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AFRO-CUBANS IN EXILE:
TAMPA, FLORIDA, 1886-1984*

by Susan D. Greenbaum

Afro-Cubans have always comprised a small segment of Cuban exile communities in the United States, representing about 13 percent of Cuban immigrants arriving during the early decades of the century, and some 5 percent of the post-1959 emigration. Miami’s Little Havana is more than 99 percent white. In writing on the causes for such discrepancies in ethnic patterns of migration from Cuba, Benigno Aguirre offered the following speculation concerning the experiences of Afro-Cubans who have migrated to the United States: “Apparently, the ethnic identity of the Cuban Negro cannot neutralize the greater discrimination that all blacks experience. They lack a sense of community that shelters the ethnic individual from the effects of the larger society.” These comments primarily refer to more recent immigrants, whose small numbers and evident alienation from the white Cuban community may well serve to mitigate an identity distinct from black Americans. However, Gerald Poyo has suggested that conditions for Afro-Cuban immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were quite different from those confronted by more recent arrivals. Although formal segregation had the predictable effect of driving a wedge between black and white Cubans, he concludes that this also contributed to the development of distinct Afro-Cuban communities. Rather than amalgamating with Afro-Americans, Afro-Cubans often retreated within the confines of their own segregated institutions. In this respect, their response to the double difficulties of being black immigrants is quite consistent with what has been shown in research on other black immigrant groups in the United States. In addition, a large share of the early Afro-Cuban immigrants were cigarworkers, whose geographical mobility, Poyo surmises, led to a rather distinctively cosmopolitan community life.

These general conclusions are well illustrated in the specific historical development of the Afro-Cuban community in Tampa, Florida. La Unión Marti-Maceo is an Afro-Cuban organization in Tampa which was originally established by immigrant cigarworkers at the turn of the century. Since its inception, La Unión Marti-Maceo has formed the basis for an ongoing, multigenerational Afro-Cuban community. The long-term development of this community offers unique insights into the process of Afro-Cuban adjustment to conditions in the United States and factors that have tended to stall incorporation into the larger black population.

This paper is based on an historical community study that is being done in collaboration with members of La Unión Marti-Maceo. The research is still in an early stage. The information is drawn primarily from the manuscript records of La Unión Marti-Maceo, oral history interviews with older club members, census and city directory data, and existing published sources.

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Formation and Early Development of the Afro-Cuban Community in Tampa

During the 1890s Tampa, Florida, was a major center of Cuban exile support for the independence struggle. The cigar industry, established in Tampa in 1886, employed several thousand Cuban workers, many of whom had been refugees of the Ten Years War of 1868-78. José Martí visited Tampa frequently to spur the enthusiasm of this large exile community, whose members had established at least forty-one separate patriotic organizations and widely adopted the practice of “tithing” their wages to supply funds for the cause of Cuba Libre. Afro-Cubans constituted a small minority among the Tampa cigarworkers, but they were of special interest to Martí. Their prominent participation in patriotic activities was a visible indication of racial solidarity among the insurgents, which Martí hoped would contribute to victory and ease the creation of a just society.

For most of the Afro-Cuban patriots, however, the vision of social justice in the new republic remained elusive. Independence changed little in Cuba. For Afro-Cubans who remained in Florida, there was an even more discouraging reality in the making.
Between the inception of the cigar industry and the end of the war in Cuba in 1898, the city of Tampa developed a unique dual character, becoming what has been described as a “cracker village with a Latin accent.” Immigrant cigar-workers accounted for nearly a quarter of the population in 1900. Most were Cuban, but there were also substantial numbers of Spaniards and Italians. The balance of the population consisted primarily of native-born white southerners, sons and daughters of the Confederacy. In addition, native-born blacks accounted for just over 10 percent of the population.

The immigrants lived almost exclusively in Ybor City and West Tampa. These were clearly defined enclaves which surrounded the cigar factories and comprised worlds unto themselves. Within their confines, the Afro-Cubans led lives far different from their Afro-American counterparts in Tampa. Black cigarworkers, virtually all of whom were Cuban, worked side by side with white workers, sharing a comparable wage scale. Black Cubans also lived among white Cubans and the other white immigrants. In sharp contrast to the American sections of Tampa, race relations in the immigrant neighborhoods were reportedly quite harmonious. Indeed, the cigarworkers’ reputation for racial tolerance was often cited as evidence of their radicalism and offered added fuel for nativist antagonisms against all the immigrants.

The end of hostilities in Cuba coincided with a number of developments that altered the insularity of the immigrant communities in Tampa and ultimately resulted in significant changes in relations between the black and white Cubans. Depressed economic conditions in Cuba following independence discouraged many of the Cubans from returning. No longer able to view themselves as temporary exiles, many of the Cubans began to reconcile themselves to permanent residence in Florida. At about the same time, American influences were increasingly penetrating Tampa’s cloistered Latin community. At the turn of the century, control of the cigar factories passed from Cuban and Spanish ownership to the American corporate conglomerates, and immediately production modes and labor practices were transformed. Of added importance for black Cubans was the 1896 Supreme Court decision, Plessy vs. Ferguson, that set forth the doctrine of “separate but equal.” In the wake of this ruling, racial segregation throughout the United States hardened around a multitude of explicit laws and ordinances, and there was a general upsurge of repression and violence against blacks.

One consequence of these changes was that black and white Cubans were increasingly disassociated from each other. Until 1898, Cubans had devoted much of their leisure time and organizational energies to the patriotic clubs, many of which were racially mixed. Patriotic clubs disappeared with the end of the war. In 1899 and 1900, Cubans established two new organizations in Tampa—one white, the other black. Both were mutual aid societies, similar in structure and composition to organizations that had been established earlier by Spanish and Italian immigrants. Although racial segregation in social organizations had also existed in Cuba, the creation of two separate clubs, in place of the previously integrated organizations, suggests that the racial solidarity of Cuba Libre was dissolving under the pressures of post-reconstruction Tampa.

The founders of the Afro-Cuban organization included Ruperto Pedroso and Bruno Roig, both of whom had been active in local Cuban political groups. It was patterned after an organization in Cuba named Antonio Maceo Free Thinkers of Santa Clara, of which Bruno Roig was a member. Antonio Maceo, a black Cuban general, had been killed fighting the Spanish. The name
given to the Tampa club, Society of the Freethinkers of Martí and Maceo, was adapted to include José Martí, the martyred Apostle of Cuban Liberty.

The initial purposes of the club were mainly social, to provide a place “to meet outside the house in a way acceptable to men of dignity.” By the end of 1901, the membership totaled 117, representing approximately one-third of the Afro-Cuban households in Tampa. Activities of the club included parties, informal socializing, a baseball team called the “Cuban Giants” (Los Gigantes Cubanos), and classes for adults and children. A separate Ladies Committee was responsible for organizing socials. In 1904 a group within the membership formed a new organization, La Unión, which was more explicitly oriented toward mutual aid. Members were able to obtain medical care and prescriptions as needed under a system of benefits developed in conjunction with the other ethnic societies in Tampa. The two Afro-Cuban organizations functioned separately but with overlapping memberships until 1907, when they fused into La Unión Martí-Maceo. Within two years construction was completed on a two-story brick clubhouse in Ybor City which included an auditorium, dance hall, and club rooms.

La Unión Martí-Maceo was a multi-purpose institution that, for the Afro-Cubans, became the locus of nearly all organized and informal leisure time activities. It served the same functions that other ethnic societies in Tampa provided their members: economic security, a place to socialize, a point of entry for the newly arrived, and an institutional basis for preserving national...
identity and culture. La Unión Martí-Maceo, had the added function of enabling black Cubans to escape some of the problems and indignities to which they were vulnerable on account of their color. The medical benefits were of particular importance in view of the extremely inadequate health care otherwise available to blacks in Tampa at that time. Segregation excluded Afro-Cubans from virtually all forms of public recreation, but within the walls of La Unión Martí-Maceo they were able to construct their own social world. They produced plays, sponsored orators and musicians, purchased recreational equipment, established a library, and maintained a cantina. After work each day, the men gathered at the clubhouse to play dominoes and socialize. Children learned to play musical instruments and were offered classes taught in Spanish. Women took an active although subordinate role in the affairs of the society, and generally attended the club only when there were dances or other formal events.

Within the complex sociopolitical environment of Ybor City and the predominantly white southern community that surrounded it, Afro-Cubans comprised a marginal group. They were a minority within two minorities, representing about 13 percent of the Cuban and just less than 10 percent of the black populations of Tampa. In the local ethnic hierarchy, the Cuban immigrants occupied a position only slightly higher than the blacks, and were themselves subject to discriminatory treatment. Theoretically, the dual identity of the Afro-Cubans should have
offered a bridge between the larger black and Cuban communities. In practice, however, the Afro-Cubans became not a bridge, but an island, encapsulated within their own small group.

The color line was an important factor that divided black from white Cubans, although they continued to live as neighbors and work together in the factories. The two Cuban organizations maintained intermittent communication based on common interests in the affairs of their homeland, but indications of friction and unspecified allusions to conflicts occasionally appear in the minutes of La Unión Martí-Maceo. Both oral and documentary accounts of relations between black and white Cubans are frequently contradictory: one view suggesting that white Cubans keenly perceived the advantages of distancing themselves from their black compatriots, the other emphasizing the extremely lax enforcement of segregation in Ybor City and an ongoing sense of patriotic camaraderie shared by all the Cubans. These discrepancies can be attributed in part to differences in the responses of individuals to the contingencies of Tampa's racial etiquette: some were more easily assimilated- than others, It is nonetheless evident that, although discrimination was less of a problem in Ybor City, black and white Cubans were not treated alike, and they did not regard themselves as comprising a single group. As time passed, racial distinctions between Cubans grew in importance, and the bonds of common national identity weakened.
Relations between black Cubans and black Americans took an opposite course. Initial conditions of almost total estrangement gradually gave way to a partial incorporation. Despite the fact that Florida laws officially assigned them to the same social category, Cuban and American blacks remained generally alien to each other until nearly the end of World War II. Their physical resemblance was superficial in comparison with the differences in language, religion, culture and history that divided them. For the most part, members of the two groups lived in different neighborhoods, adults worked in different jobs and children attended different schools. Afro-Cubans enjoyed marginal advantages not shared by Afro-Americans: they earned higher wages, lived under more relaxed color restrictions, and they had access to the benefits of their organization.

By many accounts, Afro-Cubans tended to maintain actively the distance that already separated them from black Americans. Nearly all of the children attended a Catholic elementary school, which was segregated and mostly Afro-Cuban. Those who attended the public schools were not encouraged to socialize with Americans. Marriage to black Americans was even more strongly discouraged, and girls were especially sheltered from such possibilities. Most important, black Americans did not belong to La Unión Marti-Maceo. In 1915, the state required the organization to eliminate the provision that members be Cuban. In compliance, the members formally voted to permit American blacks to join. However, a majority of those present abstained, and the organization remained effectively closed to Americans until the 1920s. Viewed from the other side, black Americans, and especially teenagers, were often quite hostile to black Cubans, ridiculing their language problems and calling them “black wops.” In short, cultural differences, minimal opportunities for contact, and competitive antagonisms all served to hinder the early formation of social ties between the two groups. These conditions had the further effect of minimizing pressures on the immigrants to assimilate.

Mobility also served to reduce the likelihood of Afro-Cubans assimilating into the local black population. A very large proportion of the Afro-Cuban immigrants between 1888 and 1930 remained in Tampa for a relatively short time, although many returned again. The proximity of Cuba greatly facilitated a pattern of circulatory migration. Many cigarworkers had wives and families still living in Cuba, and steamship travel between the two points was inexpensive. The Immigration Commission report on Tampa cigarworkers in 1911 indicated that nearly half of the Cubans (49.7 percent) had made at least one trip back to the island since their arrival. Oral histories also confirm that travel between Tampa and Cuba was extremely common. So was movement between Tampa and other Cuban communities in the United States, especially Key West. Even among Afro-Cubans who were born and raised in Tampa, frequent contact with people coming directly from Cuba or other emigré establishments established a kind of fluid cosmopolitan community structure, where mobility tended to reinforce rather than diminish a sense of Cuban identity.

Data from city directories and census schedules give some indication of the numerical dimensions of turnover in the local Afro-Cuban population. Of nineteen Afro-Cuban households listed in the 1893 city directory for Tampa, only two reappeared in the 1899 directory, by which time there were 366 Afro-Cuban households listed. Between 1899 and 1900 it appears that virtually all (94 percent) of the Afro-Cubans departed Tampa and were replaced by a comparable, although slightly larger, number of new arrivals. This rather startling level of mobility in a
single year may reflect dislocations in Cuba following independence, which could have precipitated large movements in both directions. However, the general pattern seems to have continued into the 1920s: 82 percent of Afro-Cuban households listed in the 1914 directory had not been included in the 1910 census; 91 percent of those listed in the 1914 directory did not reappear ten years later, even though the number of Afro-Cubans listed in 1924 was nearly the same (335 and 376). It should be emphasized that these data need to be interpreted conservatively, because losses due to non-enumerations at either time period in the comparisons would inflate the apparent rates of mobility. Further, it is plausible to assume that Afro-Cubans were likely to have been missed. Nevertheless, the extremely large differences that were observed over relatively short intervals confirm that this was indeed a highly mobile population during this period.

Mobility is also indicated by the changing membership in La Unión Martí-Maceo. Between 1904 and 1926 there were altogether 700 individuals who joined the organization for the first time. Of these, complete information on duration of membership is available for 495 cases. Nearly a third (30 percent) were people who joined once and retained membership for less than a year. Interrupted memberships, those who dropped and rejoined later, were very common: 58 percent had at least one interruption, and 17 percent had joined and dropped four or more times during that period.

All of this turnover might have been chaotic for the organization were it not for the ongoing presence of a core of members whose efforts were sufficient to maintain operations and preserve continuity. It was an arrangement well suited to the needs of a mobile population. La Unión Martí-Maceo served a valuable function for newly arrived Afro-Cubans. There are indications that the existing members assumed an explicit role in helping new immigrants adjust to life in Tampa. A reciprocal benefit of this assistance was that those who later departed contributed to the development of a broad network of Afro-Cuban contacts in other cities who would prove similarly valuable to Tampeños when the cigar industry began to fail in the 1930s.

**Effects of the Depression: Contraction and Change**

Employment in the cigar factories represented a major economic advantage for Cuban blacks in Tampa, and their shared experiences in the workplace were a principal source of cohesion in the community. In the early period the vast majority of black Cuban men were cigarworkers (84 percent in 1900, 86 percent in 1910). By 1914, however, the proportion had dropped to 76 percent; and by 1924 it was down to 64 percent. The initial decline may have been partially due to reported displacement of black Cuban men by Italian women, large numbers of whom were entering the factories as apprentices during that period. The later decrease also reflects the introduction of mechanization during the 1920s, which resulted in large layoffs in many of the factories. This trend was rapidly followed and deeply intensified by the depression.

The effects of the widespread layoffs registered unevenly on black and white cigarworkers. Certainly all groups in the industry confronted sobering prospects in seeking new employment in other sectors of Tampa’s depressed economy. There was a chasmal discrepancy, however, between cigarworker wages and those conventionally paid to unskilled black workers in Tampa, even in good times. This relatively greater deprivation, together with a general lack of
employment for blacks at all levels, induced many to join in what became a large scale migration of Afro-Cubans out of Tampa. Although scarcely novel for a generally mobile population, this was different because there was no accompanying migration of Afro-Cubans into the city that would balance their departure. The result was an unparalleled contraction in the size of the local Afro-Cuban community.

Between 1930 and 1940, the foreign-born black population of Tampa declined by more than half (from 631 to 311). Given that the younger native-born members of the Afro-Cuban community were disproportionately involved in the migration, this is regarded as a conservative estimate of the magnitude of the departure. The principal destinations were New York and Philadelphia, where there were established centers of Cuban settlement and cigarmaking.

Families and individuals departed daily in an unceremonious exodus. Entrepreneurs in Ybor City moved quickly to meet the sudden demand for transportation out of Tampa. Large automobiles, especially Cadillacs and Packards, were pressed into service-crammed with passengers who paid $10 each for a one-way trip north. The loss of so many members initially created a depressing atmosphere within La Unión Martí-Maceo and posed new difficulties in maintaining the solvency of the organization. Although balances in the treasury had always been precariously low, in the 1930s deficits were regularly recorded. The membership size had remained fairly stable at about 200 since 1910. In 1930 it dropped to 107, and by the following year had declined to 58. Modest gains were recorded in subsequent years, but membership rarely exceeded 100.

Several factors prevented the collapse of La Unión Martí-Maceo. The mortgage on the building had been paid, eliminating one of the major costs of operation. Revenues accrued from the rent on two small houses owned by the society and, more importantly, from frequent rental of the facility to other organizations. Deficits were made up by periodic special fundraising events.

There were at least two substantial grants of assistance from the Cuban government which aided the survival of the organization during this period. Officers of La Unión Martí-Maceo had from the very beginning maintained communications with government officials in Havana. They regarded their organization as officially Cuban, rather than American. The by-laws contained a provision that, should the club dissolve, the assets were to be turned over to the Cuban government. During times of financial adversity, the officers had intermittently appealed to Havana for assistance, usually without success. In turn, the club periodically sent donations to Cuba for such things as hurricane disaster relief, victims of the 1918 flu epidemic, and a monument to José Martí. In 1943, they requested a $30,000 loan, $5,000 of which they eventually received from the Ramón Grau San Marín government. In 1956, the government of Fulgencio Batista sent them an additional $10,000 needed for major repairs to the building. In a related gesture that same year, Batista offered to pay the costs of restoration on the former house of Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso, two of the founders of Martí-Maceo. This was to be part of a monument to Martí in what was once the Pedrosos’ back yard. As it turned out, the largesse of Batista’s assistance was not matched by the results. The Pedroso house was destroyed in a fire of unknown causes before any work was completed. Although successfully undertaken, the repairs to the Martí-Maceo building were for naught, for within ten years urban renewal condemned and demolished the structure.
Frequent rental of the dance hall and cantina to black American organizations was the major factor sustaining the organization through the depression. These revenues measurably compensated for the loss of income due to reduced membership, and the rental transactions served to promote increased communication between black Cubans and black Americans. La Unión Martí-Maceo had the largest and best equipped dance hall facility available to blacks in all of Tampa. It was the only place where large social affairs could be held, and it was particularly suited for black entertainers who were making the circuit. For the most part, black Cubans did not attend the dances and parties that were held by black Americans in the Martí-Maceo hall. However, such luminaries as Cab Calloway and Chic Webb were often sufficient to lure the second-generation Cubans who were beginning to appreciate a different kind of music.

Assimilationist Pressures in the Second Generation

The 1930s and 1940s witnessed changes that promoted more interaction and perceptions of common interests between black Cubans and black Americans. Cuban children more often attended the public junior high and high schools, where they came into contact with black Americans at a stage in life cycle when romances as well as friendships were likely to occur. By
1940, growth in the overall size of the black population, coupled with the sharp decline in the number of black Cubans rendered them a very small minority—less than 3 percent of the black population. Due to the small size of their group, Afro-Cubans found it increasingly difficult to sponsor separate activities.

Afro-Cuban teenagers were especially affected by the almost total decline in organized activities at La Unión Martí-Maceo. When the city opened a recreation center for black youths in 1950, many Afro-Cuban parents were reluctant to permit their children to participate. As an alternative, several adult members of Martí-Maceo established what was called the “Pan American Club.” The activities of the club were similar to those of Afro-Cuban youth in the previous generation: they organized plays, pageants and dances. A major difference, however, was that many black American teenagers were also involved, and a black American was president of the club. This was a practical solution to the numbers problem, but it also represented a deliberate attempt to lessen the distance that had long existed between the two groups.

Residential proximity served to remove additional barriers between black Cubans and black Americans. With the closing of most cigar factories and deterioration in the surrounding houses, the immigrant neighborhoods began to change. Many of the white ex-cigarworkers moved to new neighborhoods, and the houses they vacated were increasingly occupied by black Americans. Between 1950 and 1960, the black population in one section of Ybor City shifted from 3 percent to 29 percent. Most Afro-Cubans remained. Their mobility was affected by the same restrictions that confined nearly all blacks to the inner city neighborhoods.

Within this changing urban environment, neighborly sociability combined with a growing understanding that all black Tampans shared a common struggle against racism and segregation. An Afro-Cuban lawyer, whose father had long been a principal figure in La Unión Martí-Maceo, was one of the leading local NAACP activists during the 1960s. Although many Afro-Cubans, and especially the elderly, remained reticent about involvement in American political issues, almost all approved of the civil rights movement. For many, Martin Luther King, Jr., joined the pantheon of heroes along with Martí and Maceo.

While Fidel Castro was assuming similar heroic dimensions for many blacks in Cuba, his triumph inspired far less fervor among Afro-Cubans in Tampa. Most perceived little continuity between the revolutionary involvements of their grandparents and the contemporary struggle in Cuba. The major effect of the political changes in Cuba came in the form of travel restrictions, which substantially reduced the flow of communication between Cubans in Tampa and friends and relatives still living on the island. The trade embargo stopped shipments of Cuban tobacco and dealt one more blow to the Tampa cigar industry. These changes, along with the increasing political enmity of the United States toward Cuba, added further impetus to the process of assimilation.

**Crisis and Revitalization**

Ybor City’s industrial obsolescence and delining housing stock made the area a prime target for the urban renewal bulldozers that rolled into Tampa in the early 1960s. Although the core of
Ybor City remains, vast sections of housing and commercial properties were cleared. Many Afro-Cubans were displaced from their houses, and several lost businesses. However, urban renewal’s major broadside against the Afro-Cubans came with the demolition of the Martí-Maceo building in 1965. Of the five ethnic societies with buildings in Ybor City, Martí-Maceo was the only one to suffer this fate. On the morning of the demolition, a small group gathered on the sidewalk to witness the event. The wreckers proceeded with their work in some discomfort as they watched one old man fall slowly to his knees with tears in his eyes. This was indeed a solemn and discouraging moment, and in the weeks that followed there was, for the first time, serious talk of disbanding.\footnote{42}

Those favoring perseverance ultimately won the debate, and the club purchased another building. It was less commodious, but still within Ybor City, situated across the street from the site of the Pedroso house where the founders of Martí-Maceo had first assembled in 1900.

Despite these efforts, during the 1960s the official membership of Martí-Maceo had dropped below fifty. Organized activities ceased altogether. A dwindling group of older men gathered each day in the new hall to play dominoes and stalwartly refused to let go of what they had labored so long to create. Their patience was rewarded. Within a few years, a curious demographic convergence resuscitated the club, more than doubling the membership and bringing a return of banquets, dances and other formal activities.

The young adults who had left Tampa and travelled north during the 1930s began reaching retirement age in the early 1970s. The general ascendance of the Sunbelt, together with Florida’s reputation as a felicitous retirement setting, helped persuade many to return to Tampa. A more focused persuasion came from personal communication, which had been maintained through the years between many of the Afro-Cubans who left and those who had remained in Tampa. From this came offers of assistance in relocating, along with assurances that conditions in the South really had changed.

Many returning Afro-Cubans had also remained in contact with each other while they were living in New York. The migrants initially formed a kind of satellite community, which for many included participation in an organization similar to La Unión Martí-Maceo. This was called the Cuban Club and was located at Prospect Avenue and 162nd Street. One of the returnees had been an officer in this club for many years. For his family and many others it seemed quite natural to reestablish membership in La Unión Martí-Maceo.\footnote{43}

La Unión Martí-Maceo grew steadily through the 1970s. The current membership of 107 includes twenty-nine who are return migrants. The current president is a returnee. Emigration from Cuba after 1959 and during the Mariel boatlift of 1980 also had an impact, but of far less importance: seven current members arrived between 1959 and 1979. Another four were part of the Mariel exodus of 1980. Although diversity in the origins of members is consistent with the earlier composition of the club, new dimensions of complexity have been added. A significant minority (seven) are white Cubans, and a comparable number (nine) are black Americans.\footnote{44}

Rental of the facility to other, mostly black American, organizations remains the major source of revenue that sustains La Unión Martí-Maceo. However, increasingly regular activities are
arranged for the benefit of the members, and there has been discussion of expanding the building

The current building of La Unión Martí-Maceo.
and possibly reinstituting medical insurance.

Largely as a function of these renewed activities, Afro-Cuban ethnicity in Tampa has enjoyed a noticeable revitalization. The research that is presently underway on the history of the community is one expression of this phenomenon. Additionally, the research reveals an innovative response on the part of the community to contemporary conditions threatening the existence of La Unión Martí-Maceo.

The project was begun at the initiative of officers in La Unión Martí-Maceo in an effort to draw increased public attention to the history of the Afro-Cuban community. Specifically, the information that is being collected is intended to balance and extend existing historical accounts of Ybor City, which pay scant attention to Afro-Cubans. In recent years city officials have launched a serious new attempt to redevelop Ybor City into a tourist-oriented Latin Quarter. Members of La Unión Martí-Maceo are justifiably concerned that such efforts will have effects similar to urban renewal. They alone among the ethnic societies in Ybor City lack the protective embrace of historic status for their building, because they alone were forced to move into newer quarters that do not qualify. Without that status to safeguard their building against future demolition, they are seeking to secure their position by clearly establishing the historical role of Afro-Cubans in helping to shape Ybor City’s cultural ambience. This they feel can best be accomplished by actively enhancing local awareness of the history of their community. Afro-Cubans in Tampa have long maintained a low visibility, partly in a deliberate effort to avoid problems. This is no longer adaptive, however. For reasons that are both sentimental and pragmatic, there is now a strong desire to see the accomplishments of their parents and grandparents recounted and preserved. In this way perhaps the institution that they established some eighty years ago can also be preserved to meet the changing needs of the next generation of Afro-Cubans in Tampa.

The author wishes to express appreciation to Enrique Cordero, graduate student in Anthropology at the University of South Florida, for his valuable contribution to this research.


2 Aguirre, “Migration of Cuban Social Races,” 114.

3 Ibid., 115.


6 Poyo, “Cuban Communities,” 29.

Steffy, “Cuban Immigration to Tampa,” 47-49. During Martí’s visits to Tampa he made it a point to visit the homes of Cornéllo Brito, Bruno Roig, and Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso, Afro-Cubans who actively involved in the patriotic effort. Martí reportedly had an especially close relationship with the Pedrosos. The first speech Martí gave in Tampa included a lengthy exhortation for racial solidarity and tolerance. See also José Rivero Muñiz, *The Ybor City Story* (Los Cubanos en Tampa), translated by Eustasio Fernandez and Henry Beltran, (Tampa: S.N., 1976), 134; Sylvia Griñan, “The Cuban Negro in Tampa, Florida” (1950), unpublished manuscript in possession of author, 27.


Pérez, “Cubans in Tampa.”

Ibid., 136.


Minutes of Meeting, October 26, 1900, Book #36, La Unión Marti-Maceo Records, Special Collections, University of South Florida Library, Tampa.

Membership Lists and Registries, 1901, Book #102, ibid.

Long, “Co-operative Medicine Program.”

Arthur Raper, “A Study of Negro Life in Tampa” (Sponsored by the Tampa Urban League, the Tampa Welfare League, and the Tampa YMCA, 1927), 15-26. Copy available in Special Collections, University of South Florida Library, Tampa. This very thorough and well executed report documents wide discrepancies between the medical facilities and staff serving the black and white populations of Tampa. It also includes statistics on health status, reporting for example that the black infant mortality rate was double that of whites. In contrast, members of Martí-Maceo had access to unlimited prescriptions, clinic visits, and hospitalization when needed. The benefits also included compensation for wages lost due to illness. See also Griñan, “The Cuban Negro,” 28.

Twelfth United States Census: 1900, Microfilm Records of Manuscript Census Schedules for Hillsborough County, University of South Florida Library. Of 3,533 Cuban-born, 540 were black or mulatto; of 8,485 blacks and mulattos, 791 were Cuban-born or the children of Cuban parents. Thirteenth United States Census, 1900, Microfilm Records of Manuscript Census Schedules for Hillsborough County. Of 7,027 Cuban-born, 900 were black or mulatto; of 16,442 blacks and mulattos, 1,472 were Cuban-born or the children of Cuban parents.

Long, “Making of Modern Tampa,” 342; Middelton, “Ethnicity in Tampa.” Oral history accounts indicate that Cubans of any color were not allowed in certain neighborhoods or to use certain public facilities. Reportedly, many local establishments formerly posted signs to the effect that “dogs, niggers, and Latins” were not welcome.
In 1900, there were 791 Afro-Cuban individuals residing in a total of 406 separate household units (Twelfth United States Census: 1900, Manuscript Schedules). The mobility data reported in this paragraph were derived through successive comparisons of the names of persons listed in Tampa city directories or Hillsborough County manuscript census schedules in the following years; 1893, 1899, 1900, 1910, 1914, and 1924. Afro-Cubans were identified in city directories on the basis of Spanish surname combined with an asterisk (*), the latter symbol indicating the resident was black. In the census schedules, racial designations along with country of birth were used to identify Afro-Cubans. The mobility rates of the Afro-Cubans population for the intervals between the above years were determined by identifying the number of households listed at both time periods subtracted from the total number in the base period. Identifications were based on similarity of surname, given name, middle initial (when available), marital status, and occupation.

In the late 1920s, cigarworkers regularly earned about $40.00 per week, compared with earnings of $9.00 per week by black municipal workers and 8 cents per hour by dockworkers who unloaded banana boats. Interview with Joaquin Maldonado, July 10, 1984, Tampa, Florida; interview with Juan Mallea; Raper, “Negro Life in Tampa,” 43.

Of those Afro-Cubans interviewed, nearly all estimated that considerably more than half of the Afro-Cubans in Tampa left during the 1930s.

Miscellaneous Papers, Folio #161, Items #18, #19, #20, #30, Martí-Maceo Records.

Guillermo Pujol to Juan Casellas, April 27,1943, ibid.; interview Juan García.

Mark Scheinbaum, ed., José Martí Park: The Story of Cuban Property in Tampa (Tampa: University of South Florida Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, 1976), 5-6, copy in Special Collections, University of South Florida Library.


Sixteenth Census of the United States, 151.


Interview with Manuel Alfonso.

41 Within the Afro-Cuban community there were individuals who actively supported and aided Castro’s forces. However, La Unión Martí-Maceo maintained an official position of neutrality and refused to permit Castro to speak in the Martí-Maceo auditorium when he visited Tampa in the mid-1950s. It can perhaps be surmised that Batista’s financial assistance to the club mitigated potential opposition among Afro-Cubans in Tampa. Interview with Manuel Alfonso; interview with Juan García.

42 Interview with Manuel Alfonso.

43 Interview with Joaquín Maldonado.

44 Information on current membership status supplied by Juan Mallea, President of La Unión Martí-Maceo.

45 Ybor City has been designated as a federal “Historic Preservation District.” Buildings within its boundaries that have been determined to be architecturally significant or contributing to the historic character of the area are subject to strict protections against destruction or alteration. All the original buildings of the ethnic societies in Ybor City are included as significant structures, except for that of La Unión Martí-Maceo which lost its original building to Urban Renewal. The present structure is neither old enough nor regarded as sufficiently important from an architectural standpoint to warrant protection under Historic Preservation guidelines.