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From the earliest days of Spanish government in the Indies, the Crown relied on private individuals to guarantee the territorial integrity and internal peace of her New World empire. First came the privately financed *conquistador* armies, and later the organization of volunteer troops among the settled colonists of the region. While royal officers and cadres were sent out to train and control the locally organized militia companies which began to appear in the 16th century, the bulk of the fighting forces until well toward the end of the 18th century, were these civilian volunteers.

These organized civilian militia forces were to play a vital role in imperial defense, most decisively of course, in the Caribbean, where Spanish authority was challenged almost from the first days of her settlement. In Cuba especially, imperial defense was an extraordinarily taxing problem because of the unusually exposed position of the island on the rim of Spain's empire and her domination of the European-American trade routes. Because of this, from the middle of the 16th century onward, all of Spain's major colonial rivals at one time or another attempted to wrest control over this gateway to the Caribbean. With long unguarded shorelines and sparse population, Cuba invited constant attacks not only by veteran troops of established nations, but by a constant succession of independent privateers, pirates and freebooters of all kinds, who infested its shore almost from the first days of Spanish colonization.

To provide the needed forces for defense, the Crown from the very beginning of its volunteer civilian companies turned to both its free white colonists and to its growing Negro and mulatto free male population for support. Recognizing its dependence on the free colored population in Cuba, the Royal Government went out of its way to guarantee to these freedmen the right to bear arms and encouraged their volunteering by maintaining their coequal rights with the white militia companies, including, after their organization into separate colored military units, the right to select their own officers.

Not only did the Crown grant these militiamen the right to the *fuero militar* which protected them from criminal prosecution by civil courts,¹ but it also did everything possible to guarantee general community respect for these freedmen volunteers. This is well illustrated in an extraordinary document written by the King in

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¹ See the *Real Cédula* of September 16, 1708, for the militia rights to the *fuero* and *preeminencias* in Richard Konezke, *Colección de documentos para la historia de la formación social de hispanoamérica 1493-1810* (3 vols.; Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1953-1962), Vol. III, tomo 1, p. 110.

1714, in which he ordered royal officials to prevent these colored troops from being insulted. After pointing out their vital military role, the recognition of their necessity and efficiency by the Captain Generals of the island, and the self-sacrifice and zeal with which these "ancient and especially meritorious" colored militia companies served the Crown, the King went on to declare:

"He resuelto, que a la gente de ellas, se les de el buen tratamiento que merecen sus operaciones, considerandolos como a vasallos mios, de quien tengo entera satisfazion por la que siempre han manifestado en mi Real Servicio; por tanto por la presente ordeno, y mando, al Governador y Capitan General de la Isla de Cuba, y ciudad de San Xtobal de la Havana, Sargento Mayor Capitanes y demas gente de guerra de ella; y a los alcaldes ordinarios, regidores, y demas Juezes, y Justicias de dicha ciudad pongan expecial cuidado, en que los pardos libres de las expresadas compañías, sean atendidos con el buen tratamiento que se deve, sin permitir, que persona alguna los llame con nombres, yndecorosos en odio, y vituperio de su nazon, usando, de los que cada uno tubiere, por que mi Real animo, y voluntad es, sean tratados con amor y buena correspondencia, sin que padezcan el mas leve ultrage, ni ajamiento alguno".²

Given this attitude of the Crown, it never had to fear the arming of its free men of color, and in fact the Spanish government used colored militia troops to excellent advantage, not only in Cuba where they were probably the most numerous in the New World, but wherever freedmen resided in Spanish America.

The first organization of formal militia companies in Cuba was carried out in 1586 under the threat of an attack of English corsairs. The local governor at Havana created a force of some 1,000 armed civilian volunteers, in which some 400 men were organized into several permanent militia companies, "among whom were many men of color."³ With the constant expansion of the free colored population throughout the rest of the century, by 1600 the Governor at Havana was finally able to establish a completely independent 100 man colored militia company, which became known as the *Compañía de Pardos Libres*, pardos being the Cuban term for mulattoes.⁴

With the increased tempo of foreign invasions and corsair alarms in the late 17th century, the local officials created ever larger numbers of permanent militia companies, both white and colored, not only in Havana, but in all the major provincial capitals as well.⁵ By 1700, the one Havana pardo militia company had been expanded into four full companies, for a total of 400 men.⁶ By this time as well,

² Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla (hereafter cited as A. G. I.), Audiencia de Santo Domingo, legajo 337, May 20, 1714.

³ Jacobo de la Pezuela, *Diccionario geográfico, estadístico, histórico de la isla de Cuba* (4 vols.; Madrid: Imprenta Mellado, 1863-1866), II, 248.

⁴ A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 418, no. 7, 1714.

⁵ Pezuela, *ob. cit.*, II, 249.

⁶ A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 419, no. 8, 1715.

there were also established pardo companies in Santiago de Cuba and other provincial centers, along with an almost equal number of *moreno*, or Negro companies in the same cities.

Far from being ceremonial groups with bright uniforms who performed at parades and other social gatherings, these colonial militia companies were almost exclusively used as active military units. Observing strict military discipline when in service, these companies from the beginning were called upon, usually with no pay except when on full campaign, to engage in constant guard duty, military construction and to assist in local police work. They were constantly used in military actions not only against the continuously invading buccaneers, privateers, and other irregular forces, but were also called upon on numerous occasions to face veteran European troops in battle. Not only were they used throughout the island, but on several occasions they were even engaged in major military expeditions beyond the confines of Cuba.

Such in fact was the experience of the pardo Antonio Flores, whose service was typical of the life of a colored militiaman. Volunteering as a common soldier in 1708, he served in the ranks for nine years before being promoted to sergeant, and after three decades he finally reached the rank of company captain. During this period he had served on guard duty over long periods of time at the outlying forts of Marianaho, Caletto, and San Lázaro. He had fought against the British ship, St. George, had been involved in the capture of two French ships, had fought in an engagement against pirates, and finally had gone on an expedition to West Florida, where he was taken prisoner and sent to France, not returning to Cuba for 18 months. Next he fought in an expedition sent against the British islands, where he had served with distinction.⁷

An almost identical pattern to this was the experience of the pardo Joseph Sanchez, who had joined the militia a good half century before Flores, that is, sometime in the latter half of the 17th century. He too had spent much time in guard duties at the fortress of Marianaho, which guarded the approaches to Havana. He served in the defense of Matanzas against European troops, and had even been an auxiliary soldier of the Santa Hermandad, or rural constabulary, in its campaigns against the fugitive slaves known as *cimarrones*. A major part of his service, he complained, was absorbed in time consuming and non-remunerative guard duty at the various lookout posts around Havana. Like Flores, Sánchez had also been on an expedition to Florida, this time in defense of St. Augustine, and finally after an almost equal length of service to his country, he had risen to the rank of militia captain.⁸

As both Florida and later Louisiana came under the jurisdiction of Cuba in

7 A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 1455, no. 5, 1760.

8 A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 418, no. 7, 1714.

the 17th and 18th centuries, more and more white and colored Cuban militiamen were called upon to engage in overseas defensive operations for these territories. Thus when Alexander O'Reilly in 1769 gathered together a military force to take possession of Louisiana from the French, he took along 1,847 royal troops, and 240 volunteer militia, of whom 160 were Negro and mulatto militiamen from Havana.⁹ Also late in the century and the beginning of the next, the Crown sent Cuban Negro and mulatto troops on temporary service to Mexico and Yucatan.¹⁰

With the outbreak of the great series of colonial empire wars in the 18th century, the Spanish Empire in the New World came under increasing international pressure, and from the 1760's on, Spain was engaged, almost without pause, in one war after another with either England or France, in which the Caribbean was constantly made into a major theatre of military operations. The pressure of these incessant expeditions and international conflicts, forced the island's government to expand its militia forces. This meant both an increase in the number of armed free colored males, and even the creation of auxiliary labor battallions for the Cuban forces among the Negro slaves themselves. Not only were slaves obviously used in military construction work, but in 1765 the local royal officials even established a *Compañía de Morenos Esclavos* of 100 Negro slaves to work in artillery,¹¹ and thereafter slaves were used for multiple purposes within the artillery corps, especially in the ammunition and storage sections.¹²

Probably the most momentous changes in the militia forces occurred as a result of the disastrous capture of Havana by the English in 1762. When the city was returned to Spain the next year, the local royal officials set about to completely reorganize and expand the island's militia. Under the enactments of Inspector General O'Reilly, issued from 1763-1765, the scattered white and colored companies were organized into large battallion units with more permanent staffs and training officer cadres. For the pardo and moreno militias this meant the establishment of three full battallions of 800 men each, along with an expanded number of local provincial companies.¹³

Thus by the time of the military review and census of 1770, there were over 3,000 colored militiamen out of a total insular army of 11,667. The entire army was divided into three roughly equal parts: the white militia who numbered 4,645, the Negro and mulatto militia who accounted for 3,413 men, and 3,609 paid royal veteran troops. Thus despite the increasing importance of peninsula originated sol-

9 A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 1222, July 7, 1769; Pezuela, *op. cit.*, II, 251.

10 A. G. I., Papeles del Estado, leg. 35, no's. 13, 73.

11 A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 1220, August 19, 1765.

12 Pezuela, *op. cit.*, II, 260.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

diers, the militia was still the dominant military force on the island. The geographic and numerical breakdown of this Army was as follows:

Havana :	1	Regiment of Infantry of Seville	1,131
	1	Regiment of Infantry of Havana	697
	1	Squadron of American Dragoons	135
	3	Companies of Riflemen	242
	2	Companies of Artillery	166
	1	Regiment of Infantry Militia [white]	1,597
	1	Regiment of Cavalry Militia [white]	650
	1	Batallion of Pardos	799
	1	Batallion of Morenos	800
	1	Company of Noble Cadets	18
Matanzas :	1	Regiment of Dragoons	450
	10	Infantry Companies	484
	1	Batallion of Whites	798
Quatro Villas :	3	Cavalry Companies	150
	4	Companies of Pardos	297
	4	Companies of Morenos	177
Puerto Príncipe :	1	Batallion of Whites	800
	1	Cavalry Company	50
	1	Company of Pardos	99
	1	Company of Morenos	79
Cuba and Bayamo :	1	Batallion of Whites	800
	1	Batallion of Pardos	800
	2	Cavalry Companies	86
	5	Companies of Morenos	362
Total force present :			11,667 (14)

From their original one company of pardo milita in 1600, the colored volunteer army had thus grown by 1770 to 3 full batallions and 16 separate companies. And despite the fact that mulattoes outnumbered Negroes in the free community by almost two to one, the racial breakdown of this force was almost equal. There were 2 pardo batallions and 5 pardo companies equaling some 1,995 mulattoes, and 1 moreno batallion and 10 moreno companies totalling some 1,418 Negroes. As the total free male colored population of the island at this time was only ca. 15,000 this meant that roughly one out of every five free colored males was a member of the militia, which was an extraordinarily high figure, especially when compared to the white ratio which was only 1 out of every 12 free white males.¹⁵

¹⁴ A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 1222, June 1, 1770. The above figures do not include 545 royal troops who were listed as "detached". Cuba on the above list refers to Santiago de Cuba.

¹⁵ For the population of the island in the 1770's, see A. G. I., Indiferente General, leg. 1527, December 31, 1778; also see Ramón de la Sagra, *Historia económico-política y estadística de la isla de Cuba* (Habana: Viudas de Arazoza y Soler, 1831), p. 3.

By 1770, these military groupings were not only major occupations of the majority of the free colored adult population of Cuba, but they had also built up a powerful tradition of their own. Service was usually a lifetime affair for most of these militiamen, and the fact that they were almost all drawn from the same local community gave them an added measure of companionship, identity, and a true sense of defending their own homes.¹⁶ Thus with strong community identification and some 150 years or so of continuous existence these companies and batallions developed a powerful *esprit de corps* and performed remarkably well, despite their constant lack of adequate supplies and full time training. Finally given the fact that these military organizations were officered by fellow colored freedmen who had worked their way up in the ranks, they represented an unusually open and democratic military pattern, especially so in this age before the creation of mass conscript citizen armies.

From the establishment of their formal batallions in the 1760's until well into the 19th century, the colored militia continued to play a major role. Beginning especially with the last phase of colonial wars in 1779, Cuba became the scene of intense military activity. So desperate did things become, that in 1808 and again in 1812 local officials went so far as to arm all male citizens and organize them into informal popular militia companies, whose chief work was to support the regular militia forces.¹⁷

With the development of the revolutionary wars of independence within the Spanish Empire itself, however, this dangerous expedient in popular undisciplined armies was quickly abandoned. In fact, after 1820 Cuba became a major staging area for royal troops engaged in putting down the numerous independence movements on the American mainland. By the late 1820's the normal 3,000 to 4,000 man veteran component of the Cuban armed forces had grown to over 15,000 veteran Spanish troops.¹⁸

Nevertheless, as late as 1830, the colored militia still played an important part in the military establishment of the island. Of the 30,000 man army in that year, the paid royal troops made up 16 batallions, 11 companies, and 2 squadrons of cavalry. The various militia groups made up a force totalling only 11 batallions, but over 66 assorted companies, and 8 cavalry squadrons. Of the militia total, pardo and moreno soldiers now made up 3 batallions and 26 companies (an increase in 10 since the 1760's), and along with the traditional infantry companies, the colored militia now also included three full companies of artillery, two being pardo and one moreno.¹⁹

16 Of the 800 men of the moreno batallion of Havana, for example, 566 came from the city itself, and the rest from nearby communities. Change of residence seems to have been the prime cause for terminating service, for in the year 1772, the batallion listed 35 men as being discharged for this reason. A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 1223, no. 360.

17 Pezuela, *op. cit.*, II, 252-53.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 254-55.

19 Sagra, *op. cit.*, pp. 323-25.

But the tremendous buildup of royal veteran troops was not diminished after the end of the Spanish American wars for independence and from the 1830's on, the island was heavily garrisoned by peninsular troops. No longer burdened with a large empire and fearful of losing what remained, the royal government maintained a 15,000 to 20,000 man standing professional army throughout the next three decades, until the outbreak of Cuba's own first major war for independence in the late 1860's. Because of these forces, and the growing distrust of royal officials for the loyalty of the native Cubans, the role of the traditional militia was tremendously reduced.

For the colored militia, this growing conservative reaction by the government to local conditions had particularly disastrous results. The government officials were not only concerned over the local movements for independence and/or annexation to the United States, but they were also fearful of growing attacks against the institution of Negro slavery. In the 1830's and 1840's the English example of emancipation and their increasing pressure against the illegal slave trade created fears of unrest among the slave population. This fear was greatly strengthened by a rash of local plantation uprisings on Cuba itself in 1842-1843, and although these were essentially minor and discontinuous occurrences, they were probably the most violent slave revolts to date in Cuban history. Given these pressures, it was inevitable that the increasingly repressive and insecure Spanish government would turn its hostility toward the free colored population.

In late 1843, a new Captain General, General Leopoldo O'Donnell arrived on the island and in January of the new year was informed by a colored sergeant by the name of José Erice, of the moreno militia company of Matanzas, that there was in the planning stage a revolutionary plot to free the slaves. Erice's statements however, could not be corroborated and no evidence of unrest or sedition could be discovered. But once suspect, the free colored population especially, became ever more of a concern to the harsh governor. When in March of 1844 a female slave also denounced the existence of such a plot led by the free colored population, the government took direct action. It raided several homes and rounded up a large group of free colored persons among whom the leading figure was the mulatto poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, known as Plácido. Another prominent figure accused of being a leader, was a mulatto by the name of Andres Dodge, who it was charged, would be the overseas ambassador for the rebels, since he spoke Spanish, English, and French. Finally the government accused the famous ex-British Consul to Cuba, David Turnbull, who had been expelled from the island in 1842 for his ardent abolitionist statements of being the key instigator. They claimed that he was behind this so-called race war which had as its aim to exterminate Cuba and destroy its economy, which the Cuban government charged, was the avowed policy of the British government.

Charged with plotting a war of racial extermination, the royal officials had all the leaders executed in late June of 1844. Thus initially some 11 persons were sentenced to death, and dozens of others, slave and free, Negro and mulatto, were imprisoned, exiled, or whipped for their supposed complicity. But this was only the beginning, for under a corrupt military tribunal set up to deal with the "plot" a reign of terror soon set in, and several hundred prominent freedmen were either killed or exiled, and forced to relinquish their property. The panicky government struck a heavy blow especially at the upper levels of the free colored community, which it almost succeeded in destroying totally.²⁰ It was inevitable that with its attack on the leaders, economic, intellectual, and social of the free colored community, that the government would also strike at the colored military establishment. Charging the militia with complicity, the government took the next logical step in its fear, and in this same month of June, 1844, it formally disbanded and abolished the pardo and moreno militia companies and batallions.²¹

Before very long, however, the peninsula authorities recognized the utter stupidity and groundless fear of this action, and even came to question the existence of the entire Plácido conspiracy, based as it was on largely perjured testimony and non-existent documentary evidence. Thus after the tempers had cooled, the Crown re-established these famous militia companies in 1854, and even permitted the arming of the free colored fire brigades.²² But the days of powerful professional militia companies were coming to an end, and in recognition of this, and the continued distrust of these potentially revolutionary troops, the re-created colored militia companies were made subordinate to regular commands and placed under the jurisdiction of royal batallions.²³

But even despite their re-establishment, the days of the militia were, for all intents and purposes, at an end, whether for whites or the colored freedman. Not only was the island innundated from 1830 on with heavy concentrations of regular

²⁰ For the government's position on the Plácido affair see Justo Zaragoza, *Las insurrecciones en Cuba* (2 vols.; Madrid: Miguel G. Hernández, 1872-1873), I, 536 ff. A more balanced view is presented in Vidal Morales y Morales, *Iniciadores y primeros mártires de la revolución cubana* (Habana: Imprenta Avisador Comercial, 1901), pp. 147ff. Morales y Morales estimated the total number of victims when all was finished at 78 executions, some 400 expulsions, over 1,000 imprisonments, and some 300 deaths due to prolonged punishments or other harsh treatments. The impact of the terror on the free colored population was extremely disproportionate, and of the 1,800 persons variously punished, over 1,200 were freedmen, only 590 were slaves, and but 14 whites. *Ibid.*, pp. 155n, 173.

²¹ Zaragoza, *op. cit.*, p. 573. The very existence of the whole plot has been challenged not only by Morales y Morales, but by several more recent scholars, see Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, *et al.*, *Historia de la nación cubana* (10 vols.; Habana: Editorial Historia de la Nación Cubana, 1952), IV, 71.

²² Pezuela, *op. cit.*, II, 266.

²³ Zaragoza, *op. cit.*, pp. 657-58.

troops, but the royal officials even created a paid insular police force, in 1851, modeled on the lines of Spain's *Guardia Civil*, which consisted of some 800 armed infantry and cavalry troopers. So reduced was the importance of the militia that the white and colored militia forces in the early 1860's had been reduced to some 4,170 troops, as opposed to some 19,561 royal soldiers, and this was not including the new constabulary force.²⁴ Thus by the outbreak of Cuba's first major war of independence in 1868, which began the famous Ten Years War, the militia no longer played a significant role in the armies of the Cuban royal government. In fact, after 1868, the white, Negro and mulatto militiamen would come to form the bulk of the troops in the Cuban revolutionary armies, and many a colored officer trained under Spain would rise to a position of prominence in the rebel armies.

Thus after some two and a half centuries of continuous existence, the famous colored militia organizations came to an end. Of tremendous military importance in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, these colored soldiers had contributed vitally to the defense of the island against constant foreign attempts at conquest. Not only did they guard Cuba's shores, but they were constantly called upon to face better equipped and veteran European trained French and English forces in major battle. Yet these colored batallions performed their arduous tasks willingly and at great personal sacrifice. They also contributed to imperial defense far out of proportion to their numbers, and well over twice as much in proportion to the free white settlers of the island. Paid only on full campaign, and receiving only moderate recompense for long years of service, the work of the militiamen represented a tremendous expenditure of unpaid time in the service of the State. Although militia officers received part compensation, and many soldiers often received some type of pension or privilege, it would not be an understatement to say that the free colored community of Cuba heavily and positively paid on its own for a large part of the resources and manpower used by Spain to maintain Cuba within the Spanish Empire.

Though the free colored community never received the monetary rewards that its service demanded, and that the other classes often received, it gained substantial social benefits from its armed militia companies. For these companies provided one of the major avenues for social mobility for able Negro and mulatto freedmen through the existence of a large colored officer class. That this was an opportunity widely available is attested to by the size of this group. In the 1770 census, for example, one pardo batallion had 34 colored officers, 25 sergeants and even one colored military surgeon,²⁵ for a force of 800 men.²⁶ This meant that for the three

24 Pezuela, *op. cit.*, II, 276.

25 For the war experiences of a colored surgeon, see A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 1455, no. 10, 1760.

26 For the detailed organizational table and names of the officers of the pardo batallion of

bataillons and 16 companies that existed in Cuba in that year, there were something like 130 colored officers, a not inconsiderable number when it is remembered that there were only 15,000 free colored males in the total population.²⁷

Given this large officer population, the exceptionally gifted Negro and mulatto through devoted service and the exhibition of skill and intelligence, had every expectation of reaching this position. Once reaching this status, they gained enormous prestige and power. Not only were militia officers granted pensions and other honors by the state, but they were also accorded general respect for their rank in the community at large, and this enabled them to break through the social and economic barriers, either for themselves, or more usually for their children.

The career patterns of some of the officers clearly shows this to be the case. Thus Antonio Flores, who began as a common soldier volunteer, after three decades of service finally achieved the primary position as battalion commander, and in so doing added an aristocratic "de" before his final name. An artisan by profession, he nevertheless gained enough stature through his position to be able to send his son to primary and secondary school. And in fact, he had his eldest son train, not for a craft like himself, but for the liberal professions. Within the local Jesuit *colegio* of Havana, his son majored in Theology and Grammar and did quite well at these subjects. Not only did Flores demand the right of his son to enter the University if he wished, but he even went so far as to demand from the Crown that all his sons be exempt from any color bars to any professions which they might want to engage in or train for in the future. And in demanding this right from the Crown, based on his long years of service and his prominent position, Antonio de Flores pointed out that the rise of militia officers sons to high socio-economic status was a common experience in Cuba.²⁸

The existence of an armed colored militia not only provided an avenue of social mobility for the few, but most crucially of all, it represented a basic right of citizenship and humanity for the many. For as the United States Constitution so aptly puts it, one of the fundamental rights of the free citizens of a state, is "the right of the peoples to keep and bear arms..." Not only did the creation of the colored militia

Havana, which included one company of mixed infantry and cavalry known as the Grenadier Company, along with a ten man white professional advisory and training staff, see A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 1223, no. 359. Such organizational tables for the Havana pardo and moreno battalions for 1776 can be found in A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 1225.

²⁷ This was even large in proportion to the whole officer cadre of the Cuban army. Thus of the 448 field officers on active assignment in Cuba, which means sub-lieutenants to captains, 114 were colored.

²⁸ A. G. I., Santo Domingo, leg. 1455, no. 5, 1760. There was even the case in the 1790's of an Auditor of War for Cuba, who was a mulatto and who had attended the University, thus becoming a Doctor of Civil Law, a practicing lawyer and a holder of high government office. See A.G.I., Santo Domingo, leg. 2236, October 1, 1791.

of Cuba provide the free colored the basic right as citizens to defend *their* state, but it also guaranteed to them one of the most fundamental o human rights, the right to human security. Accepted as a co-equal citizen before the law, the free Cuban Negro or mulatto though often denied social position and economic opportunity, was never denied his most primary of human rights. These included not only such things as the sanctity of home and family and the full communion in the Church, but possibly the most basic right of all, the right to bear arms.