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A Cuban Connection

*Edwin F. Atkins, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., and the
Former Slaves of Soledad Plantation*

REBECCA J. SCOTT



CUBA OFFERED STARTLING CONTRASTS for a winter visitor from Massachusetts in the nineteenth century. Palm trees, brilliant skies, and soft breezes fit the image of a tropical paradise, while railroads and the belching smokestacks of sugar mills evoked the industrial landscape of grimy Lawrence or Lowell. Beneath the industry and beauty of Cuba lay the persistent reality of African slavery. As a colony of Spain, Cuba had been administered under an increasingly draconian rule that sought to preserve Spanish dominance and a dramatically inequitable prosperity based on slaveholding.

In 1838, Elisha Atkins of Massachusetts and his partner William Freeman had begun to benefit from Cuba's slave economy by exporting molasses and sugar from Cienfuegos, on Cuba's southern shore, to Boston. When the sixteen-year-old Edwin Farnsworth Atkins first voyaged to Cuba in 1866 to learn his father's business firsthand, slavery had just been extinguished in the United States. While an intense struggle over the boundaries of freedom for the former slaves convulsed the U.S. South, 360,000 men, women, and children of African descent in Cuba remained slaves—nearly 50 percent of them living on the island's sugar plantations.¹

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“E. F. A. as Young Boy.” Halftone from Edwin F. Atkins, Sixty Years in Cuba: Reminiscences of Edwin F. Atkins (privately printed at the Riverside Press: Cambridge, 1926), facing page 4. Collections of the MHS.

Despite slavery’s persistence in Cuba, a number of interrelated events in the United States, Spain, and on the island itself had begun to weaken the institution. Abraham Lincoln’s wartime decision to enforce the laws treating slave trading as piracy helped to grind contraband trade to Cuba to a halt; the U.S. flag would no longer shelter illegal activities from the scrutiny of the British navy.² The Union victory in the Civil War signaled to slaveholders in Cuba and Brazil that they would now be alone in defending a vision of economic modernity built on slavery. A modest Spanish abolitionist movement began to question the morality of slavery and helped bring about passage in 1870 of the Moret Law, which freed young children and the elderly in both Cuba and Puerto Rico. Inside Cuba during the same period, nationalist writers and organizers criticized Spain’s complicity in the slave trade and questioned colonialism itself. The most radical among them called for the abolition of slavery.³

Beginning in 1868, a bitter civil war pitted rebel Cuban nationalists—who drew from among free people of color, slaves, and Creole whites—against Spanish colonial forces backed by conservative Cuban planters and other pro-Spanish loyalists. Settlement of the war in 1878 did not end slavery on the island, but the war had set the process of emancipation in motion. In 1880, the Spanish government declared slavery abolished in name, if not in substance. Responsive to pressure from planters, Spain crafted a law that bound former slaves as *patrocinados*, or apprentices, to their masters for eight

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more years. The cloak of *patronato* (patronage) covered a system that appeared to offer freedom but enabled masters to extract several more years of largely unpaid labor from their slaves.

By the early 1880s, the Cuban countryside was home to a complicated and heterogeneous rural population. *Patrocinados* and *libertos* (those freed under the Moret Law by virtue of having been born after 1868 or having reached the age of sixty) worked alongside Chinese laborers recently released from indenture and thousands of Spanish immigrant laborers. In the countryside, smallholders, renters, squatters, and contract cane farmers of all socio-racial categories moved back and forth between farms, plantations, and the sugar towns. The drama of final emancipation would play on a very crowded stage.

Edwin F. Atkins and Charles Francis Adams, Jr., stand out on this stage not as major players but as a particularly intriguing Boston connection. Among the truly major players, planters like Julián Zulueta and the Count of Casa Moré owned hundreds of slaves and shaped Spanish policy. On the Cuban nationalist side, few could equal the impact of Antonio Maceo, the *mulato* insurgent general who insisted on full emancipation at the end of the 1868–1878 war, or the thousands of rebels who fought under the orders of rebel generals Maceo and Máximo Gómez. As the master of some ninety-five *patrocinados* beginning in 1884, Edwin Atkins was a late arrival on the scene of slavery. But he did leave an exceptionally rich record of his years in Cuba, including daily correspondence with the manager of Soledad, his sugar estate. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., enjoyed a walk-on part, visiting Edwin Atkins at Soledad plantation for several weeks in 1890. He spent his mornings on horseback exploring the neighborhood and his afternoons writing wry, carefully crafted letters to his wife and his brother. Together, the Atkins and the Adams papers—both held by the Massachusetts Historical Society—provide a vivid portrait of the end of slavery and the first years of freedom.

The port of Cienfuegos and its hinterland were undergoing rapid economic expansion as Edwin F. Atkins took on increasing responsibility for the trading business established by his father. Four different river systems open out onto the bay of Cienfuegos, and their broad valleys provide ideal flat land for the cultivation of cane. By the 1870s, the district contained over seventy sugar plantations. The rivers offered convenient transportation for the crystallized sugar to the port facilities, and from there steamboats carried the cargo to the wharves of New York and Boston. To the east of the bay lie the valleys of the Caunao and Arimao rivers, beyond which rise foothills leading to the Trinidad mountains. Planters might see the hills as a beautiful backdrop for their

estates, but they also feared them as a refuge for rebels and bandits. Many former slaves and small-scale farmers had settled on whatever plots of open land they could find there.⁴

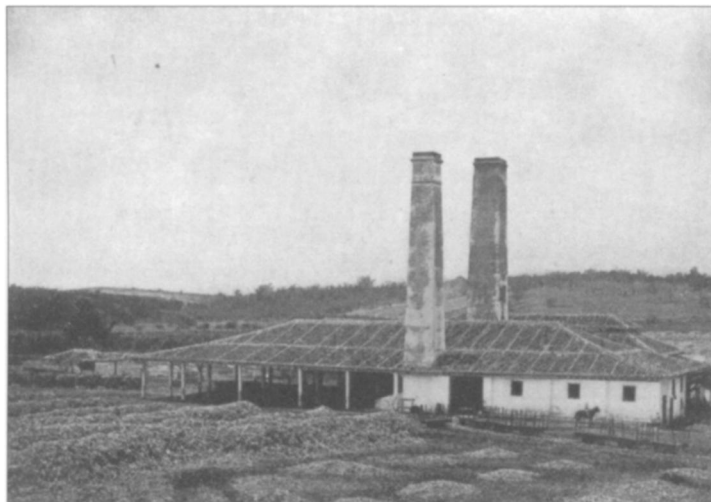
The Soledad plantation, founded by the Sarría family, was by Cuban standards a mid-sized estate, with 900 acres and 180 slaves according to the census of 1877. An 1881 bill of sale from the Sarrías to Edwin Atkins's partner Joaquín Torriente enumerated 177 *patrocinados*, candidly referred to simply as *esclavos*, or slaves.⁵ Under the 1880 Spanish law establishing the *patronato*, they were scheduled to be freed by lottery between 1884 and 1888. When Atkins bought the plantation from Torriente in 1884, he named as the new general manager J. S. Murray, a native of Pittsburgh and longtime resident and railway engineer in Cuba. Murray spent most of 1884 renewing contracts with the farmers who supplied cane to the mill, hiring new laborers, and struggling to assert control over the remaining 95 *patrocinados*, who still constituted an important part of the labor force.⁶

Murray found many of the bound laborers eager to purchase their full freedom, and his accounts recorded their payments, including a total of \$548 from six *patrocinados* in June 1884. Murray informed Atkins that three of them—Victor Gangá, whose age was listed as 52, Benicia Criolla, listed as 49, and Eduviges, listed as 51—were “in reality over 60 years of age, therefore free according to law.” The previous owner had apparently falsified these slaves' ages to avoid granting them the freedom mandated at age 60 by the 1870 Moret Law. Murray was content to continue the fiction and extract unwarranted payment along the way—payments based on funds accumulated by *patrocinados* from the sale of hogs that they had raised.⁷

In addition to those formally under the *patronato*, Soledad also employed *libertos*, including young men and women born to slave mothers after 1868 and thus freed by the Moret Law. Murray commented on one group of *libertos* who had been driven away by the plantation's disgruntled previous manager: “I have taken all the able ones back, they work better, cost less and are much easier to manage than white men and they all more or less have fathers, mothers, sisters and aunts that attach them to the estate.” Murray's optimism, however, was short-lived. He soon complained that “almost every negro on the estate owns a horse and they are a source of constant trouble in some way.” Murray's subsequent letters reflect a continuing campaign to force the workers to get rid of these horses, emblems of mobility and autonomy.⁸

By May of 1885, Murray began cracking down: “I have given order to negros to sell all their hogs, prohibiting in the future the raising of hogs.” He offered to increase their monthly salary by fifty cents as recompense, but he went

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“Soledad Mill, 1884.” Halftone from Edwin F. Atkins, Sixty Years in Cuba: Reminiscences of Edwin F. Atkins (privately printed at the Riverside Press: Cambridge, 1926), facing page 92. Collections of the MHS.

on to order the sale of their horses as well. Murray’s attempt at further restricting the freedom and economic life of the workers proved counterproductive. A work stoppage ensued, and within a few days “all the libertos rebelled.” When they refused Murray’s terms, he ordered them off the estate, grumbling “we are better without them as they are now only working when they feel like it, and keeping up a constant loafing during the day in the ranchos.”⁹

Murray’s references to hogs, horses, and “loafing” in the *ranchos* (huts with small plots of land) suggest that an internal economy, the lineal descendant of the old system of slave provision plots, was alive and well at Soledad. Murray tried to trim it down, but in doing so he encountered immediate resistance. Because he controlled lodging and wage income, Murray could win the first round. “All the libertos have come to terms and all begged to stay, I sent off only the two head men, They know how they stand with the estate and I don’t intend to loose control of them in the future.”¹⁰

But Murray’s resolution did not last long. By August of 1885, his relationship with the workers had so degenerated that he put several of the protesters in the stocks, an illegal act. His desperate measures reflected the increasing hopelessness of maintaining strict control over the behavior of men and women who could see the imminent end of their bondage. Hoping to reestablish order on the plantation, Murray proposed to Atkins that they cut a deal

with the remaining *patrocinados*: “give all the negros their liberty at the price established by the government, fixing a salary of from \$8 to \$10 deducting 50%.” It was hardly a generous proposition, but Atkins opposed it, fearing that he would lose “the bal[ance] of Patrocinado a/c as it stands in your ledger.” Atkins proposed instead retaining the *patrocinados*’ *cédulas*, their identity papers, while each one worked off his or her price as it appeared in the company account books. “Any arrangement which would secure the value of the a/c would meet our approval and I much prefer to finish entirely with the old system as soon as we can safely do so without loss, in this as in other matters you can use your judgment knowing what our views are.”¹¹

In May of 1886, Murray concluded that these efforts to continue legal bondage impeded rather than facilitated the plantations’ operations and saved too little money to make the effort worthwhile.¹² Murray offered the remaining *patrocinados* their freedom for twenty pesos; for those who did not have the money, five pesos a month would be deducted from their wages. He anticipated that by facilitating this purchase of freedom, he could “organize them better when all of one class.” Besides, he concluded, “we will have to give them their liberty in a short time.” Less than five months later, the Spanish Parliament decreed the abolition of the *patronato* and put an end to the institution of slavery in Cuba.¹³

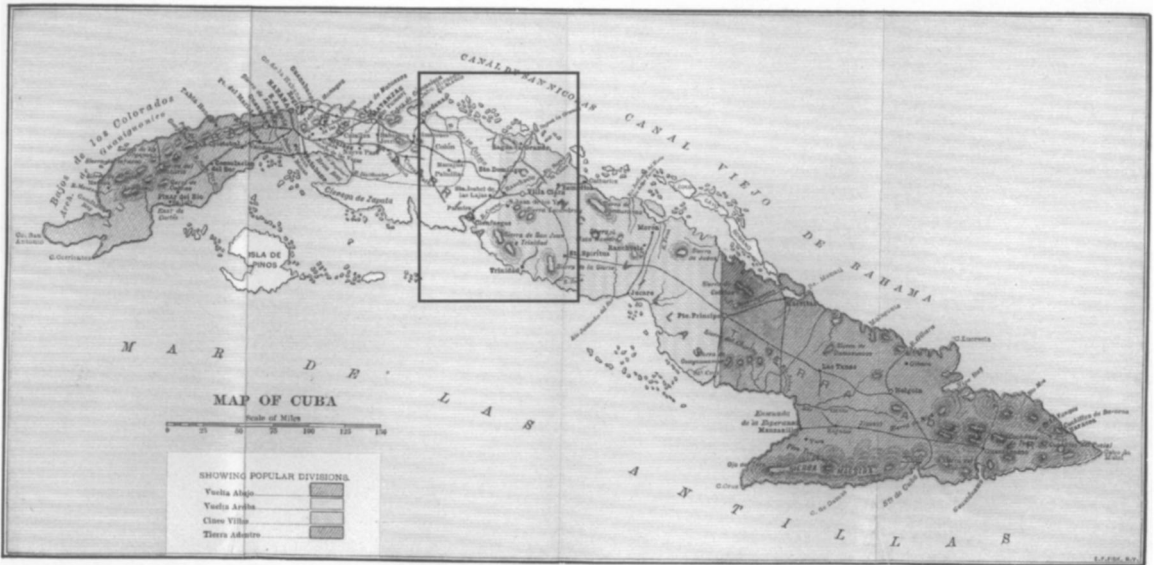
I can manage them better when all of one class, besides we will have to give them their liberty in a short time.

J. S. Murray to Edwin F. Atkins, May 27, 1886. J. S. Murray letterbook, Atkins family papers, collections of the MHS.

What might we conclude from this portion of the story? It is hardly a novel observation that foreign investors cannot be counted upon to put the well-being of those who labor for them above the value of their investments. More interesting is the evidence of the continual tugging and hauling between the owners, managers, and laborers as they contested the boundaries of freedom. We might take special note of several features of this process. First, the transformations at Soledad represented a struggle over lives and values, not just wages. The men and women emerging from slavery had lived for years on the plantation, and many had taken their surname—Sarría—from the former owner. They planted food crops on the various *conucos* (garden plots) and

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“Map of Cuba; Showing Popular Divisions,” in *The Island of Cuba: Descriptive and Historical Account of the “Great Antilla.”* Andrew Summers Rowan and Marathon Montrose Ramsey (New York, 1896), facing page 4. Collections of the MHS.



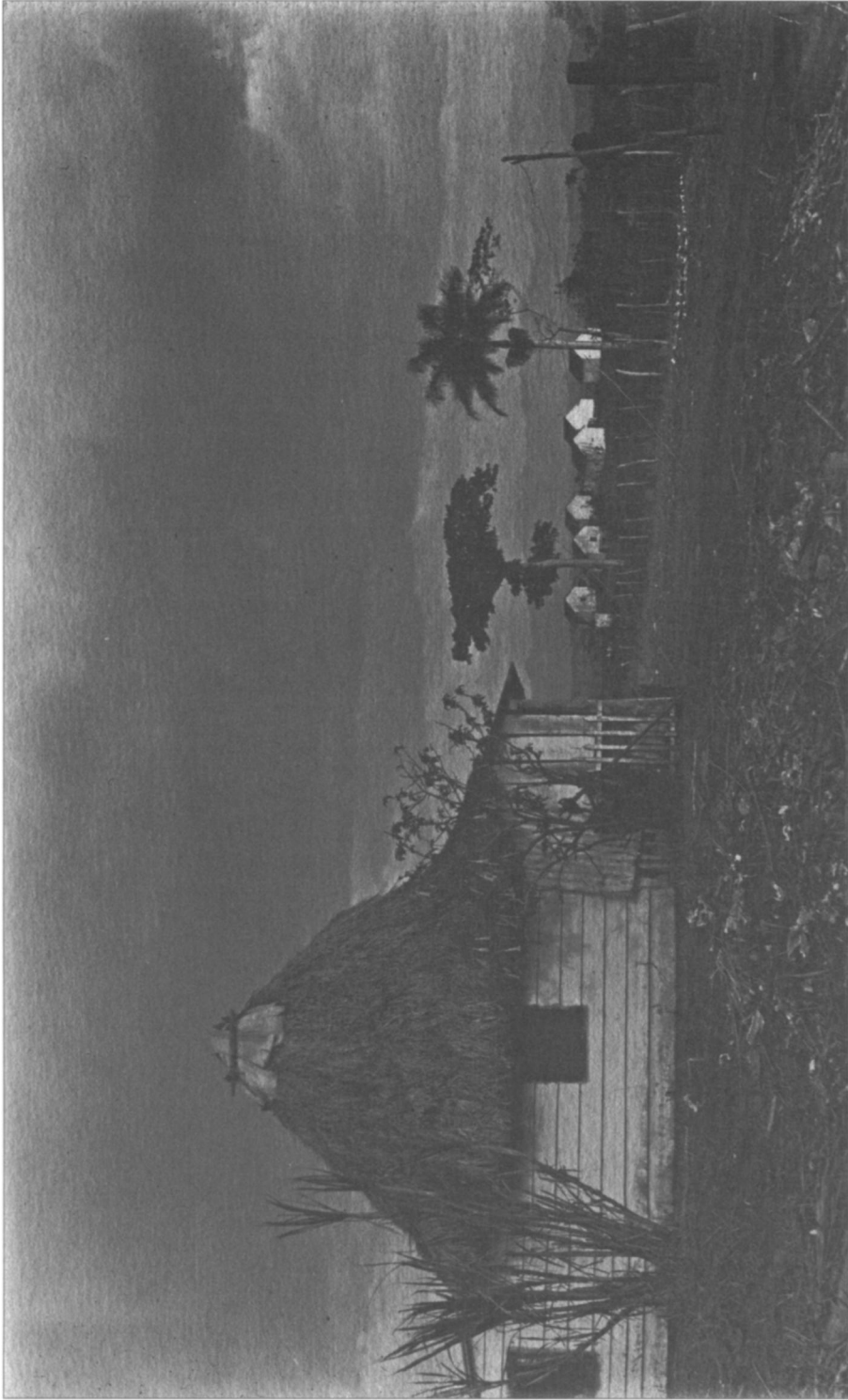
sitios (small farms) on the estate, and they buried their kin in the plantation cemetery. They understood that their labor had made the estate a productive enterprise. Moreover, this was home. With freedom, they believed themselves entitled to consume or sell the produce from the gardens they planted and the hogs they raised. The former slaves and *libertos* lacked legal title to the land, but they nonetheless viewed the *ranchos* or *sitios* they occupied as their own. Some of Murray's difficulties arose precisely from the fact that E. Atkins & Co., as recent purchasers of the land and buildings, brought a temperament to Soledad's operations that was fundamentally different from the workers' views of their own entitlements.

Second, attachment to the land appeared to make many of the *patrocinados* on Soledad pragmatic about the process of gradual emancipation. They likely believed that freedom should be theirs by right, but if necessary they would sell a pig and hand the proceeds over to Murray to secure the treasured *cédula*, the certificate of legal freedom. Thus, the *patrocinados* found themselves indemnifying those who had held them captive. Murray and Atkins, in turn, saw the approaching end of the *patronato* and cashed out slowly to avoid losing the value of the bound laborers in their ledgers, but they bowed sufficiently to the demands of their workers to maintain order on the plantation and not endanger their own authority.

A third element that stands out in the lives of the plantation's workers is the omnipresence of horses. Horse ownership brought mobility, a measure of real freedom, and perhaps a degree of masculine honor. With a horse, one could go overland to Cienfuegos, about ten miles away, or scout out the wages offered at plantations further afield. Alternatively, one could ride a few hours eastward to the ford on the Arimao River and cross to the town of Arimao, a multiracial community with lively politics and memorable dances. Beyond Arimao and Cumanayagua lay the mountains, home to rebels of various kinds.¹⁴ The anticolonial rebellion had helped to trigger the beginnings of slave emancipation. The prospect that former slaves might join any new rebellion could shape the struggle over the meanings of freedom.

In outline, one can thus see some of the elements that former slaves employed to build their freedom. Small garden plots, a few hogs, and the ubiquitous horse provided the initial basis for a new life. Owners hired former slaves to cut cane, drive the carts, and take care of the cattle, but considered other workers and their families as simply "excess." In 1885, Murray wrote dismissively that he had given "several lots of land to old and useless negros," land that he considered "a lot of waste land on a hill," far enough from the center of the plantation to "keep them away."¹⁵

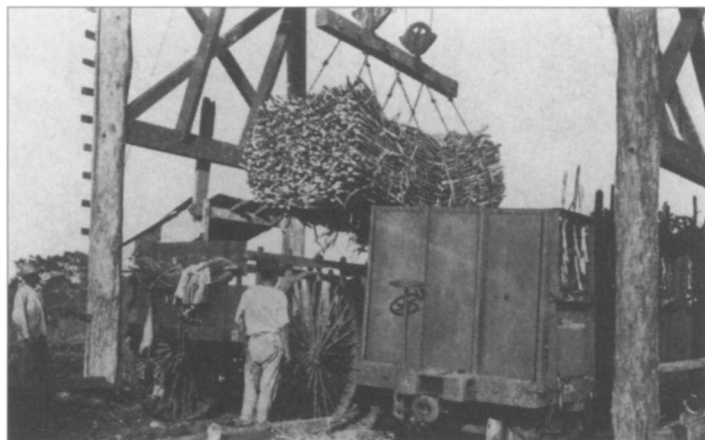
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“Limones estate at Soledad, Cuba.” (Limones was originally a separate estate, eventually incorporated by Atkins into Soledad.) Atkins family photographs, 37.2.42, collections of the MHS.

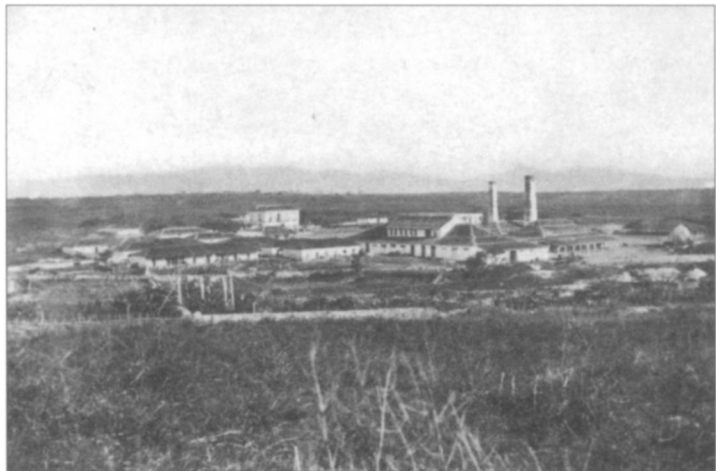


“Soledad estate, Cuba.” Atkins family photographs, 37.340, collections of the MHS.



“Sugarcane being lifted from cart, Soledad, Cuba.” Atkins family photographs, 37.213, collections of the MHS.

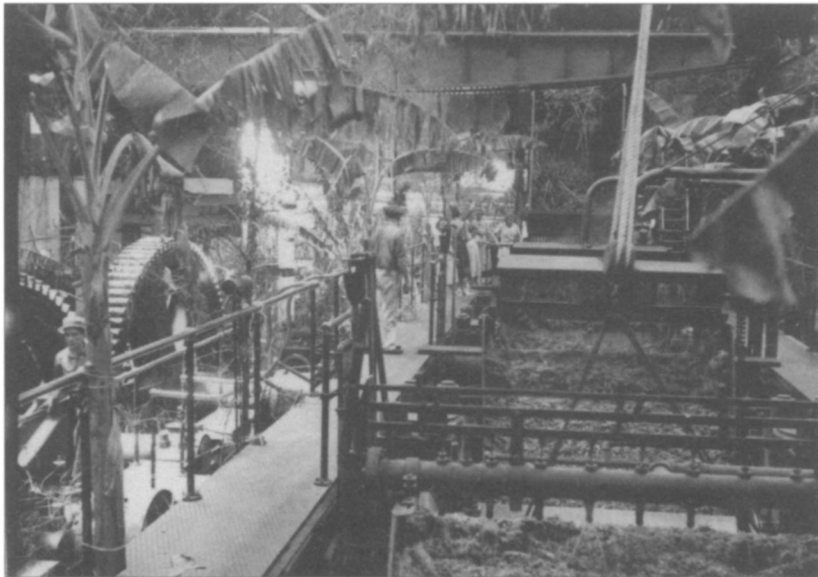
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*“Soledad, Cuba.” Atkins family photographs, 37.214,
collections of the MHS.*



“Mr. Elisha Atkins, Captain Beal, Mr. Murray (standing), E. F. A.” Halftone from Edwin F. Atkins, Sixty Years in Cuba: Reminiscences of Edwin F. Atkins (privately printed at the Riverside Press: Cambridge, 1926), facing page 114. Collections of the MHS.



“Sugar Mill.” Atkins family photographs, 37.257, collections of the MHS.

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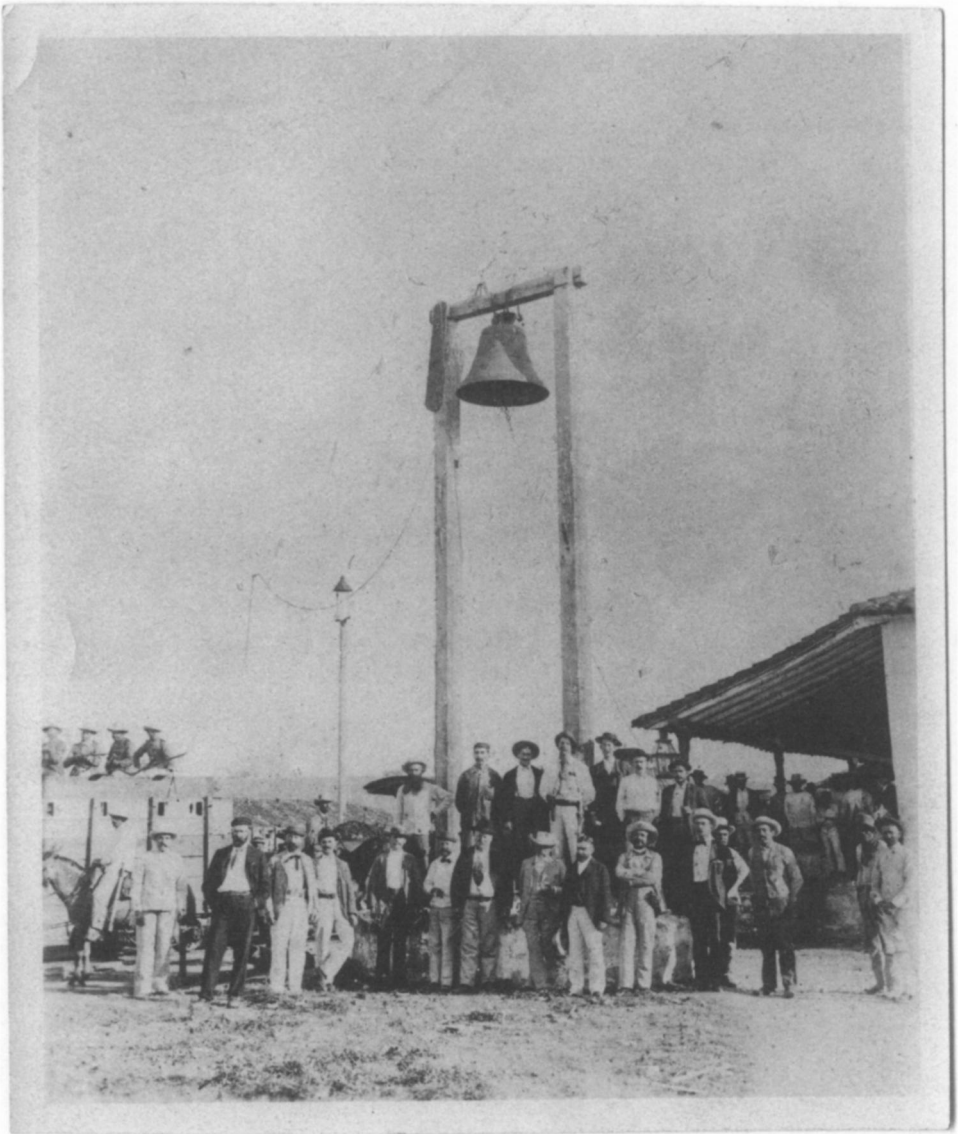


“Horse with local boy.” Atkins family photographs, 37.278, collections of the MHS.

“Boy on a pony at the Caledonia estate at Soledad, Cuba, ca. 1910.”

(Caledonia was originally a separate estate, eventually incorporated by Atkins into Soledad.) Atkins family photographs, 37.226, collections of the MHS.





"Under the old slave bell, Soledad, Cuba, ca. 1895." Atkins family photographs, 37.216, collections of the MHS.

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“Guards Returning with the Workmen.” Halftone from Edwin F. Atkins, Sixty Years in Cuba: Reminiscences of Edwin F. Atkins (privately printed at the Riverside Press: Cambridge, 1926), facing page 230. Collections of the MHS.



“Cutting Cane under Guard.” Halftone from Edwin F. Atkins, Sixty Years in Cuba: Reminiscences of Edwin F. Atkins (privately printed at the Riverside Press: Cambridge, 1926), facing page 182. Collections of the MHS.



“Former Slaves—Sin Cedula.” Halftone from Edwin F. Atkins, Sixty Years in Cuba: Reminiscences of Edwin F. Atkins (privately printed at the Riverside Press: Cambridge, 1926), facing page 252. Collections of the MHS.

Atkins wrote on page 97: “Among the older negroes was a little Congo, under five feet in height, who said he was the son of a prince in Africa and that he had been kidnapped and sent to Cuba as a slave. After the Spanish Government required a certificate, termed a ‘cedula,’ from every one, this little negro complained that he never received one and was known as ‘Sin Cedula.’ He walked with a cane and we did not consider him able to do any work. But many years afterward, he took charge of a gang of boys and walked with them to the fields with his hoe and worked all day.”



“Negro Quarters, Soledad, 1884.” Halftone from Edwin F. Atkins, Sixty Years in Cuba: Reminiscences of Edwin F. Atkins (privately printed at the Riverside Press: Cambridge, 1926), facing page 96. Collections of the MHS.

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Into this final stage of Cuba's drama over slavery wandered Charles Francis Adams, Jr. (1835–1915). Son of Lincoln's ambassador to England, Civil War veteran, author, historian, and railroad entrepreneur, Adams wished to forget the miserable Boston winter and the discouraging turn of business events, where he had been ousted from his position as president of the Union Pacific Railroad by the rising Jay Gould. His old friend Edwin Atkins suggested a vacation at Soledad plantation. Arriving on the island in January 1890, Adams found Cuba's vegetation a bit disappointing, but he rather liked the architecture of Havana with its "heavy arcades, the brown stucco walls, with deep set windows, the subdued roofs of tiles, all suggestive of Italy as you remember it twenty-five years ago, but most refreshing and full of repose to one who for years has surfeited on paint and shingles and clapboards, with jig-saw trimmings."¹⁶ He also encountered stucco and tile at Soledad, both in the dwelling house and in the old slave quarters. He was, however, less charmed by the sugar mill itself, with its "wretched freight yard" and "great, ugly soot-vomiting-stacks." With his customary condescension, he opined that the fields of sugar cane "would from this distance be mistaken for a rather poor patch of half-matured Indian corn." Adams disparaged Soledad's inadequate plumbing. And, of course, no one in Cuba kept champagne cold enough for his taste.¹⁷

Adams's crankiness subsided, however, under the influence of Cuba's winter air—"so pure, so soft and yet so fresh, so salubrious . . ."—and he began to roam the neighborhood and record his observations.¹⁸ Africans and Cubans of African descent especially drew his curiosity. He judged them the only properly exotic thing in Cuba, and so, like a good tourist, he tried to observe and compose stories about them for his family back home. In doing so, he combined the acuteness of an accomplished writer with the incomprehension of a man without knowledge of the local language. Reading George Eliot's *Adam Bede* put him in the mood for sketches of rural life. Rather than Eliot's empathy, however, one finds in his letters the racial stereotypes of a patrician New Englander for whom color differences marked those of African descent as deeply alien.¹⁹ On his third day he wrote,

Yesterday afternoon, towards sunset, we rode out and went to what they call "China-town," or the place set apart for the freed slaves, who yet remain about the plantation. It is a piece of refuse land, largely ornamented with field stone, and the children of Africa live thereon in habitations of palm-bark and thatch. They were a strange sight. Nearly all of them seem to have been born in Africa,—they had the pure negro features, most unnaturally ugly, and many of them were old, rheumatic and broken.

They were evidently the refuse of the place,—like a troop of old, broken-down and used-up horses, turned out to take care of themselves—and die. They all knew Atkins, and approached us with strange attempts at salutation, making eager inquiries after his wife, who seems, in her visits here, to have been kind to them,—a mode of treatment to which from all accounts they were not much accustomed.²⁰

Adams's description a few days later of one of the older former slaves reflected both his fascination and his stark racialism:

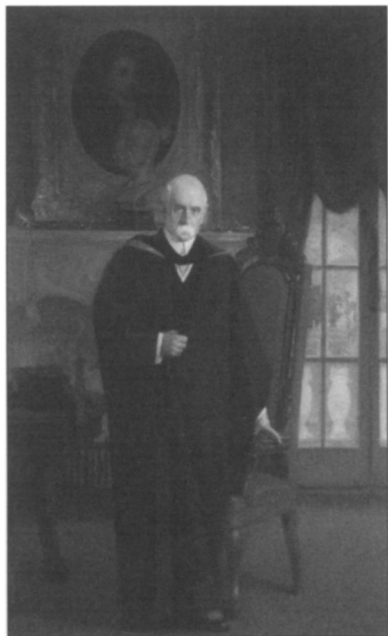
The only diversion was the return to the plantation of a hideous old African woman, who it seems is a privileged character. Mr. Murray, the manager of the place, intimated that he suspected she had been down to Cienfuegos, where she has a grand-daughter, impelled by the love of strong drink; but the old lady herself met us on our arrival, and, with many gestures and much volubility, informed Mr. Atkins that she had gone there for the benefit of sea-bathing, and she now desired him to direct Mr. Murray to provide her with a small piece of land and a house, for her greater convenience in living. She is a sociable old party and gives me the advantage of many speeches in negro-Spanish,—squatting about all the while like a deformed monkey.²¹

The challenge here for the researcher is to find a way to cut through the derogatory metaphors and adjectives to the real lives of those whom Adams observed. This unnamed woman, whose granddaughter had migrated to the city, clearly wished to remain on Soledad. What Adams found risible—that she should expect to have land and lodging—she evidently found perfectly logical. She may well have wanted to locate herself somewhere other than the barren wasteland to which many of the former slaves had been consigned. Treated as refuse, many of these older slaves looked to Adams like refuse. But this “sociable old party” clearly had a strong sense of herself and her rights. Moreover, Adams could see that others somehow shared this sense—she seemed “a privileged character.” She knew where she belonged, which was right there, and she wanted Atkins and Murray to acknowledge her rights. What better time to make a claim than during a visit by a distinguished guest, when Atkins might feel obliged to accede?

Through Adams's sketching of exotic scenes several patterns emerge, including the former slaves' search for land, resources, and the right to permanence, as well as freedom of movement. Adams, like Murray, was impressed with the ubiquity of horses. On the way to a neighboring plantation, Adams noted that he passed “men going to market, perched on top of the

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Charles Francis Adams II (1835–1915) was a leading member of the Massachusetts Historical Society and served as its president from 1895 to 1915.



Oil on canvas by Robert William Vonnob, 1913. Collections of the MHS.



Photograph by Elliott & Fry, 1913. Portraits of Members, collections of the MHS.

pannier-saddled animals. At the wretched native wine stores, at each road crossing, were groups of horses tied to the posts and the fences, the riders of which—rough, bearded and dirty—with great straw hats on their heads, were drinking coffee or wine, and smoking cigarettes, on the dirt floors of the porches.”²²

When Adams reached the hill town of Arimao, the clear river water and the beautiful mountains in the distance delighted him. He even toyed with the idea of buying the handsomely situated but rundown Conchita estate. But he had little way of engaging with the social life of the town other than as a genre scene, and he possessed neither the means nor the inclination to inquire about the lives of rural Cubans. At worst, they seemed exemplars of Latin lassitude; at best, they appeared as participants in a tableau evocative of Italian paintings.²³

But like people everywhere—including picturesque Italian peasants—Arimao's population of African descent declined to play to type. If Adams saw a woman named Bárbara Pérez as he rode through Arimao, he probably perceived her dark color and steady gaze as part of his aesthetic of the exotic. We can nonetheless reconstruct a more complex portrait from other sources. Bárbara Pérez had been born into slavery on the nearby Santa Teresa plantation, owned by Sebastián Pérez Galdós, and was expelled from the estate after emancipation. She had learned to read while still a slave, and each time a newspaper arrived in the town of Arimao, Bárbara Pérez read it aloud to her neighbors, keeping them in touch with the rest of the world. A black woman's assertion of the right to speak in the public sphere, her neighbors' participation in a new social world emerging in the countryside—these actions fell outside Adams's range of observation. Almost never did Adams or Atkins refer to a former slave by name, and they entirely missed the struggle for respect and standing that engaged men and women of color in Cienfuegos and the surrounding countryside.²⁴

In late February of 1890, both Atkins and Adams sailed north to the chilly air of a Boston spring, and back to business. Seeking to reconstruct a credible financial position after his humiliating departure from Union Pacific, Adams overreached, and the financial panic and economic collapse of 1893 caught him “carrying a large amount of sail—far more than was prudent.” The result was a devastating financial reverse.²⁵ Atkins, although fearful of new tariffs and taxes from Spain, oversaw larger and larger crops at Soledad, which he had built to 12,000 acres, with some 1,200 employees at harvest time. The generous provisions of the McKinley tariff expanded Cuban exports to the United States, and the island's sugar production reached the one-million-ton mark in the early 1890s. In 1894, however, trade negotiations between Spain and the United States broke down. Cuban sugar came off “the free list” and became subject to a brutal 40 percent tariff on raw sugar and 48 percent on refined.²⁶ Spain in turn imposed heavy tariffs on imports to the island. The price of sugar to the producer fell; the cost of living on the island climbed. Plantations laid off cane workers, hunger loomed, and illness swept through Soledad. The anticolonial movement that had been in abeyance since 1880 picked up new strength, and men from the area, including former slaves named Sarría, became possible recruits.²⁷

Rumors of war reached Soledad in February and March of 1895. At first, Edwin Atkins struck a confident pose and remarked that “in these parts the trouble seems confined to a bunch of bandits in vicinity of Sn Lino. . . . I do not think there will be any fighting outside of N York Herald.”²⁸ But in the east-

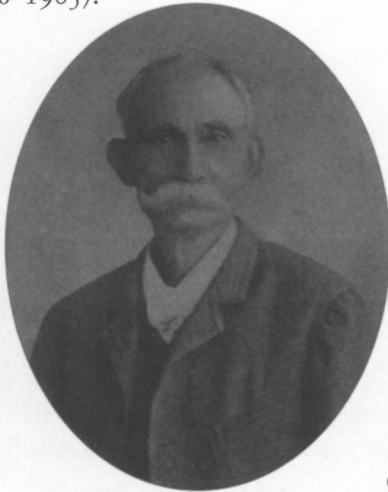
Antonio Maceo (1848–1896).

Both portraits: Library of Congress, Hispanic Division, “The World of 1898: The Spanish American War.” LOC, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/> (accessed May 23, 2007).

The site provides a textual and photographic online history of the war. Portraits originally published in Photographic History of the Spanish-American War (New York, 1898), 32.



Máximo Gómez Baez (1836–1905).



ern part of the island, the rebellion took hold, and once again Spain was obliged to defend its sovereignty over Cuba. The rebel leadership, including José Martí and Máximo Gómez, aimed to end Spanish control and to eliminate the structures of racial and ethnic discrimination. Antonio Maceo, the rebel general with a history of opposing racism, returned from exile in Central America and began recruiting fighters.

Juan Gualberto Gómez, a leader of the battle for civil rights for Cubans of African descent, was soon arrested by Spanish colonial authorities. In leadership as well as in its rank and file, the campaign to end Spanish rule represented a cross-racial movement of extraordinary dimensions.²⁹

By the summer of 1895, regional insurgent leaders around Cienfuegos had gathered enough supporters to spark risings in several towns. In late June,

the management at Soledad reported that work still proceeded smoothly, although hostilities had increased. Spanish forces, according to Atkins, chased “a party of a dozen or so in the vicinity of Cumanayagua” to the east, toward the mountains. In late July, a rebel expeditionary force landed on the coast of Santa Clara province, and the insurrection began to strengthen in the region.³⁰

Claudio Sarría, born a slave on the Soledad sugar plantation, took command of one rebel company operating near Soledad, and several former slaves joined him. Among them were Ciriaco Quesada, free since 1886, and Cayetano Quesada, born free to a slave mother on the neighboring Santa Rosalía plantation. In December, the rebel forces from the east swept across the center of the island, passing just north and east of Soledad and stimulating further recruitment. By January 1896, the new manager on Soledad, J. N. S. Williams, reported a “uniting of [the] small parties into one large party of rebels. Claudio Sarría, Rafael Monte, Torres, and Najarro have united their forces with the Mejicano for their own safety.” The group comprised some three hundred men, and surviving enlistment registers show dozens with the surnames Quesada, Sarría, Iznaga, and Zulueta, markers of their families’ previous status as slaves of the region’s landowners.³¹

Atkins and Adams had not imagined that Cubans—black, *mulato*, Chinese, and white—would take matters into their own hands and seek an end to Spanish colonialism, while aiming to redistribute power and resources on the island. To Atkins, the rebels represented only bands of common outlaws; to his managers at Soledad, they were dangerous vandals. But these were the emergent companies of a Cienfuegos brigade of what its members called the Liberation Army. Over the next three years, rebel forces of this kind across the island fought Spanish troops to a tense stalemate. Then, in April 1898, the United States intervened in the conflict, and Spain conceded defeat a few months later.

Given his interests and experiences, we can hardly expect Edwin Atkins to have comprehended the dynamics of freedom taking place on his estate or to have sympathized with the nationalist insurrection. Charles Francis Adams, Jr.’s wry descriptive wit and unsparing arrogance, moreover, predictably led to caricatures of Soledad’s residents of African descent. Nevertheless, the record of experiences in Cuba left to us by Atkins and Adams—whatever their limitations—can be used to build a fuller understanding of this era in Cuban history, and provides glimpses into the everyday lives of rural people. The countryside of Cienfuegos, after all, was not just the object of a Bostonian

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gaze, but a real place. And its history can be reconstructed by layering different kinds of records and memories.

More than a century after Charles Francis Adams, Jr., returned to Boston, descendants of the black families he had observed, some of them named Sarria and Quesada, as well as the descendants of Bárbara Pérez, still live in Cienfuegos. In June 1998, with photocopies of Adams's letters in my backpack, I visited Leonardo Alomá, who for most of his life worked on and around the Soledad plantation, now known as Pepito Tey. Alomá was a guide at the Cienfuegos Botanical Garden, the successor to the Atkins garden, adjacent to the plantation. With two other historians, I had looked through Adams's accounts of his morning rides and reconstructed several of his itineraries.

In the early afternoon one day, four of us set out on a trail, all that remains of the Camino Real to Arimao, the town Adams had admired for its clear river and lovely surrounding hills. At the hamlet of San Antón we changed course. An uncle of Alomá's lived there, and he told us of three brothers and a sister in San Antón—Humberto, Francisco, Gerardo and Ramona Quesada—whose father had been a soldier in the 1895 war. They still lived on a small farm nearby. Ramona Quesada and her husband Evelio Castillo received us warmly. Her father, it turned out, was Cayetano Quesada, who fought in the 1895 war in a company of rebel infantry raised in the neighborhood. His name appears on a register of the children of slaves born on the adjacent Santa Rosalía plantation. Cayetano Quesada was a member of one family that had lived on Santa Rosalía in 1890, when Charles Francis Adams visited the estate and found it “backward” compared to the Atkins mills.³² Adams had used harsh language to describe the kin of Ramona Quesada. When he wrote to his brother John Quincy Adams II of his Santa Rosalía visit, he portrayed the work force as “slouchy, half-naked negroes, doing in a lazy, slovenly fashion what machinery does so quickly and neatly in the modern mill.”³³

Understandably, given Adams's attitudes and biting prose, I felt no eagerness to read his letters to the residents of San Antón. But in one description from February 16, 1890, just four years after the final abolition of slavery in Cuba, Adams had dropped his guard and for a moment appeared to recognize the legitimacy of a set of aspirations that he otherwise conveyed primarily through caricature. On that morning of his last day at Soledad, Adams had set out on a final philanthropic errand, to deliver a suit of clothes to one “distorted and more than half-naked old African” who lived in the “colony of old slaves.” Such an errand was consistent with his view of these people of African descent as a residuum, left behind by progress, toward whom pity

and occasionally charity might be felt. His letter, however, contained one unusual passage that departed from his usual condescension and even seemed tinged with a little envy. I read it aloud on Ramona Quesada's patio, improvising a Spanish translation as I went along:

So this morning we were in the saddle a few minutes after sunrise, and rode out to the main road, followed by a mounted man carrying the bundles. It was a Sunday morning, and fresh and clear as all mornings here seem to be, and, as we turned into the road from the plantation gate, we came across a Cuban family party that did my soul good:—coming towards us,—picking their way down the rocky road to the bed of the stream which crossed it,—were a negro and his wife,—both were mounted on rather sorry looking animals, he riding first and she following. Each had a child in front of them, he a little girl and she the baby, and they were bound for a whole day's outing, dressed in their best clothes, and regardless of expense. Their garments and aspect told the whole story,—the expedition had been arranged for days, and their own and the children's clothes made ready,—they had gone to bed early, and been up since dawn getting breakfast and dressing the children, and now, at sunrise, they were far on their way, sun-umbrellas and all, as happy and as much impressed with their own favored condition as it is given to mortal man to be.

I suppose that as I translated, I shaded some of the more stereotyped aspects of the genre portrait of happy peasants, but it seemed important to go all the way to the end:

As we passed them at the crossing of the brook we bade them good morning and good luck, and I looked back after them, and carried away a sort of vague wealth of smiling, black faces, white teeth, and general happiness. The woman especially, in her queer riding habit and negro finery, seemed to laugh all over with joy and contentment. It almost vexed me as I rode on to think that I could n't get as much out of a holiday as they were bound to have before they got home tonight.³⁴

Leonardo Alomá calculated that Adams must have ridden out that morning in 1890 from what was then the main entrance to Soledad, and turned left on the trail that runs from Cienfuegos to Arimao, passing very close to San Antón. Thus, the people Adams observed likely belonged to the extended network of families of former slaves and their descendants into which Ramona Quesada and her brothers had been born. For an instant, Adams had caught a glimpse of the exercise of freedom in everyday life: the unprecedented level

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of mobility (those ubiquitous horses); the results of insistence on the right to wages and some independent choices about consumption; and the newly won ability to preserve their families and not be menaced by separation through sale. The image he recorded held multiple meanings for him, and still other resonances for Ramona Quesada a century later, as she envisioned her father's kin and neighbors in the years before her birth. The Boston-Cuba connection, it seemed, had borne long-delayed fruit, a moment of mutual recognition that could become part of the reconstruction—by both historians and local residents—of the aftermath of slavery in the world of cane.

NOTES

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1. On this first trip, see Edwin Farnsworth Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba* (1926; New York, 1980), 1–11. On the slave population, see Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1899* (1985; Pittsburgh, 2000), 12.
2. See David R. Murray, *Odious Commerce: Britain, Spain and the Abolition of the Cuban Slave Trade* (Cambridge, Eng., 1980), esp. 299, 305.
3. On abolitionism in Spain and the Antilles, see Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833–1874* (Pittsburgh, 1999).
4. For a portrait of Cienfuegos, see Orlando García Martínez, “Estudio de la economía cienfueguera desde la fundación de la colonia Fernandina de Jagua hasta mediados del siglo XIX,” *Islas* (1977): 55–56.
5. The estate's land holdings are described in “Noticia de las fincas azucareras en producción que existían en toda la isla de Cuba al comenzar el presupuesto de 1877–78,” *Revista económica*, June 7, 1878, pp. 7–24. See the list of *patrocinados* in *Ventas de Fincas por el Señor Juez de Primera Instancia de esta ciudad a favor*

- de la sociedad de Torriente y Hermanos, Aug. 8, 1881, Escritura Núm. 200, folios 840–846v, Protocolo Hernández Castiñeiras, Año 1880, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Cienfuegos.
6. See Atkins, *Sixty Years*, 91. The estimate of 95 *patrocinados* held by Atkins comes from the letters of Murray, specifically J. S. Murray to Edwin F. Atkins, June 23, Dec. 4, 1884, May 26, 1885, Aug. 6, 1885, in ser. IV, Atkins Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter AFP).
 7. The discussion of the six self-purchases is in the letter of J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, June 19, 1884, ser. IV, AFP.
 8. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, July 1, Oct. 21, 1884, ser. IV, AFP. I have discussed events on Soledad in an essay titled “Reclaiming Gregoria’s Mule: The Meanings of Freedom in the Arimao and Caunao Valleys, Cienfuegos, Cuba, 1880–1899,” *Past and Present* 170(2001):181–216, and several of the paragraphs that follow are drawn from that essay.
 9. See J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, May 26, June 2, 1885, AFP. The *patronato* as a system of control was breaking down at the same time. Murray reported on May 26, 1885: “Thirty one (31) *patrocinados* obtained their liberty through the government and of our best men and women have bought theirs 40 in all, and no doubt more will buy their liberty as soon as the hogs are sold.”
 10. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, May 26, June 2, 4, 1885, ser. IV, AFP. On what is sometimes termed “the slaves’ economy,” see Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville, 1993).
 11. See J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, Aug. 6, 1885, ser. IV, and E. F. Atkins to J. S. Murray, Aug. 14, 1885, in ser. IV, vol. 2, AFP. Atkins’s letter seems to betray both a relentless concern for the book value of the estate and something of a bad conscience: “Regarding the negroes I shall be glad when they are all free, but we do not want to lose the bal of Patrocinado a/c as it stands in your ledger; can you arrange to retain their cedulars until you get their value crediting them \$8–\$10 per month until they work it out?”
 12. On the general decline of the *patronato*, see Scott, *Slave Emancipation*, chaps. 6–8.
 13. See the letters from J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins dated May 24, 27, 1886, in ser. IV, AFP.
 14. The dances at Arimao were recalled in a June 1998 interview by the author with Tomás Pérez y Pérez, whose parents met at such a dance in the 1890s. On the link between anticolonial warfare and postemancipation adaptations, see Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 104–128.
 15. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, June 16, 1885, ser. IV, AFP.
 16. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to Mary Ogden Adams, Jan. 25, 1890, Charles Francis Adams II Papers, MHS (cited hereafter as CFAIIP).
 17. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to Mary Ogden Adams, Jan. 28, 30, 1890, CFAIIP.
 18. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to Mary Ogden Adams, Jan. 29, 1890, CFAIIP.

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19. On public opinion in the north in the 1890s, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), esp. 359–360 on Adams.
20. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to Mary Ogden Adams, Jan. 30, 1890, CFAIIP. This nomenclature, “China-town,” is somewhat puzzling. Soledad employed numerous Chinese workers, but Adams made no other comment about them. It may be that the settlement he was visiting was Rosario, located beyond the Chinese barracks and cemetery.
21. See the letter headed “The Plantation ‘Soledad’,” evidently from Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to Mary Ogden Adams, Jan. 1890, CFAIIP.
22. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to Mary Ogden Adams, Feb. 8, 1890, CFAIIP.
23. See Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to Mary Ogden Adams, Feb. 11, 1890, CFAIIP.
24. Bárbara Pérez’s life history remained vivid in the memories of her son Tomás Pérez y Pérez and of her granddaughter Olga Pérez. I am very grateful to them for sharing their recollections in interviews in 1998 and 1999. On the broad campaign for equality and respect, see Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 200–252.
25. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., *An Autobiography* (New York, 1916), 199. His own appraisal of his conduct on the eve of the panic was harsh: “my head turned by long and considerable success, I had become reckless. But, after my sudden railroad dethronement, to reduce sail was impossible; and, at the same time, I had to assume heavy additional burdens on account of the Union Pacific; but which now I had to shoulder myself. Thus, with much canvas spread, I was loaded down with a cargo I had never intended to take on.”
26. An account of the tariffs can be found in Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York, 1971), 288–291.
27. See Atkins, *Sixty Years*, chaps. 10 and 11.
28. See E. F. Atkins to [J. M.] Brooks, Mar. 7, 1895, ser. II, vol. 14, AFP.
29. A compelling portrait of this complex movement is Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* (Chapel Hill, 1999). See also Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 129–153.
30. On Soledad, see Atkins, *Sixty Years*, 161. On the rebellion in Las Villas see José S. Llorens y Maceo, *Con Maceo en la invasión* (Havana, Cuba, 1928), 39.
31. See the records of Company 2 and Company 3, Second Division, Fourth Corps, in “Documentos relativos a la inspección general del ejército . . . brigada de Cienfuegos,” Nov. 27, 1896, inventario 1, exp. 60, Colección de Documentos del Ejército Libertador Cubano, Archivo Provincial de Santa Clara (photocopy courtesy of Michael Zeuske). See also Atkins, *Sixty Years*, 192, 196. The question of surnames taken by former slaves is a complex one. See Michael Zeuske, “‘Los negros hicimos la independencia’: Aspectos de la movilización afrocubana en un hinterland cubano. Cienfuegos entre colonia y república,” in *Espacios, silencios y los sentidos de la libertad: Cuba 1879–1912*, ed. Fernando Martínez Heredia, Rebecca J. Scott, and Orlando García Martínez (Havana, Cuba, 2001), 193–234; and Michael Zeuske, “Hidden Markers, Open Secrets: On Naming, Race-Marking, and Race-Making in

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Cuba," *NWIG New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 76(2002):211-241.

32. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to John Quincy Adams II, Feb. 3-5, 1890, in CFAIIP. For a reconstruction of the history of Cayetano Quesada's family, see Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 109-111, 147-148, 187.
33. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to John Quincy Adams II, Feb. 3-5, 1890, CFAIIP.
34. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to Mary Odgen Adams, Feb. 16, 1890, CFAIIP.