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“Such an Obscure Colony”

The origins of Puerto Rican participation in the clandestine slave trade are found in patterns established from the earliest years of Spanish settlement. They begin with blind spots that prevented the Spanish government from recognizing the island’s worth beyond its use as an isolated sentry to check foreign encroachment. Despite the nautical appeal of San Juan’s layout, for example, which could have facilitated the development of large-scale enterprises, the Crown never elevated the capital city above the level of a secondary port. Due to a history of this kind of imperial negligence, many historians failed to recognize that isolation creates its own dynamic. This changed when Arturo Morales Carrión published his seminal work on Puerto Rican relations with the non-Hispanic Caribbean. He demonstrated that, with the cooperation of resident Spanish officials, Spanish settlers and Puerto Rican Creoles developed the means to survive, and sometimes thrive, through contraband commerce despite blatant metropolitan indifference from the 1520s to the 1790s.¹

In his report to Charles III in 1765, royal envoy Alejandro O’Reilly complained that the inhabitants of Puerto Rico had little spirit for surplus production. According to him, the island’s natural wealth—an abundance of fruits, vegetables, livestock, and waterways fat with fish—discouraged industrial incentive. He also complained that Spanish soldiers abandoned their quarters in favor of domesticity with black women, with whom they had many children and gave the whole of their modest income. Above all, he observed that coastal contraband trade with foreigners was well organized and beyond the reach of imperial control.² O’Reilly saw a great deal of surplus industry, of course, but

most of it was destined for the non-Hispanic islands, in clear violation of foolhardy but long-standing Spanish commercial restrictions. In this sense, many Puerto Rican harbors, beaches, bays, and other shoreline features were no less international pathways and crossroads than the “New World Boulevard” that was Abbé Raynal’s Havana.³

Smuggling thrived on the southern, eastern, and western shores of the island but less in the north and rarely if ever in the capital. From Jamaica to Curaçao, English, Danish, Dutch, and French interlopers depended on Puerto Rico for lumber, dye woods, ginger, cattle, pigs, horses, mules, hides, coffee, tobacco, and prized Spanish silver, which colonists exchanged for salt and cassava, sometimes strong spirits, but mainly textiles and slaves. Thus, from approximately 1670 to 1765, Puerto Rico was the center of international contraband trade in the Caribbean. The colony’s character was rural to be sure, but the economic features of its isolation were limited to the walled city of San Juan. The rest of the colony had a life of its own.⁴ The epistemological function of this spatial divide reminds us that meanings and definitions are only determined in comparison to other meanings and definitions. As seen in Puerto Rico’s early history of isolation, rurality and underdevelopment are always contingent.

In 1777, Governor José Dufresne expelled a Benedictine friar on false charges of commercial fraud. The ousted cleric was Iñigo Abbad y Lasierra, Aragonese secretary of the governor’s nemesis, Bishop Manuel Jiménez Pérez. Back in Spain, Abbad published a comprehensive history of the island in 1788. Over the course of his tenure in Puerto Rico, he paid detailed attention to all he observed, including social relations within and across class lines. While he noted that social slippage through racial divides was not uncommon, he concluded that Africans and their descendants were the most abused and degraded: “A white man will insult any one of them, using the most contemptible language with impunity; some slave masters treat them with despicable cruelty.”⁵ He also understood the politics of contraband trade. Like O’Reilly, Abbad concluded that metropolitan neglect encouraged illegal and legal practices among the free inhabitants of the island: inter-Caribbean smuggling at the external level in the first instance, and sociocultural contradictions at the internal level in the second instance.⁶ Thus, in spite of metropolitan neglect, by the eighteenth century Puerto Rico had the basic features necessary to develop and perpetuate a slave-based economy in the nineteenth century. Social and commercial patterns established between the 1530s and the 1790s were clearly visible and deployable in the 1820s. Even in the face of Anglo-Spanish treaties that twice

banned international slave traffic, the illegal influx persisted with perforated success from 1817 to 1859.⁷

This chapter touches on an assortment of topics examined with greater detail and thematic integration in subsequent chapters. Discussions here address slaving activities at the intersection of Spanish resourcefulness and foreign succor to facilitate both the inter-Caribbean influx of Creole slaves and the transatlantic influx of African captives. The first section explores immigration as an expedient that encouraged and protected the slave trade to Puerto Rico between 1816 and 1830. King Ferdinand’s immigration initiative anticipated arrangements with Great Britain to abolish the slave trade from Africa two years later. The decree included articles that encouraged foreign newcomers to purchase slaves from neighboring non-Hispanic Caribbean ports before settling in Puerto Rico. The Spanish government insisted on the legality of this avenue. Despite British pressure, it never outlawed inter-Caribbean slave traffic. Though some slaves who entered Puerto Rico by this channel were Creoles, most were newly landed Africans who were quickly rerouted or “reexported” to the island.

The second section considers small-scale inter-Caribbean slave acquisitions between 1835 and 1846. Most slaves in this traffic were bona fide Creoles from Brazil, Venezuela, the Danish Caribbean, and the United States. Their masters owned them and, for the most part, knew them prior to having filed petitions for their entry. Therefore, Great Britain had no grounds for inquiry or protest. Still, Spanish officials exercised caution in landing procedures in order to separate African identity from Creole or creolized identity and to avoid the introduction of slave rebels. The influx seemed quiet and innocuous. Yet this movement of Creole slaves (and one nominally free West African) underscored two conflicting realities. On the one hand, Spanish authorities feared slave revolts, especially those led by the African-born. On the other hand, the Creole influx proved to be a preface or dress rehearsal for the return to reexport maneuvers, which, earlier, under the auspices of the immigration decree, brought many African captives to Puerto Rico by way of non-Hispanic ports.

The chapter’s final section outlines the course of Spain’s bid for direct involvement in the African slave trade. Black slavery was not new to imperial Spain, but until the latter half of the eighteenth century, it relied on foreigners to provide captives for its colonies. Based on perennial complaints of insufficient servile labor from colonists, dependency on foreign slave traders was in itself a problem. But even after the Crown encouraged private Spanish companies to

carry out slave expeditions to Africa, labor shortages in Puerto Rico remained acute. It becomes apparent why Puerto Rico, almost always compelled to play second fiddle to more prosperous Spanish colonies, relied on mixed channels of acquisition—African and inter-Caribbean—for as long as the slave trade endured.

Newcomers, Slave and Free

In 1815, Ferdinand VII promulgated the Real Cédula de Gracias, an immigration decree designed to stimulate the Puerto Rican economy. At the Congress of Vienna, which convened between 1814 and 1815, Great Britain announced the internationalization of its crusade against the slave trade. Anticipating British pressure, Ferdinand enticed foreigners with land grants and the tax-free importation of slaves. It behooved immigrants to bring family members and slaves, for the *cédula* granted white immigrants approximately six acres of land for each family member and about three acres to heads of households for each slave they brought. It granted free nonwhite immigrants half the lands allotted to whites. But few newcomers arrived with families. Most who did brought one or more brothers, cousins, or nephews, not spouses and children. Thus, it was wise for them to enter with as many slaves as possible, for once admitted under the provisions of the decree, subsequent slave acquisitions would not qualify for additional concessions of land. However, allowances were made for predecree resident foreigners to leave and return, as if for the first time, preferably with slaves. Though the decree authorized numerous commercial concessions to de facto foreign newcomers as well as to incoming non-Puerto Rican Spanish subjects, it did not provide land grants for the latter group.⁸

When Thomas Abraham, a New Yorker, landed in Puerto Rico with thirty slaves, mainly from the non-Hispanic Caribbean, he qualified for approximately 96 acres and the brother who accompanied him an additional six. En route from Genoa to Puerto Rico, Michele Saliva brought only a few slaves and therefore qualified for much less land. But the fortunes of the two men translated differently in settlement. Abraham did not need so large a coffle of bondsmen for his intended profession. By the time he settled down to coffee production in the highlands of Utuado in 1817, only 7 of the original 30 slaves remained. Apparently he sold the others to start his coffee business. In comparison, by 1826 Saliva owned 52 slaves, valued at 16,015 pesos. He was also a supplier, and in the same year, in concert with other Italians, he sold 104 slaves to local consumers for a total of 27,964 pesos.⁹ Three groups of nonwhites

arrived long after the decree expired: Asian workers who were probably Vietnamese, convicted Chinese contract workers from Cuba, and non-Hispanic Antilleans, first and foremost Kittisians, Nevisians, and Virgin Islanders. Had they arrived earlier, when the decree was in force, few would have qualified for its provisions.¹⁰

The lapse of the *Cédula de Gracias* in 1830 did not discourage white immigrants with slaveholding in mind. Some of them employed resourceful—albeit illegal—means to establish themselves. In the mid-1840s, as a result of financial difficulty, Seymour Boulogne and the Bellevue brothers, Fincer and Forville, were about to lose their estates in Marie Galante, an islet dependency of Guadeloupe. They fled to Puerto Rico with their twenty-three slaves. The governor of Guadeloupe alerted the French consul in San Juan that the men were trying to defraud their creditors and directed him to enlist the aid of the governor of Puerto Rico to return the slaves. Governor Rafael de Arístegui promised his support, but when a steamer arrived to retrieve the bondsmen, he would not allow them to leave. He reasoned that because the matter exceeded commercial concerns, he could not authorize the return of the slaves. By 1851, Boulogne and the Bellevues were established Puerto Rican residents. Another French settler made a career of slave trading. A native of Bordeaux, Joseph Beaupied arrived in Puerto Rico in his late teens, at some unknown date, with neither money nor property but some training in engineering. He was not a *cedulario* immigrant. Whatever his earlier fortunes, by the late 1840s, while still a young man, he was a logistics expert for the transferal of slaves from the French Antilles to Puerto Rico. For the next twenty years, he authored and executed schemes to sell Puerto Rican slaves to Cuba. He was also implicated in a plot to kidnap free Afro–Puerto Ricans to enslave them in Cuba.¹¹

Many immigrants purchased slaves, but market rivalry often depended on the degree to which they interacted with conationals. Some formed strong affinities with compatriots and organized slave-purchasing activities around them. Others, by choice or circumstance, did not bond with conationals and thus Hispanicized rapidly. Still others operated in both worlds, marrying into modest and often well-to-do white Creole families while maintaining natal identity through social and economic liaisons with their expatriate communities.¹² Geography also segmented *cedulario* settlement. French nationals, for example, including Italian-speaking Corsicans and French colonials who fled the Haitian Revolution, competed with Spaniards and Spanish Creoles in the sugar-producing centers of the south and west. Anglophones, almost exclusive-

ly Britons and Irishmen—unable to compete with Spanish Creoles, Spaniards, and Francophones at the top level of the sugar industry—opted to settle in areas in the northeast and east. Irish concentration was noticeable between Fajardo and Humacao. It was especially dense in Loíza, Río Piedras, and Cangrejos (Santurce), where there existed a tightly woven Gaelic community based on client-patron relations between older immigrants and newcomers. Few Irishmen came with capital or spouses. Though many of those already established sponsored their brothers, nephews, and godsons, liquid assets among them were largely unimpressive, or undeclared, at the time of arrival. Furthermore, as subjects of the British Crown, slave purchases for Irishmen en route to Puerto Rico posed a problem. They could not depend on British Caribbean support. Unlike the French and Corsicans, who—in theory at least—enjoyed the conational cooperation of the French Caribbean islands, the Irish had to rely on Danish and Dutch Caribbean slave markets, where competition with Puerto Ricans and wealthier *cedularios* was keen.¹³

The prospects of slave-based wealth did not mesmerize all immigrants. Businessman Pieter Hosman emigrated from Amsterdam in 1817. In Puerto Rico, he purchased Liberato, Benito, Valeriano, and María del Carmen for domestic service. He outlived his Creole wife, María Josefa Guevara, and they had no children. When he died in 1843, he left his entire estate to the slaves.¹⁴ In another case, Emanuele Laura (or Lauria) left Italy alone in 1815 but arrived in Puerto Rico with a young slave, María Estanislá. They settled in Ponce, where he opened a general store. María bore him three children, each of whom he freed at birth. In his will, he bequeathed all his assets to his mulatto children. He also freed their mother, “in compensation for her demonstrated affection and good behavior.”¹⁵

The immigration decree was neither novel nor radical in its efforts to bolster the island’s agricultural industry. Innovation was found in the attempt to build a loyal, solvent, assimilable, landed aristocracy dependent on the Spanish system of trade.¹⁶ Slaves entering with *cedulario* settlers between 1816 and 1830 outnumbered slaves imported through other inter-Caribbean channels between 1821 and 1845. However, a certain problem in terminology is critical here. In the purest sense, a slave entering under any provision of the royal decree was a *cedulario* slave. The term did not distinguish slaves accompanied by immigrant newcomers—who would therefore qualify to receive additional land as stipulated in Article 10—from slaves imported either by foreigners or Spanish subjects after having already settled in Puerto Rico, as stipulated in Article 23.