

María de las Mercedes Barbudo

"Puerto Rico's first female Freedom Fighter"

By: Tony "The Marine" Santiago

María de las Mercedes Barbudo (1773-1849) was a political activist who was the first Puerto Rican female "Independentista", meaning that she was the first Puerto Rican woman to become an avid advocate of Puerto Rican Independence. She joined forces with the Venezuelan government, under the leadership of Simon Bolivar, to lead an insurrection against the Spanish colonial forces in Puerto Rico.

Early years

Mercedes Barbudo (birth name: María de las Mercedes Barbudo y Coronado) was one of four siblings born in San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, to a Spanish father, Domingo Barbudo and Puerto Rican mother, Belén Coronado. Her father was an officer in the Spanish Army and being the daughter of a military officer benefited her greatly. At the time the only people who had access to the libraries and who could afford books were either appointed Spanish government officials or wealthy land owners. The poor had to resort to oral story-telling in what are traditionally known in Puerto Rico as Coplas and Decimas. Mercedes Barbudo was well educated and became interested in politics and social activism.

Political activist

Mercedes Barbudo established a store in San Juan which was dedicated to the sale of buttons, threads and cloth. She eventually became a successful personal loan provider and had commercial dealings with Joaquín Power y Morgan, an immigrant who came to Puerto Rico in

connection with the Compañía de Asiento de Negros which regulated the slave trade in the island.

Mercedes Barbudo was well known in San Juan and was befriended and often visited by some of the islands most distinguished Puerto Rican celebrities, among them Admiral Ramón Power y Giralt (Joaquín's son), Bishop Juan Alejo de Arizmendi and artist José Campeche. She had a liberal mind and as such would often hold meetings with intellectuals in her house. There they would discuss the political, social and economic situation and propose solutions to the problems involving Puerto Rico and the Spanish Empire in general.

This was at a time when Simón Bolívar dreamed of liberating and creating a unified Latin America, which included Puerto Rico and Cuba. Mercedes Barbudo was inspired by Bolivar and became a follower of the independence ideal for Puerto Rico upon learning the Bolivar dreamed of eventually engendering an American Revolution-style federation between all the newly independent republics, with a government ideally set-up solely to recognize and uphold individual rights. She befriended and wrote to many Venezuelan revolutionists, among them José María Rojas, with whom she corresponded. She also received magazines and newspapers from Venezuela which upheld the ideals of Bolivar.

Held without bail and no trail

Unknown to Mercedes Barbudo, the Spanish authorities in Puerto Rico under Governor Miguel de la Torre, were suspicious of the correspondence between her and the rebel factions of Venezuela. Secret agents of the Spanish Government had retained some of her mail and delivered it Governor de la Torre. He ordered an investigation and had her mail confiscated. The Government believed that the correspondence served as propaganda of the Bolivian ideals and also that it would serve to motivate Puerto Ricans to seek their independence.

Governor Miguel de la Torre ordered her arrest on the charge that she planned to overthrow the Spanish Government in Puerto Rico. Since Puerto Rico did not have a women's prison she was held without bail at the Castillo San Cristóbal. Among the evidence which the Spanish authorities presented against her was a letter dated October 1, 1824, from Rojas in which he told her that the Venezuelan rebels had lost their principal contact with the Puerto Rican Independence movement in the Danish island of Saint Thomas and therefore the secret communication which existed between the Venezuelan rebels and the leaders of the Puerto Rican independence movements was in danger of being discovered.

On October 22, 1824, Mercedes Barbudo did not go on trial; she did however go before a magistrate. The Government presented as evidence against her various letters which included five letters from Rojas, 2 copies of the newspaper "El Observador Caraqueño"; 2 copies of the newspaper "El Cometa" and one copy each of the newspapers "El Constitucional Caraqueño" and "El Colombiano", which were sympathetic to Bolivar's ideals. When asked if she recognized the correspondence she answered in the affirmative and refused to answer any more questions. The government also presented as evidence various anti-monarchy propaganda pamphlets to be distributed throughout the island in exhorted the people of Puerto Rico to demand the right to own property and the right to elect their own government. Mercedes Barbudo was found guilty and her fate was in the hands of Governor de la Torre.

Exile and escape to Venezuela

Governor de la Torre consulted with the prosecutor Francisco Marcos Santaella as to what should be done with Mercedes Barbudo. Santaella suggested that she be exiled from Puerto Rico and sent to Cuba never to return. On October 23, 1824, de la Torre ordered that Mercedes Barbudo be held under house arrest at the Castillo de San Cristóbal under the responsibility of Captain Pedro de Loyzaga. The following day

Mercedes Barbudo wrote to the governor a letter requesting that she be permitted the liberty to go into town to fix her financial and her personal obligations before she was exiled to Cuba. The Governor denied her request and on October 28th she was placed aboard the ship "El Marinero".

Upon her arrival to Cuba, she was placed in an institution in which women accused of various crimes were housed. Mercedes Barbudo escaped with the help of the revolutionary factions which were also operating in Cuba, and made her way to the island of Saint Thomas. From there she made her way to La Guaira in Venezuela where she was met by her friend José María Rojas. She proceeded to Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, where she met and befriended Simón Bolívar. Mercedes Barbudo established a close relationship with the members of Bolívar's cabinet, which included José María Vargas, who would in the future, would become the president of Venezuela, and she became one of their main collaborators.

Mercedes Barbudo, who never married nor had any children, never returned to her homeland Puerto Rico. She died in 1849, and is buried in the Cathedral of Caracas next to Simon Bolivar, an honor reserved only for the church hierarchy and the very rich. In 1996, a documentary was made about the life of Mercedes Barbudo titled "Camino sin retorno, el destierro de María de las Mercedes Barbudo". It was produced and directed by Sonia Fritz.

Further reading

*"Maria de las Mercedes Barbudo: Primera mujer independentista de Puerto Rico, 1773-1849"; by: Raquel Rosario Rivera; Publisher: R. Rosario Rivera; 1. ed edition (1997); ISBN-10: 0965003620; ISBN-13: 978-0965003629.

*"Mercedes"; by: Jaime L. Marzán Ramos; Publisher:Isla Negra Editores; ISBN: 978-9945-455-54-0.

*"From Eve to Dawn, A History of Women in the World, Volume IV: Revolutions and Struggles for Justice in the 20th Century"; by: Marilyn French; Publisher: The Feminist Press at CUNY; ISBN-10: 1558615849; ISBN-13: 978-1558615847

*"Women in Latin America and the Caribbean: Restoring Women to History (Restoring Women to History)"; by: Marysa Navarro; Publisher: Indiana University Press; ISBN-10: 025321307X; ISBN-13: 978-0253213075