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TAMPA AT THE CLOSE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by JOSE RIVERO MUNIZ

Translated by CHARLES J. KOLINSKI

BEFORE THE ADVENT of the tobacco industry, Tampa was a population center of slight importance in the State of Florida. Fishing, wood-cutting, and the cultivation of certain vegetables were the principal occupation of its few inhabitants. Located on sandy and relatively arid ground which was covered by few trees other than stunted pines and unexploitable palmetto palms, the extensive prairies of the region were marked principally by numerous marshes and a few sulphur springs. It was not an infrequent occurrence among the isolated thickets to stumble upon an apparently sleeping alligator or a scarcely less dangerous rattlesnake or water moccasin.

Lacking both important industries and natural resources, the inhabitants of the future city existed in conditions which were necessarily modest. In spite of such obstacles, however, these early inhabitants persisted and little by little a city commenced to appear which by the second half of the nineteenth century could be considered as the principal center along the west coast between Cape Sable and Apalachicola Bay. A railway constructed in 1883 provided connections with Plant City and the interior of Florida, while the Hillsborough River provided access to the Gulf of Mexico.

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1. The sources utilized in the preparation of this article include: (1) the manuscript left by Eligio Carbonell Malta entitled *Cuba en Tampa*, written in 1897, which contains information which he had contemplated for inclusion in his projected book; and (2) the *Proceedings of the Club Ignacio Agramonte, 1891-1894*, the originals of which are now in the library of the Universidad Central de Las Villas in the city of Santa Clara, Cuba.

Aside from these sources without which it would have been wholly impossible to prepare this work, I have also availed myself of my own memories of Tampa in 1899. As mentioned previously, the documents cited may be examined at the library of the Universidad Central de Las Villas, Santa Clara, Cuba. With respect to my memory I might add that I still retain the most vivid and pleasant recollections of the city in which I resided in those long-past years when I still possessed that divine treasure of youth.

JOSE RIVERO MUNIZ

Havana, Cuba, October, 1961.

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Although several authors have sought to describe the Tampa of that remote era, it may prove of interest in the following pages to present the impressions of a person who had the opportunity to reside in the Tampa of that time and whose stature as a cultured observer lends exceptional significance to his comments. Eligio Carbonell Malta was born in 1869 at Palo Alto, near the city of Sancti-Spiritus in what was then the Province of Santa Clara—today Las Villas—in the central region of Cuba. The son of a Cuban patriot, Nestor Leondo Carbonell, young Eligio inherited from his father a love for *belles lettres*. It was probably for this reason that shortly after his arrival at Ybor City in 1889, about three years after the inauguration there of the tobacco industry, he began to compile information for a projected book to be entitled *Cuba en Tampa*, of which he was to leave only a few short chapters completed.

Only few details have survived of the childhood of Eligio Carbonell Malta. His mother died while he was still quite young. With the end of the so-called “Guerra de los diez años” in 1878, the first of the wars waged by Cubans to achieve their independence from the yoke of Spain, the young man left his native land with the remaining members of his family and went with them to Key West, then the principal refuge of people fleeing from Spain’s subjugation campaign in Cuba. At Key West, as the small island had long been known, Nestor Leonolo applied himself to the teaching profession and established a school in which the children of the Cuban tobacco workers living there could be educated.

An honest man possessing strong principles, culturally and intellectually superior to the majority of immigrants who then resided at Key West, he was not understood by his fellow countrymen. Because of his refusal to accept the aid of gunmen-bandideros—with whose aid Spain had succeeded in Cuba, protests were voiced in which neither questions of dignity nor morality were considered. As a result, Nestor Leonolo contemplated moving to New York. His friend Cornelio Brito, however, who was living in relatively well-off circumstances, encouraged him to move to Tampa where he might find a community with stronger ideals and less disunity. He made the change and recommenced his teaching career. In 1890 he also founded the newspaper *La*

Contienda, which championed the ideals which in 1868 had stimulated Cuban patriots to rebel against Spain.

Nearly all of the people then residing in Ybor City were tobacco workers. Unlike the majority of laborers at that time, the Tampa tobacco worker was not an individual possessing little knowledge other than of his profession. Due to the practice of having the texts of books and newspapers read aloud in the factories for the benefit of the labor force, the tobacco worker possessed a level of culture somewhat higher than that of other laborers. Shortly after the establishment of the new factories at Tampa the "readers" of the several companies were able to acquire reading material, principally newspapers and novels, from Nestor Leonelo Carbonell, who either sold or rented the material from a small library called La Galeria Literaria, which he had organized in his own home in thriving Ybor City.

Eligio, who assisted his father in this activity, enjoyed a direct and constant contact with the readers and discussed with them the problems and events of the new sector of Tampa. It was not unusual, therefore, that he should have experienced the urge to prepare a book of his own authorship which might depict the history and development of Ybor City including a description of major events, the role played in them by his neighbors, and the gradual trend toward prosperity in the city. With these objectives in mind he commenced writing *Cuba en Tampa*, a work of which he left only six chapters completed as well as numerous and interesting details which were to serve him in the completion of the historical survey which he had contemplated. Unfortunately, it was not possible for him to finish his study since other, more urgent tasks, particularly of a patriotic nature, began to demand his full attention. Moreover, his untimely death was to occur when it appeared he would finally have the leisure to complete his study.

The following material has been taken from the unedited first chapters of the proposed book. It is also believed pertinent to reproduce the text of the brief introductory note to the original manuscript which was written by the author's half-brother, Jose Manuel Carbonell Rivero, a contemporary poet known both for his intellect and as President of the Academia Nacional de Arte y Letras. The note reads as follows: "These original manuscripts belong to my brother, Eligio Carbonell Malta, who died at Ha-

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vana, August 5, 1899, almost on the termination of the war against Spain. He faced life with unparalleled virtue and tenacity; death struck him down in the flower of his youth just as he was about to reap the harvest of his many years of sacrifice." In a separate paragraph Jose Manuel Carbonell Rivero added the following: "Eligio contemplated writing a book covering the revolutionary activities of the immigrants, and almost all these papers are concerned with that project."

In the first chapter, entitled "Political and Biographic Notes," the author writes first of Eduardo Manrara, partner of Vicente Martinez Ybor in the latter's multiple commercial enterprises. He attributes to Manrara the initiative of establishing the tobacco industry in Tampa where Cubans arrived "not as the vast number of luckless Europeans did - without a goal in mind, but rather bringing with them a rich industry and an alert and creative initiative which have since resulted in the establishment of societies, schools, and newspapers, and have both aided in the development of other industries and in the stimulation of a prosperous level of commerce."

"Tampa at the beginning of 1886," according to Eligio, "was still a small city with only a little over 1,500 inhabitants whose residences were spread over a wide area. This area did not reflect the aspect of a compact urban center. Neither commerce nor industry were sources of livelihood for the inhabitants who existed on the returns from a rudimentary agriculture. At the time of the commencement of this narrative the railroad constructed by Mr. Plant had been in operation to Tampa for about two years. Tampa had thus begun to attract the attention of the inhabitants of the surrounding area who were engaged in growing and shipping oranges. The city therefore reflected the process of considerable growth. These features, however, were not sufficient in themselves to have produced such a rapid population increase, nor such an expansion in general prosperity - almost as though by magic - had it not been for the opportune arrival of the tobacco industry with its hundreds of Cuban workers who tended each Saturday to spend and squander their sizable week's earnings."

Eligio then continues his narrative of the progress of the city which by October, 1887, possessed about 22,000 inhabitants including more than 8,000 Cubans (about 40 per cent of the to-

tal). It was now the foremost manufacturing center of Cuban tobacco in the United States. Among the many large new buildings which had been constructed there was the Tampa Bay Hotel, property of the Plant family-built at a cost of over \$2,000,000 and reputed to be one of the finest in the world. "Others were the *Casa Corte*, of extraordinary luxurious appointments, and the First National Bank, of superb appearance with a magnificent facade of marble and granite." The author also noted, "that Tampa possessed one of the highest levels of receipts from its customs house of any in the southern part of the United States."

The remainder of this first chapter is devoted to censure "of the barbarous government of Spain," which by virtue of its incredible tax demands had obliged many manufacturers to move their factories away from Cuba. As could be expected of the son of a patriot who had suffered the persecution of such a government, Eligio had harsh words for the Spanish regime. He also points out that many members of the extensive Cuban community at Key West had looked with much displeasure at the transfer of these factory workers and manufacturers to Tampa, which then became a rival of Key West in the nation's markets. As is well known, this development originated the decline of Key West, where the tobacco industry had been practically the only source of livelihood for the population. Many of these people emigrated to Tampa, especially following the major fire disaster of April, 1886, which almost caused the total destruction of the homes of the island's inhabitants.

"Ybor City; Its First Inhabitants," is the title given by Eligio Carbonell Malta to the second chapter of his projected book. In my opinion, its contents represent the part which is of greatest interest for students of the history of the so-called "latin" district of Tampa. It is for this reason that the chapter has been transcribed almost in its entirety, with omission being made only in the case of relatively unimportant paragraphs or those devoted by the author to matters of a personal nature not pertinent to the central theme of the overall work. With this reservation, therefore, I shall begin with the presentation of a direct transcription of Eligio's work.

"The first Cubans who arrived to live in this desert and fever-infested region of Florida were beyond doubt authentic heroes. The early inhabitants enjoyed few of the comforts provided by

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modern civilization and none which might render their existence a pleasure. In order to walk from one end of the village to the other a person had to resign himself to suffer as though he were contemplating a difficult journey across a desert. In reality, Ybor City was almost like such an area since from the moment of leaving their homes the inhabitants found themselves at face with a variety of inconveniences, not the least of them being the necessity of traversing the thick sand which blanketed most of Florida.

“Neither in that era nor for some considerable time later did sidewalks or paved streets exist which might have facilitated transit. Likewise, there was no municipal lighting system in the village; for the person who ventured out at night, therefore, it was indispensable to carry a lantern or lamp which might permit him to avoid dangerous spots. It was also advisable to carry a rifle or revolver for protection in the event of meeting any dangerous animals or similar unexpected threats. In addition to these features there was the persistent menace of deadly malarial fevers spread by microbes in the air emanating from the neighboring swamps and marshes, and accentuated by the forest-clearing and land removal projects carried on in all directions preparatory to the building of homes. Life in this area involved difficulties at every hand.

“The few business and commercial establishments literally made hay while the sun shone by selling their wares at prices triple their value to the Cuban inhabitants who, as it was known among the Americans of the locality, were earning large salaries and tended to be both extravagant and generous. As a result of these several factors Ybor City in its early days did not possess a stable, fixed population. There was a constant migratory movement. Attracted by high salary employment opportunities many laborers from Key West and Cuba passed through the growing city on their way to and from the North. They stayed only as long as it was necessary to amass a quantity of money, or until they contracted malaria. Such was the appearance, in general terms, of the isolated sector of Tampa known as Ybor City. It had been founded on the one hand by the Spanish financier Vicente Martinez Ybor—a Cuban by sentiment. On the other it had been founded by honorable and hard-working Cuban immigrants whose progressive spirit is demonstrated by the many achievements performed by them on foreign soil since the time that the heavy hand

of the Spanish government had forced a large sector of them to flee abroad. These people had departed with no assistance other than that represented by their own virtues and with no hope other than for the future redemption of their native land. They had moved from country to country searching for a hospitable place where they might build anew the homes which had been denied them on their own soil by the corruption and evil of the Iberian conqueror.

“Only a short time transpired before the new tobacco factories began to increase their operations and to hire a constantly greater number of workmen. The population grew rapidly. There were now social needs which required satisfaction. The Logia de los Caballeros del Trabajo was established by the enterprising and cultured Cuban, Carlos B. Balino, who came from Key West on an express assignment authorized by the organization. Balino also founded two societies of the same type among the Americans residing in Tampa. Somewhat later *El Yara*, the first newspaper in Spanish, commenced publication. It had also been imported from Key West and its editor, the well-known Cuban Jose Dolores Poyo, had moved to Tampa for that purpose. The political views espoused by the new paper were invariably concerned with the absolute independence of Cuba.

“The appearance of social organization and publication of the first newspaper were followed by the natural complement of these two important factors of modern civilization and human progress—the school. The first school was established by a long-time Cuban emigre, Carlos Zequeira, who moved from Baltimore to Tampa with this project expressly in mind. The number of schools soon increased. Among these new institutions mention may be made of that directed by Mrs. Sainz de la Pena, and of the school offering both elementary and secondary instruction which was directed by Nestor Leonelo Carbonell.

“Within a short time the first political society or club appeared which became an important and indispensable factor in the life of the Cuban immigrants still dreaming of independence for their country.”

This club was the *Crombet* and was presided over by Antonio V. Ramos. Although Eligio presents details regarding its organization it is not believed pertinent to include them here since they bear no reference to the development of Ybor city. The author

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also states that "the first Cuban newspaper in Tampa, *La Union Cubana*, did not exist long," - an assertion which contradicts his earlier statement that *El Yara* was the first Spanish-language periodical in the area. My own investigations into this matter confirm that *La Union Cubana*, mentioned by Eligio, never reached printed form. The only evidence concerning this paper appeared in the form of an announcement regarding its future publication. The project was carried no further since Ybor City in that era lacked both a printing establishment and type-setters who could handle Spanish. The first persons capable of such activity were those who came with Jose Dolores Poyo and who helped him to publish *El Yara*. But let us continue with Eligio's account.

"Some time was to pass until Ybor City again possessed a periodical. In mid-1887 Ramon Rivero Rivero, who had previously visited Tampa, arrived from Key West and began publishing *La Revista de Florida*. Although this weekly was principally concerned with modern labor philosophy and ideology, it nevertheless did not overlook propaganda efforts on behalf of Cuban independence."

The most important sections of the second chapter of interest from a historical point of view have now been transcribed. The remaining portions of the second chapter add nothing to the foregoing material. Likewise, in the remaining chapters which were completed, there is little information other than material related to the political activities of the Cubans resident in Ybor City in their efforts to procure funds with which to initiate the struggle against their hated enemy the Spanish government.

Before continuing further with the discussion of Eligio Carbonell Malta it is believed pertinent at this point to relate my own impressions of Tampa in 1899. It was in this year that I first traveled there in order to visit some family friends. The ship which brought us from Havana was the old *Mascotte*, the same which appears on the official seal of the city and which transported so many thousands of Cubans to Tampa. This was still the period during which a person could travel freely without the need of any passport. On the arrival of the ship men could be seen on the dock who had been sent by the tobacco factories to offer immediate employment to those arriving. We landed without anyone asking either me or my older brother where we intended to go or how long we planned to stay in the city.

At this time Ybor City possessed several streets, though sand had still not given way to paving. Most of the sidewalks were of wood planks - a detail which I found to be rather curious since neither in Cuba nor in Spain, where I had previously resided, had I observed wood employed for such a purpose. The commercial center of the Ybor City area was situated on Seventh Avenue in the sector between Thirteenth and Sixteenth streets. Here were located the most important stores: clothing and shoe shops, several cafes, and a number of stores selling alcoholic beverages. The *bodegas* or food stores were scattered about the city - a further unusual aspect for me since they sold both vegetables and fish and thus obviated the necessity for customers to travel long distances in order to obtain such items.

We also had opportunities to attend some picnics-outdoor excursions participated in by the latin young people, Cuban and Spanish, which featured lunches and dancing. I recall clearly that one of these fiestas which took place on a Sunday afternoon was held at a point along the shores of the bay where a large bower or kiosk had been erected. The occasion in Tampa which pleased me most, however, was the visit to the Tampa Bay Hotel whose minarets reminded me of the Moorish style. It was in fact a hotel such as few have seen-it was surrounded by beautiful gardens and trees with thick vegetation along the trunks and branches in which agile squirrels could be seen climbing and jumping about. At the rear of the hotel a large incubator placed near the kitchen area hatched thousands of small chicks.

And now, leaving aside this digression which caused me to deviate from the basic theme of this study and which I hope may be pardoned by the reader, I shall resume the subject of Eligio Carbonell Malta. Almost precisely at the very time I was engaged in exploring the streets of Tampa he was dying in Cuba. The data and other material left by him refer principally to the activities of the Cuban revolutionary clubs in Tampa during the years which preceded the war of 1895. In spite of some discrepancies, it can be deduced from these notes that the majority of his countrymen continued united in the project for the liberation of their native land. Before any concrete efforts could be undertaken, however, it was essential to unify opinion, collect financial resources, and acquire arms for the use of those ready to com-

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mence the fight. Young Eligio cooperated efficiently in these projects.

Let us see how. Apart from his duties as the only employee in his father's bookstore, which involved attending to the public and distributing periodicals received from Havana, the young man figured among those immigrants who displayed the most enthusiasm in the meetings and other events sponsored by the Cubans. In his spare time he wrote articles which were published in Spanish in the local press, and occasionally he also sent his works to the periodical *El Porvenir* which was published in New York. His greatest effort in this field, however, was that which culminated in the founding of the Cuban revolutionary club *Ignacio Agramonte*. Due to its initiative, Jose Marti, the Apostle of Cuban liberty, visited Tampa at the close of November, 1891.

Marti's presence in Tampa revived the faith of the Cubans residing in Ybor City; his vigorous and patriotic speeches succeeded in unifying the patriots of the district and in convincing them that the moment was at hand for the commencement of the epic struggle. Eligio acted as a guide or companion for Marti during his stay in the "latin" district and from this connection a friendship was born which existed until Marti's death. The last decade of the nineteenth century saw the Cuban immigrants in Tampa aroused and willing to undertake the greatest sacrifices in favor of their native land. Many new clubs and societies were organized and measures were initiated in the tobacco factories for the collection of donations to be used for the purchase of arms and supplies for the future combatants. When the struggle finally began on February 24, 1895, Spain came to realize that the strongest focal point of the rebellion was in Tampa—since it was from Tampa that the expeditions were leaving which would challenge the Spanish army.

Though Eligio Carbonell Malta was now old enough to accompany the expeditions to Cuba, his request to be included among the volunteers was not approved by the Cuban Revolutionary Party. He was ordered to remain in Tampa where his services were considered necessary in the best interests of the liberation movement. In collaboration with Fernando Figueredo Socarras, chief of the party branch in Tampa, and with Ramon Rivero Rivero, he prepared communications, declarations, manifestos, and all the other varied types of material of benefit to the

course of the revolution. The enthusiasm of the Cuban immigrant showed no signs of declining, and the employees of the tobacco factories agreed to contribute one-sixth of their salaries - a procedure which up to then had no parallel in the history of the Cuban labor movement.

In a recent book entitled *Los Cubanos en Tampa*, I have included references to the life of the Cuban immigrants in Tampa during the period of the Second War of Independence, 1895-1898, which ended with the active participation of the United States. It is suggested that anyone interested in obtaining more details regarding the subject may wish to consult this book. Since, however, it does not elaborate fully on the activities of Eligio Carbonell Malta it was felt that this present article might serve to present a more detailed description of his life and role. As indicated by its heading, this article is concerned with a description of Tampa at the close of the last century-a city whose development was especially aided by the efforts of Cuban and Spanish immigrants in establishing an industry which, through its fame and success, made Tampa the most thriving and prosperous city along Florida's west coast.