

## FREEMASONRY IN CUBA

### Introduction

Relationships between the United States and Cuba have ranged between the assistance given in the liberation of Cuba from exploitative Spanish rule in 1898 to the abortive “Bay of Pigs” invasion attempt to dislodge the Castro Government of 1961 and the tense Cuban Missile crisis of 1962.

The United States maintains an embargo which makes it illegal for U.S. corporations to do business with Cuba (diplomatic representation in handled by Switzerland) hoping to see democratization and a reintroduction of capitalism of the type that took place in Eastern Europe after the revolutions of 1989.

Cuba is of particular interest to Masons because Cuba is one of the few nations where Freemasonry was proscribed by its (Spanish) colonial power for centuries but with the introduction of a Marxist-communist dictatorship Freemasonry has been permitted to operate.

### History of Cuba



Christopher Columbus sighted the island of Cuba during his first voyage of discovery in 1492 and Cuba became a Spanish colony ruled by a Governor in Havana. The Seven Years' War, which started in 1754 and Spain's alliance with the French meant war with the British, and in 1762 a British expedition captured Cuba<sup>1</sup>. The arrival of the British immediately opened up trade with their North American and Caribbean colonies, causing a rapid transformation of Cuban society. Food, horses and other goods flooded into the city, and thousands of slaves from West Africa were transported

to the island to work on the undermanned sugar plantations. However Cuba was returned to Spain in exchange for Florida.

The first large-scale war for Cuban independence began in 1868 and lasted 10 years concluding with the inconclusive Treaty of Zanjón, which established only that slaves who fought on either side were freed, but slavery was not abolished and Cuba remained under Spanish rule. The second war for independence, called the “Little War” started in 1879 and lasted just one year with no better result.

After the ten years war US interest and financial capital began flowing into Cuba, mostly into the sugar and tobacco business and mining and, by 1895, although Cuba remained Spanish, it had started to depend economically on the United States.

In 1895, the main independence leaders landed on two expeditions in Oriente. Continuing west, they were met by 1868 war veterans in Las Villas, adding weapons, men and experience to the revolutionaries' arsenal.

After the Ten Year War, possession of weapons by private individuals had been prohibited. This led to a guerrilla-style war, using the environment, the element of surprise, a fast horse and a machete. Most of their weapons were captured from the Spaniards but many unsuccessful attempts were made to bring weapons and supplies to the rebels from outside the country. Only one succeeded through the protection of the British.

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia

Starting in the early 1880s, Spain had also suppressed an independence movement in the Philippines, which was intensifying, and Spain was fighting wars on two fronts, which were putting a heavy burden on its economy.

In 1897, the liberation army had occupied Camagüey and Oriente. For the rebels, it was essential to take the war to the western provinces Matanzas, Havana and Pinar del Rio, where the island's government and wealth were located. The Ten-Year War failed because it had not managed to proceed beyond the eastern provinces. In a successful cavalry campaign the revolutionaries invaded every province. Surrounding all larger cities and well-fortified towns, they arrived at the westernmost tip of the island exactly 3 months after the invasion near Baraguá.

Spain's Prime Minister **Praxedes Sagasta** admitted in May 1897: "*After having sent 200,000 men and shed so much blood, we don't own more land on the island than what our soldiers are stepping on*"<sup>2</sup>. The rebel force of 3,000 had defeated the Spanish in various encounters and the Spaniards were kept on the defensive. By the end of 1897, there were 240,000 Spanish regulars and 60,000 irregulars on the island. The revolutionaries were far outnumbered.

The final three months of the conflict escalated to become the Spanish–American War, when, in January 1898, following a riot by Cuban Spanish loyalists, the US Consul-General cabled Washington with fears for the lives of Americans living in Havana. In response, the battleship USS *Maine* was sent to Havana. Soon after her arrival the *Maine* was rocked by an explosion, killing 258 of the crew and sinking the ship in the harbour. The cause of the explosion has not been clearly established to this day

US President McKinley gained Congress authority to send American troops to Cuba following a resolution supporting Cuban independence and disclaiming any intention to annex Cuba, demanding Spanish withdrawal, and authorizing the president to use as much military force as he thought necessary to help Cuban patriots gain independence from Spain.

Hostilities started when a contingent of US Navy ships blockaded Cuban ports and the Americans landed at Daiquirí and Siboney, east of Santiago, and established a base. Major battles between Spaniards and Americans took place but the American advance ground to a halt. Spanish troops successfully defended Fort Canosa, allowing them to stabilize their line and bar the entry to Santiago, which, however, eventually surrendered after the defeat of the Spanish Caribbean Squadron.

After losing the Philippines and Puerto Rico, which had also been invaded by the US, and with no hope of holding on to Cuba, Spain sued for peace in 1898 and agreed to relinquish all claim of sovereignty and title over Cuba and in 1902 Cuba gained formal independence. Under the terms of agreement with the US for the withdrawal of US, Cuba agreed to lease Guantánamo Bay to the United States.

In the years following its independence, Cuba saw significant economic development, but also political corruption and a succession of despotic leaders, culminating in the overthrow of the dictator Fulgencio Batista by the communist revolutionary Fidel Castro during the 1953-9 Cuban Revolution.

Castro started as a liberal and nationalist revolutionary. The large Cuban middle class and unionized workers supported his efforts to restore democracy and extend socioeconomic gains to the less-favored sectors. Castro betrayed this ideal and implanted instead his four-decades-long Marxist dictatorship<sup>3</sup>.

Many thousands of Cubans went to political prisons, were killed in the guerrilla war, were sent to forced labor camps, were expelled from the universities and work places or have drowned in the Florida straits. One million have preferred going into exile. Dissidents are routinely jailed. Cubans still flock out of the island at every chance.

Cuba has since been ruled by Castro's Communist Party of Cuba, although Fidel Castro himself formally stepped down from leadership of the country in 2008, to be replaced by his brother Raúl Castro.

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>3</sup> Seven enduring myths about Cuba” By Jorge Luis Romeu. Published in The Syracuse Post Standard 2002

Following the Cuban Revolution of 1959 relations between USA and Cuba deteriorated substantially, and have since been marked by tension and confrontation. The United States has maintained an embargo which makes it illegal for U.S. corporations to do business with Cuba. because of the nationalization of US corporations' property during the Revolution, and has stated it will continue it so long as the Cuban government continues to refuse to move toward democratization and greater respect for human rights.

In early 1961 the unsuccessful “*Bay of Pigs Invasion*” was launched by a CIA-trained force of Cuban exiles to invade southern Cuba, with support and encouragement from the US government, in an attempt to overthrow the Cuban government of Fidel Castro but was defeated within three days.

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was a confrontation between the Soviet Union and Cuba on one side and the United States on the other in October 1962, during the Cold War. Cuban and Soviet governments secretly began to build bases in Cuba for a number of medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic nuclear missiles with the ability to strike most of the continental United States. This action followed the 1958 deployment of similar US missiles in Italy and Turkey in 1961 having the capability to strike Moscow. It was resolved initially by a naval blockade of Cuba ordered by President Kennedy and by treaty involving the removal of the Russian and US warheads and the removal of missiles in Turkey.

### **Freemasonry in Cuba**

Freemasonry first appeared in Cuba in 1763, and largely grew from English and Irish military lodges. However, the English departed in 1763 and Cuba reverted to Spanish rule where Freemasonry had been proscribed since 1741.

Spain having sided with France in the Napoleonic Wars, French Masons arrived in Cuba, fleeing the Haitian revolution in 1791 (eventually bringing three Lodges with them) but it was not until 1804 that the first Lodge “Temple of the Theological Virtues” was chartered in Cuba by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania<sup>4</sup>. By 1822 there had been 15 Lodges in Cuba sponsored by several Grand Lodges at different times as shown in the following table.

| <b>Sponsoring Grand Lodge</b> | <b>No of Lodges</b> | <b>Period of Charter</b> |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania   | 7                   | 1810-1822                |
| Grand Lodge of Louisiana      | 3                   | 1815-1818                |
| Grand Lodge of South Carolina | 2                   | 1818-1819                |
| Grand Orient of France        | 3                   | 1819-1821                |

As Freemasonry was proscribed by Spain the Lodges worked in secret and some Lodges were erased for failing to meet but by 1859, with growing unrest against Spain prior to the ten years war, there was a revival and the Grand Lodge of Colon was established by the Grand Lodge of South Carolina with three Lodges. With the establishment of a Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite, this changed to the Grand Orient of Colon but arguments ensued. The ten years war began in 1869 and this meant that the Lodges had to suppress their activities and the Spanish authorities executed several men for being Freemasons. The number of Lodges fell from 30 down to 7 in 1870.

In 1873 the Grand Lodge of Colon resumed operations. In Havana 9 Lodges formed a rival Grand Lodge of Cuba in 1876 and it had agreed that the higher degrees should be worked by the Grand Orient of Spain. By late 1876 the Grand Lodge of Colon had 36 Lodges and about 8,000 members and the Grand Lodge of Cuba had 17 Lodges. In 1879 they amalgamated as the Grand Lodge of Cuba.

After the Cuban revolution in 1895, Spanish control having been removed, Freemasonry prospered and the Grand Lodge of Cuba had about 400 regular Lodges. The Grand Lodge of Cuba is regular and recognized by the majority of mainstream grand lodges around the world.

Following the Castro-led revolution of 1959, Freemasonry went into a sharp decline. However, since 1990 the number of members has grown.

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<sup>4</sup>Freemasons for Dummies

According to the “2010 List of Lodges-Masonic”, Cuba today has 316 Lodges, with more than 29,000 members. More than a third of the members and lodges are in Havana, and some members also belong to the Communist Party of Cuba, according to a recent study by **Jorge Luis Romeu**, a Mason born in Cuba and a Professor of Statistics at the University of Syracuse, in New York.<sup>5</sup>

That Freemasonry operates in Cuba at all is remarkable, in that it was the only state formerly within the Soviet sphere of influence where Freemasonry was permitted. Although it is not altogether clear why Cuba should have tolerated the Craft, it is strongly rumoured that the intellectual élites backing the revolution, felt an affinity for Freemasonry due to its historical involvement with many of the liberation movements of Central and South America. Many Cuban revolutionaries in the three decade struggle for independence from Spain, like **Joseph Marti**, **Antonia Maceo** and "father of the nation" **Carlos Manuel de Céspedes**, who were Freemasons.

It is also said that, during Cuba's revolution, Fidel Castro took refuge in a Masonic lodge, and so has never shut down the fraternity. The result is Masonry's unusual ability to straddle the line between an oppressive state and freedom.

Masonry is legal in Cuba, but is strictly controlled by the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba. They do not take a confrontational stance with authorities, yet they welcome dissidents as members. Nevertheless, and surprisingly, Masonry has survived in Cuba, despite an effort by pro-Castro members in 1959 to dissolve the group, alleging that the revolution had eliminated the necessity for such groups. There is some evidence of a resident Masonic group being formed to assist in the unsuccessful “*Bay of Pigs*” invasion of Cuba in 1961.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Cuban government eased restrictions on Freemasonry, allowing them limited ability to participate in public ceremonies and to charter the first new lodges since 1967. Still, anything more than holding regular meetings requires government permission. And the publishing of Masonic books and even pamphlets is severely restricted.

### **The Grand Lodge of Cuba in Exile**

There is also a Grand Lodge of Cuba in Exile operating in Miami with the following 12 Lodges:-

- Florencio Pino # 1
- Perseverance of Havana
- Perseverance of Cardenas
- Carlos M. Pineiro and Cueto
- Harmony
- Solomon # 2
- Alberto Chaves
- Antonio Maceo
- Freedom
- Equality
- Joaquin F. del Cueto
- Fraternity

It was formed in 1962 in the belief that Freemasonry was totally banned in Cuba and named itself the "Grand Lodge of Cuba in Exile" with V Brother **Roger Pujol** as first Grand Master. This Grand Lodge of Cuba in Exile is recognized by the Grand Lodge of Florida but not by all US Jurisdictions. Its Declaration of Principles denounces the Castro regime for its abuses and states that Freemasonry would not rest until Cuba is free and democracy reigns in Cuba.

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<sup>5</sup> A history of Freemasonry in Cuba – Warren Murphy – Walter Meier Lodge of Research Vol 4 1974

It is one of the most powerful institutions in the United States<sup>6</sup> but perhaps because of their special characteristics or ignorance of their strength this is not widely known. It has expanded into other States and, in every major city in USA where there are considerable groups of Cubans, there is a Lodge. In California and in Chicago, Texas, Louisiana, Tampa, Atlanta, New York, Puerto Rico, and Miami there are Cuban Lodges with members. There are two Charity bags - one for Charity and another for a special fund to cooperate in any effort to rescue Cubans who claimed some help.

However, it is understandable that, while Cuba allows Freemasonry on the mainland some freedoms, the Castro Regime is highly suspicious of the Grand Lodge of Cuba in Exile. Recently **Juan Manuel Collera Venta** and two other Masons are accused of allowing a Mason initiated in Miami to attend a meeting in a Cuban Lodge last year, violating a rule establishing that only members initiated in Cuba can visit the Lodges of the island<sup>7</sup>.

### Female Freemasons in Cuba

A professor of philosophy at the University of Havana states that a female student claimed to be a Freemason<sup>8</sup>. The student told him that female Masons perform rites almost the same way as men, that the society had come to Cuba through Chilean colleagues, and that there were now two lodges on the island – one in Havana and the other in Pinar del Rio. He later conducted an interview with **Leticia Cora Guerra**, Master Mason; and **Aryan Lisset Garcia**, Junior Warden; both of the Venus No. 23 Lodge and reported the following conversation (in part):

*“It is important to point out that though the patriot Freemason brethren are not physically present, their legacy is maintained in their constant presence in our workshops. For example, every January 28 we perform a special ritual dedicated to our dear brother **Jose Marti**, and during National Culture week we pay tribute to the Cuban flag, which is Masonic in its symbolic entirety.*

*You’ll note that we are an example of racial integration in our Pinar del Rio lodge. There, Victoria No. 24 lodge is beautifully adorned with black women. In fact the current Grand Master of Pinar del Rio is black, as is part of the leadership of our lodge, Venus No. 23. There are mestizo women in the lodge I’m in.*

*We’re advancing in short but firm steps. It’s not our goal to grow in quantity, but in quality. To legally constitute ourselves as a Grand Lodge, we must have three lodges according to Law 54/85, the Associations Law, and its concordant 1986 Regulation. Currently in Cuba there exist some 60 female Masons distributed among the three symbolic “degrees of Craft” and the two lodges (Victoria No. 24 in the valleys of Pinar del Rio and Venus No. 23 in the city of Havana). There are also sisters in the surrounding Havana province, the municipalities of Bejucal and Artemisa, as well as “Promotion Groups” existing in the cities of Cienfuegos and Santiago de Cuba and some about to form in Holguin and Bayamo, in addition to several candidates now in the process of joining. What is now an unstoppable fact are the stories that female Cuban Masons are writing today. In a near future these will be the pillars that sustain the Grand Women’s Masonic Lodge of Cuba”.*

### Some Famous Cuban Freemasons



Lt. General **José Antonio de la Caridad Maceo y Grajales** (1845–1896) was second-in-command of the Cuban Army of Independence. Called the "Bronze Titan" by the Cubans and the "Greater Lion" by the Spaniards, **Maceo** was one of the most noteworthy guerrilla leaders in 19th century Latin America. **Maceo** developed an active interest in the political issues of his time and was initiated into Freemasonry.

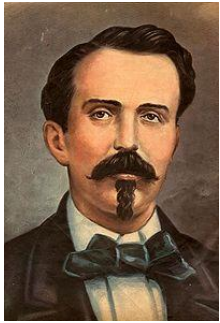
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<sup>6</sup> [http://masoneriacobana.com/masoneria\\_en\\_el\\_exilio.html](http://masoneriacobana.com/masoneria_en_el_exilio.html) - Article written by Brother Orestes Ferrer

<sup>7</sup> El Nuevo Herald, a Spanish-language newspaper published in Miami, on May 24th, 2010

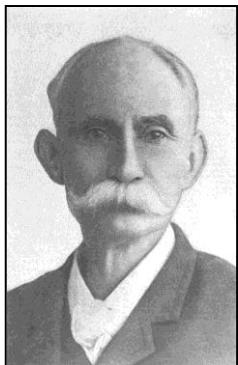
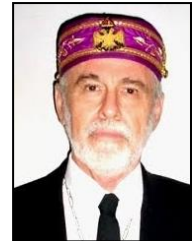
<sup>8</sup> “Women Freemasons in Cuba” - Havana Times, April 6, 2010 By Alfredo Fernandez Rodriguez

**José Julián Martí Pérez** (1853–1895) was a Cuban national hero and an important figure in Latin American literature. In his short life he was a poet, an essayist, a journalist, a revolutionary philosopher, a translator, a professor, a publisher, and a political theorist. He was also a part of the Cuban Freemasons. Through his writings and political activity, he became a symbol for Cuba's bid for independence against Spain in the 19th century, and is referred to as the "Apostle of Cuban Independence". He also fought against the threat of United States expansionism into Cuba. From adolescence, he dedicated his life to political independence for Cuba and intellectual independence for all Spanish Americans.



**Carlos Manuel de Céspedes del Castillo** (1819–1874) was a Cuban planter who freed his slaves and made the declaration of Cuban independence in 1868. **Céspedes** owed a sugar plantation in eastern Cuba. After returning from Spain in 1868, he made the declaration of Cuban independence, which began the Ten Years' War. That morning he freed his slaves and invited them to join him and his fellow conspirators in war against the Spanish government of Cuba. In 1869 he was chosen President of the Republic of Cuba in Arms but deposed in 1873 in a leadership coup. Spanish troops killed him in February 1874. He was Master of "Buena Fe" Lodge at Manzanillo.

**Gustavo Pardo Valdes**<sup>9</sup> was initiated in Freemasonry in 1984, the "La Luz de Occidente" Lodge, where he served as Secretary. He is a past Master of "Havana" Lodge and a member of the Grand Lodge of Cuba. In 1994 he was elected Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Library and, in 2000, as President of Public Relations Committee. Born in 1946 in Havana, he is a geotechnical specialist and author of several books on Freemasonry. He was a powerful speaker of democracy in the Cuban system and was arrested as a political prisoner.



**Máximo Gómez y Báez** (1836-1905) was a Major General in the Ten Years' War and Cuba's military commander in the War of Independence. He retired as a Colonel from the Spanish Army after their defeat in the Dominican Annexation War and became a rebel 1868, helping transform the Cuban Army's military tactics and strategy. The Spanish Army was terrified of his Machete charges. In 1871 **Gómez** led a campaign to clear Guantánamo from forces loyal to Spain. Most of his officers went on to become high ranking officers, including **Antonio Maceo**. **Gómez**, rose to the rank of Generalísimo of the Cuban Army. In 1898 the Spanish Captain-General of Cuba, Ramón Blanco y Erenas, proposed that **Gómez** and his Cuban troops join him and the Spanish army in repelling the United States in the face of the Spanish-American War but

**Gómez** refused.

**Carlos Prío Socarrás** (1903–1977) was the President of Cuba from 1948 until he was deposed by a military coup led by Fulgencio Batista in 1952, three months before new elections were to be held. **Prío** was committed to a rule marked by civility, primarily in its respect for freedom of expression. Several public works projects and the establishment of a National Bank and Tribunal of Accounts count among his successes. **Prío** said of his presidency "They say that I was a terrible president of Cuba. That may be true. But I was the best president Cuba ever had".



During Cuba's communist revolution, **Joaquín del Cueto** became a target for Fidel Castro. He was an officer in Batista's army, worked with an American in Havana with ties to the CIA and headed the anti-communist group, Accion Civica. In 1961, two days after the Bay of Pigs invasion, he was executed by a government firing squad, aged 38<sup>10</sup>. A Lodge in Miami is named in his honour.

<sup>9</sup> Masonic Times Tuesday, 5 April 2011

<sup>10</sup> By Jay Weaver. Tuesday, January 8, 2002 in Miami Herald

**In 1959** Jorge Luis Calvo Cuervo **was** a member of Lodge “*March World*” and was Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Cuba in 1961-62, organized a **clandestine Masonic movement** in Havana. Its members were mostly army veterans. In 1962 he was poised to start an armed struggle against the Castro regime. In the US the “*Masonic Movement for Freedom of Cuba*” was also involved in the plot. However the plot failed and Cuevo and others were arrested. Queen Elizabeth II interceded for his release and he went into exile in Miami.



**Amelia Peláez del Casal** (1896–1968) was an important Cuban painter of the Avant-garde generation. She received a prize in the *National Exposition of Painters and Sculptors* in 1938. She sent her paintings to the São Paulo Art Biennial in 1951 and 1957, and participated in 1952's Venice Biennale. In 1958 she was a guest of honor and integrated the International Jury of the first *Inter-American Paints and Drawing Biennale*. **She was a member of one of the female Lodges in Havana.**

**Remedios Varo Uranga** (1908–1963) was a Spanish-Mexican, surrealist painter and anarchist. She was born **María de los Remedios Varo Uranga** in Spain. **Varo's** style was beautifully enigmatic and instantly recognizable. She often worked in oil on masonite panels she prepared herself. Her work continues to be respectfully regarded in Mexico and the United States. **She was a member of one of the female Lodges in Havana.**

### Conclusions

Relationships between USA and Cuba continue to be unresolved but stable after the tense missile crisis of 1962. There is, as yet, no apparent change in relationships following the ascension of Raul Castro to leadership of Cuba although recent events are heartening.

Freemasonry in Cuba occupies a curious position, as Cuba is one of the few nations with a Marxist dictatorship where Freemasonry still flourishes. Freemasonry shares some ideals with Communism – equality and fraternity – but Freemasonry also stands for liberty, whereas Marxist Communism seeks to dominate individuals on behalf of the good of the State. Freemasonry in Cuba shows itself as loyal to Cuba but not necessarily to the Castro regime, which many Freemasons had fought to establish.

The Freemasons on mainland Cuba have obviously acted with great patience and prudence despite the restrictions under which they must act.

However the expressed political attitude and actions of the Grand Lodge of Cuba in Exile does not align with Masonic principles. Masonry respects those who fight for their principles and for freedom, as have many Cuban revolutionaries in the past, but cannot condone Lodges or Grand Lodges which become directly involved in political activities, particularly those involving violence or invasion.