spring and summer of 1898. "With the thermometer 98 degrees in the shade," remarked Poultny Bigelow in *Harper's Weekly*, "the U.S. troops sweat night and day in their cowboy boots, thick flannel shirts and winter trousers."

Troops also faced other dangers in Tampa. General O. O. Howard, the one-armed Civil War veteran and namesake of Howard University, attempted to minister to the soldiers' religious needs. "It would be difficult to describe the temptations to which the men are exposed," he wrote. "The gamblers congregate from everywhere, and low characters for gain bring disease and corruption into the camp." Private Charles Post reminisced how soldiers congregated at local confectionaries, ordering General Robert E. Lee Milk Shakes and General Grant Ice Cream Sodas. The drinks, of course, consisted of bad whiskey.

Veterans of the crusade described in vivid detail the chaos and excitement of Tampa. An extraordinary number of autobiographies and memoirs appeared in the decade following the war. One of the best was Captain M. B. Stewart's account, *The N'th Foot in War* (1906). "We talked of Tampa and dreamed of Tampa—not that we cared a snap of our fingers about that dirty little town, except that it was the jumping-off place for Cuba." Exhilarated by the prospects of glory and public patriotism, Stewart lamented, "It remained for Tampa to disillusion us on that score. Their patriotic endeavors were limited to a partially successful effort to relieve us of as much pay as



The Tampa Bay Hotel. (Courtesy of the Burgert Brothers Photographic Archives, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library.)

was consistent within the pale of the law. . . . Pie factories and beer saloons multiplied and increased.”

No individual or group captivated the press and public more than Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders. The genesis of the Rough Riders speaks volumes as to the nature of war and the preparedness of U.S. forces in 1898. The Volunteer Bill passed by Congress in April called for 125,000 volunteers. President McKinley added an extraordinary provision, allowing for three regiments “to be composed exclusively of frontiersmen.” The Secretary of War offered the command of the horsemen to Assistant Secretary of the Navy

Theodore Roosevelt, who deferred leadership to Leonard Wood. The press identified the regiments as “Teddy’s Texas Tarantulas,” “Teddy’s Gilded Gang,” and “Teddy’s Terrors,” before finally deciding upon “Rough Riders.”

The composition of the Rough Riders reinforced the Gilded Age’s love affair with rugged individualism and the pursuit of the strenuous life. The ranks included a Harvard quarterback, several authentic cowboys, a son of a Pawnee chief, and two English blue-bloods.

Boredom, anger, and pandemonium characterized the Rough Riders’ seven days in Tampa. Members shot up saloons, raided bordellos, and wrote letters of protest to bureaucrats. The press adored the Rough Riders and joked about boys sowing wild oats before Cuba. African American soldiers, however, blurred the color line and threatened *esprit de corps*.

Race Riot

The presence of African Americans in uniform strained the tense urban milieu in Tampa. Over four thousand black soldiers accompanied the army of invasion which concentrated around Tampa. Almost immediately upon their arrival, Tampanians began complaining of “black ruffians in uniform.” On 12 May 1898, the *Tampa Morning Tribune* pleaded, “It is indeed very humiliating to the American citizens and especially to the people of Tampa . . . to be compelled to submit to the insults and mendacity perpetrated by the colored troops that are now camped in this city.”

Two salient beliefs collided in Tampa in 1898. First was the principle that marginal groups could legitimize their status and win social acceptance by military sacrifice. However, African Americans in uniform challenged the powerful belief in white supremacy. “Negro soldiers,” taunted the *Tampa Tribune*, “find that the people of Tampa will not make any exceptions on account of the Negroes being dressed in the uniforms of the U.S. Army.” One of these, Private Charles Post, overheard a local sheriff, upon meeting a “niggra cop” in uniform, remark, “It ain’t natural.”

The situation exploded in June 1898. Letters from black soldiers to African American newspapers reveal the depths of frustration and the humiliating treatment by soldiers and town folk. One black

“We talked of Tampa and dreamed of Tampa—not that we cared a snap of our fingers about that dirty little town, except that it was the jumping-off place for Cuba.”

soldier wrote to a friend, “Our fellows think it is h--- to have a fight in defense of people who are so prejudiced. They are determined to make these crackers ‘walk Spanish’ while here or be treated as men.”

The racial clash that came to be known as the Tampa riot occurred on the eve of the army’s embarkation for Cuba. White volunteers from Ohio snatched a two-year old black child from his mother. The soldiers used the young child for target practice. When African American troops heard of the incident, they flew into a rage. The soldiers sought out saloons and establishments which refused to serve them, demolishing considerable property in the process. Tampa’s police force—which numbered only five officers—asked for help. Troops of the Second Georgia Volunteer Infantry put down the riot with draconian ruthlessness. Scores of white and black soldiers required hospitalization.

The Tampa riot received widespread coverage by the press. The *Atlanta Constitution* suggested that the disturbance proved that “army discipline has no effect on the Negro.” African Americans, while disillusioned by events, resolved to press for their rights as citizen soldiers.

Epilogue

Racial violence engendered bitter feelings among black and white soldiers and civilians. Microbes and pathogens however, no respecters of race or region, indiscriminately killed scores of soldiers in Tampa. The U.S. Surgeon General reported that during the period from 1 May 1898 to 30 April 1899, 5,438 deaths resulted from disease, but only 968 deaths occurred on the battlefield. Fully 309 deaths occurred in Florida in preparation for war. Accidents and deaths resulted from myriad causes. George Jolly of Ohio died after drinking carbolic acid, mistaking it for a bottle of whiskey. Other soldiers became sick after consuming embalmed meat—canned beef

rejected by the Japanese government.

Overall, how did the brief encounter with fame affect Tampa? Contemporaries certainly thought that 1898 was Tampa’s year of destiny. Almost everyone cited improvements wrought by government contracts and an infusion of visitors and payrolls. “Tampa has been completely transformed since my first arrival here, the middle of March [1898],” observed Baltimore Mayor Joseph Pangborn. Two months later, he noted, “There is not an empty structure in town The streets are jammed with army teams . . . the sidewalks are thronged with soldiers, civilians, contractors.” The *Tampa Tribune* posed the question: “What has been the result?” Unabashedly, the local paper answered its question: “Tampa is the Atlanta of Florida.”

Tampa may indeed have been the Atlanta of Florida, but such comparison told more about the underdeveloped economy of the Sunshine State. To be sure, several million dollars had been left behind, but profits failed to transform Tampa’s economy. For all purposes, Tampa remained “Cigar City,” an economy dependent upon the popularity of Tampa Nuggets and Hav-a-Tampas.

Appropriately, the end of the Spanish-American War spelled both an end and a beginning for the Cubans in Ybor City, the people and place that had sacrificed so much for the Cuban War of Independence. The end of the war provided few clear answers. While many Cubans left Ybor City for their liberated homeland, it became apparent that Cuba’s crippled economy offered a bleak future.

Many Cuban exiles now became immigrants, preferring to remain in Key West or Tampa because of economic prospects and their children’s future. Cubans, unlike other immigrants of the era, enjoyed the ease of return migration and repatriation, the result of geography and diplomacy. Consequently, many Ybor City Cubans maintained households and jobs in Tampa and Havana.

The end of the Spanish-American War also liberated energies and funds which had been pledged to *Cuba Libre*. Now Cubans and Spaniards could live in peaceful coexistence and dedicate resources to the new homeland. In 1899, Cubans organized La Sociedad de Circulo Cubano, the flagship club offering social, medical, and cultural benefits to members. In 1904, Spaniards organized Centro Asturiano, a full-fledged mutual aid society.

The peace in Cuba resulted in massive investments on the island, developments which had significant meaning in Tampa. Within the first few years of the twentieth century, tobacco interests succeeded in organizing trusts and cartels, typified by the American Cigar Company and the Havana-American Company. Most pioneering *patrones*, such as Vicente Martínez Ybor, died, replaced by executives more concerned with efficiency.

The new interests controlling Tampa’s cigar factories collided with a reinvigorated militancy of the workforce. A series of ferocious strikes followed the Spanish-American War. In 1899 Latin cigar makers struck when owners installed scales, thereby challenging the integrity of the workers. Large numbers of Cubans left Tampa during the lean months of *la huelga de la pesa* (the weight strike).

Inspired by the short-term gains achieved by the weight strike, cigar workers organized La Resistencia, a militant union. A four-month strike ensued, resulting in the deportation of union leaders,

mass evictions, and new levels of violence. In a 1910 strike, Tampa vigilantes hanged two Latins as a warning to strikers. Yet the industry prospered.

In the quarter century following 1898, Tampa's cigar industry enjoyed a spectacular success. Latin immigrants earned handsome wages which thrust them into the ranks of highly-paid artisans. Indeed, the industry attracted increasing numbers of immigrant women, precisely because cigar making provided high wages, a safe environment, and cultural solidarity.

The vaunted hand-rolled cigar industry collapsed in the 1930s. The Great Depression signaled the inexorable decline in cigar smoking. Symbolizing the demise of cigar manufacturing was the abolition of the reader in 1931. City officials blamed *el Lector* for the industry's troubles, and after a brief strike, the reader was removed, just as machines replaced skilled cigar makers. World War II, with its massive defense spending and military bases, revitalized Tampa's economy in ways the short-lived Spanish-American War could not. Ironically, the U.S. government's embargo against Cuban tobacco in 1961 drove one of the final nails into Tampa's faltering cigar industry.

Tampa's involvement in the Cuban War of Independence and Spanish-American War provides an ideal forum to study local history with important ramifications for national and international affairs. This article suggests a number of themes for students and teachers to explore.

1. The Possibilities of Local History

One can ask big questions about small places. For instance, a study of Tampa can help students appreciate the complex forces which swept America and the Caribbean in the 1880s and '90s: imperialism, colonialism, racial discrimination, immigration, labor conflicts, and technological advances.

2. Revisionism

The victors in battle also triumph in the history books. By examining the events of the 1890s through the lens of Tampa, Florida, one might conclude that the term "Spanish-American War" is at best distorted, at worst, meaningless. A new label, actually a century old, the "Cuban War of Independence" seems not only politically but also historically correct.

3. Historical Antecedents

Most textbooks routinely analyze the causes of the Spanish-American War in a familiar listing of factors: "yellow journalism," the decline of the Spanish empire, increasing American investments in Cuba, jingoism, manifest destiny, and the sinking of the *Maine*. An understanding of the revolutionary milieu in Tampa amplifies the events leading up to 1898. Moreover, the role of José Martí helps connect the expatriate Cuban communities with the Cuban War of Independence and 1898.

4. War as a Force for Change

During the First World War, George M. Cohan's song "Over

There" captivated Americans with its inspiring lyrics. But scholars have argued for some time that the greatest changes accompanying war occur not over there, but over here. War often unleashes powerful forces on the home front. □

Bibliography

History of Tampa

Gatewood, Willard. "Negro Troops in Florida, 1898." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 49 (July 1970): 1-16.

Grismer, Karl H. *Tampa*. St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg Printing Co., 1950.

Hewitt, Nancy. "Paulina Pedroso and *Las Patriotas* of Tampa." *Spanish Pathways in Florida, 1492-1992*. Edited by Ann Henderson and Gary Mormino. Englewood: Pineapple Press, 1991.

Ingalls, Robert P. *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882-1936*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988.

Mormino, Gary R., and George E. Pozzetta. *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

—. "Tampa's Splendid Little War: A Photo Essay." *Tampa Bay History* 4 (Fall/Winter 1982): 45-61.

Pérez, Louis A. "Cubans in Tampa: From Exiles to Immigrants, 1892-1901." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57 (October 1978): 129-41.

Poyo, Gerald E. *"With All and for the Good of All": The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1848-1898*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1989.

Memoirs

Marshall, Edward. *The Story of the Rough Riders*. New York: G. W. Dillingham Co., 1899.

Post, Charles J. *The Little War of Private Post*. New York: Little, Brown, 1961.

Roosevelt, Theodore. *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*. Edited by Elting Morison. 8 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951.

Roosevelt, Theodore. *The Rough Riders*. New York: 1902

Stewart, M. B. *The N'th Foot in War*. Kansas City: Hudson Press, 1906.

Journalists

Brown, Charles H. *The Correspondents' War: Journalists in the Spanish-American War*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967.

Davis, Richard Harding. "The Rocking-Chair Period of the War." *Scribner's Magazine* 24 (August 1898): 132.

Kennan, George. *Campaigning in Cuba*. New York: Kennekat, 1899.

Gary R. Mormino is Professor of History at the University of South Florida. His books include *Immigrants on the Hill: Italian Americans in St. Louis, 1882-1982 (1986)* and *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985 (1987)*.