

## Blanca Canales

By: Tony (The Marine) Santiago



Blanca Canales

When Puerto Rico was a Spanish Colony, Puerto Rican women were commonly known for their roles as mothers and housekeepers. Women's rights were unheard of and their contributions to the islands' society were limited. However, women in Puerto Rico began to express themselves with their literary work during the 19th century. Among these women was Maria Bibiana Benitez who was Puerto Rico's first poetess and playwright. In 1832, she published her first poem "La Ninfa de Puerto Rico" and her niece, Alejandrina Benitez de Gautier, whose "Aguinaldo Puertorriqueño" was published in 1843, gave her the recognition of being one of the island's great poets.

During the 20th century, some of the women in the island became active as union organizers, such as in the case of Luisa Capetillo and involved in politics, as was the case of Blanca Canales, who at the tender age of 24, may possibly have been the first and youngest women in history to have led a revolt against the United States when in 1950 she led the "Jayuya Uprising".

The following is a short bio of Blanca Canales which I wrote in Wikipedia and which I would like to present here as my tribute to all the brave Puerto Rican women who are willing the "guts" to sacrifice everything that they have for what they believe in.

Blanca Canales Torresola was born in 1906 in the town of Jayuya, Puerto Rico. She was the younger sister of writer and politician Nemesio R. Canales Torresola. Their father was an active member of the "Unionist Party" of Puerto Rico which, notwithstanding its name, lobbied for the independence of the island. Their mother was a strong willed woman who encouraged her children to think for themselves.

As a child Canales read many books and stories about other nations and their heroes. She would often go with her father to political meetings where she became impressed with the speeches and enjoyed the patriotic nature of the flag waving in the meetings. She finished her primary and secondary education in Jayuya.

In 1924, her father died and her mother moved to Ponce. She graduated from Ponce High School and then enrolled in the University of Puerto Rico. In May 1930 she earned her Bachelor's Degree in Liberal Arts. Before graduating, she attended a conference given by the President of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, Pedro Albizu Campos, and was very impressed with his speech. Canales returned to the university that same year to take a course in social work.

### **The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party**

Canales returned to Jayuya and worked at a local rural school. In 1931, she joined the Nationalist Party and was active organizing the women's branch of that party. A series of events between the United States appointed government and the nationalists took place in the 1930s. In 1936, Albizu Campos was arrested and on March 31, 1937 the infamous Ponce Massacre took place.

During the 1940s, Canales' active political participation was limited to making collections because her job kept her busy traveling from San Juan to Ponce. Things changed when Albizu Campos was released from jail in 1947.

### **The Uprising**



### **Military troops enter Jayuya**

In 1949, the Nationalist Party under Campos' leadership planned a revolution which was supposed to take place in 1952 when the United States Congress was to approve the concept of "Estado Libre Asociado". The leaders of Jayuya included Canales, Elio Torresola (Griselio Torresola's brother) and the Irizarry brothers. Weapons for the planned revolution were stored at Canales' house.

On October 26, 1950, Albizu Campos held a political meeting in Fajardo. After the meeting Campos received word that he was going to be arrested and that his house in San Juan was surrounded by the police. The nationalists decided to go on with their planned revolution and instructed their members to raid the police stations in the island.

On October 30, 1950, Canales and her group entered the town of Jayuya waving Puerto Rican Flags (which were outlawed from 1898 to 1952) and took over the police and telephone stations in what became known as "The Jayuya Uprising". She led the group to the town's plaza where she raised the Puerto Rican Flag and declared Puerto Rico to be a Republic. Canales went to the town's hospital and attended to the wounds of Carlos Irizarry. Jayuya was under the nationalists' control for three days until it was recaptured by the Puerto Rico National Guard. The nationalists surrendered on November 1, 1950.

Canales was arrested and accused of killing a police officer and wounding three others. She was also accused of burning down the local post office; she was sentenced to life imprisonment plus sixty years of jail. In June 1951, she was sent to the Alderson Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia, the same prison to which Lolita Lebron would be sent in 1954.

### **Later years**



**The House of Nemesio and Blanca Canales**

In 1956, Canales was transferred to the Women's Jail in Vega Baja, Puerto Rico. In 1967, Canales was given a full pardon by Puerto Rican Governor Roberto Sanchez Vilella. She continued to be an active independence advocate until the day that she died. Canales died in 1996 in Jayuya. The house in which Blanca and Nemesio Canales were born and raised was turned into a museum by the City of Jayuya.