

Marcus Garvey and his Cuban Contact

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Marcus Garvey, who is unknown to most Cubans today, created a stir in the Cuban press during the early 1920s, when he made a four-day visit to the island's capital city of Havana. Arriving on February 28, 1921, he was received at the San Francisco dock by Mr. Primitivo Ramírez Ros, a journalist and Representative from the Province of Matanzas, a notable member of the Conservative Party, and well-known member of the Atenas Society, an organization for upper middle-class blacks and mulattoes.

When he disembarked from the steamer "Governor Cobb," which served the Key West-Havana route, Marcus Garvey was the president of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the African Communities League (ACL). He also directed the newspaper *The Negro World*. The 3 million *El Heraldo* subscribers who were also members of the UNIA guaranteed Garvey's reputation as one of the United States' most important black leaders.

Born in Jamaica, Marcus Garvey later became a disciple of Duse Mohammed Ali.

He sought economic independence, and the personal and social betterment of blacks.

The Cuban press covered the black leader's sojourn to Cuba in great detail. His visit to Havana, from February 28 till March 3, and later, to other cities like Morón, Nuevitas, Camagüey, Banes, and Santiago de Cuba reflected the fact that they had all received significant immigration from the West Indies. Garvey was most interested in the Jamaicans, whose number was dramatically increasing because they were coming to Cuba to work in the sugar cane industry.

Yet, according to the very same press that highlighted Garvey's visit in the first place, the real reason for it was something other than just proselytizing. Economics seems to have been more pressing to him than emancipation, something that is born out by the meetings he had with business men on the island, and even President Menocal, to whom he was introduced by conservative Representative Ramírez Ros.

He probably talked to them about his Black Star shipping line, which had a steamer called the "Antonio Maceo." One must be



mindful of the fact that the Cuban sugar industry's production was substantial, and that it was the United Fruit Company that handled most of its shipment to the United States—at monopolized prices.

The following Havana newspapers followed and published articles about Garvey's presence and activities in Cuba: *La Discusión*, *El Heraldo de Cuba*, *El Heraldo*, *La Lucha*, *La Nación*, *La Prensa* and *El Triunfo*; in Santiago de Cuba it was the *Cubano Libre*. They all published information that is dated from 1921, but it was *El Heraldo de Cuba* that offered the most complete and objective coverage of this black leader's visit to the island.

Garvey also gave a number of speeches in Havana and Santiago de Cuba. Perhaps, the most famous is the one he gave at the Atenas Club, a black organization where he was received by Dr. Miguel Ángel Céspedes, a

prominent figure in black society during the Republican years. The Club's magazine even covered the event. Just hours earlier, Garvey had visited the Unión Fraternal Society and the Abraham Lincoln Club.

In his talks, which were aimed at UNIA sympathizers and followers in Cuba, he highlighted the need to achieve the black race's economic and political freedom, criticized the white colonialism of the European powers, and clarified that he had not come to Cuba to get involved in its national political problems.

It is important to note that although he had sympathizers and followers, particularly among West Indian immigrants in Cuba, his ideals were not so well received by the general black (Cuban) population, particularly by those in the societies he visited. Black Cubans really believed that they lived in conditions very different from those endured by blacks in the U.S.

After his visit to Cuba ended, Garvey left for Jamaica via Santiago de Cuba, in the steamer "Antonio Maceo," of the Black Star Company.

By way of this testimony, I am highlighting the different perspectives and characteristics of the black communities in the United States and Cuba. The participation of blacks in Cuba's independence wars and, especially and very notably, in the war begun in 1895, created an integrative view of blacks in Cuban society.

Note
Rodríguez, Pedro P. "Marcus Garvey en Cuba."
Anales del Caribe 7-8 (1987-1988): 87-88.