

Intentona de Yauco

By: Tony (The Marine) Santiago

Ask anyone about the uprisings in Puerto Rico against Spanish rule and I bet that the majority will quickly mention “El Grito de Lares” as the one and only. How wrong an assumption. After the “Grito”, there were many minor uprisings in the island. Now, how many of you have ever heard of the **Intentona de Yauco** a.k.a. the "Attempted Coup of Yauco" of 1897, the second and last major revolt against Spanish colonial rule in Puerto Rico, staged by Puerto Rico's pro-independence movement in which the current Flag of Puerto Rico was flown for the first time in Puerto Rico?

The first major revolt against Spanish rule in the island was in 1868 and is known as El Grito de Lares. After the failure of the short-lived rebellion many of the local leaders and participants were arrested and some were executed. Those who survived their prison terms were later released and some went into exile. Shortly after the revolt Spain gave the island many liberal reforms. It extended to Puerto Rico some of the liberal constitution that it had allowed its previous colonies in South America. Puerto Rico received provincial status and Spanish Citizenship was granted to the criollos. Some political reforms granted were allowing Puerto Ricans to participate in special elections and to organize themselves into officially recognized political parties. During the years that followed there were minor protests against Spanish rule in various towns of the island, that were quickly subdued by the Spanish authorities.

Leaders of "El Grito de Lares", who were in exile in New York City, joined the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Committee, founded in December 8, 1895, and continued their quest for Puerto Rican independence. In 1897, with the aid of the local leaders of the independence movement of the town of Yauco, they organized another uprising, which became known as the "Intentona de Yauco". The local conservative political factions, who believed that such an attempt would be a threat to their struggle for autonomy, opposed such an action. Rumors of the planned event spread to the local Spanish authorities who acted swiftly and put an end to what would be the last major uprising in the island to Spanish colonial rule.

Prelude



Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances

On September 23, 1868, the first major uprising against Spanish colonial rule in Puerto Rico occurred in the town of Lares. The uprising, which was planned by Puerto Rican patriots, Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances and Segundo Ruiz Belvis, was carried out by several revolutionary cells in the island led by Manuel Rojas, Mathias Brugman, Mariana Bracetti, Juan Ríos Rivera,

Juan de Mata Terreforte and Aurelio Méndez Martínez among others. They took control of Lares and then departed to take over the next town, San Sebastián del Pepino. The Spanish militia, however, surprised the group with strong resistance, causing great confusion among the armed rebels who, led by Manuel Rojas, retreated back to Lares. Upon an order from the governor, Julián Pavía, the Spanish militia soon rounded up the rebels and quickly brought the insurrection to an end.

Some 475 rebels, among them Manuel Rojas, Mariana Bracetti and Juan Rius Rivera were imprisoned in the local prison of the city of Arecibo. On November 17, a military court imposed the death penalty, for treason and sedition, on all the prisoners. Meanwhile, in Madrid, Eugenio María de Hostos and other prominent Puerto Ricans were successful in interceding with President Francisco Serrano, who had himself just led a revolution against the monarchy in Spain. In an effort to appease the already tense atmosphere on the island, the incoming governor, José Laureano Sanz, dictated a general amnesty early in 1869 and all prisoners were released. Betances, Rojas, Rius Rivera, Terreforte, Méndez Martínez, and many more were sent into exile.

The Spanish Crown feared losing the only two colonies which it had left in the Western Hemisphere, Puerto Rico and Cuba to independence insurgents. As a result of the Lares uprising Spain granted Puerto Rico provincial status and its native Spanish Citizenship. Puerto Ricans were also allowed to participate in special elections and to organize officially recognized political parties.

Political and pro-independence protests and skirmishes



Puerto Rican Revolutionary Committee

(standing L-R) Manuel Besosa, **Aurelio Méndez Martínez**, and Sotero Figueroa (seated L-R) **Juan de Mata Terreforte**, D. Jose Julio Henna and Roberto H. Todd

During the years immediately following the Grito, there were minor pro-independence protests and skirmishes with the Spanish authorities in Las Marías, Adjuntas, Utuado, Vieques, Bayamón, Ciales and Toa Baja (Palo Seco).

In July 1871, a group of people attacked Spanish soldiers and members of the local militia in San Juan, Puerto Rico's capital. Lieutenant General Gabriel Baldrich, the Spanish appointed governor, declared martial law. Some of the protests were between the liberal and conservative political factions of the island and were not pro-independence intended. Among these were the "Motin de Yabucoa" of 1871, "La Estrella" and the "Sucesos de Camuy" of 1873.

On December 8, 1895, the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Committee was founded in New York City. This group promoted the ideal of Puerto Rican independence from Spain and included participants of "El Grito de Lares" who were exiled, such as Ramon Emiterio Betances, Juan Rius Rivera, Juan de Mata Terreforte and Aurelio Méndez Martínez among its members.

Terreforte was named by the committee as its Vice-President. In 1892, Terreforte and the members of the Revolutionary committee adopted the design (which is the current design) of a flag similar to the Cuban flag, but with its colors inverted, as the flag to represent the Republic of Puerto Rico.

Intentona de Yauco



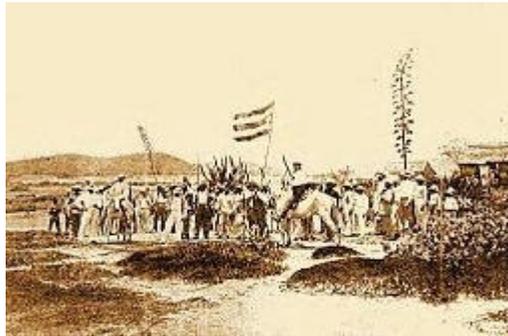
Antonio Mattei Lluberas

In 1896, a group of "Yaucanos" (as the natives of Yauco are known) who believed in full independence of Puerto Rico joined forces and met in *Barrio Barinas* of Yauco where they made plans to overthrow the government. The group was led by Antonio Mattei Lluberas, a wealthy coffee plantation owner, and Mateo Mercado. On December of that year, the local Civil Guard discovered their plans and proceeded to arrest all those involved who, besides Mercado and Mattei Lluberas, included Dario and Carlos Franchesi and Emiliano Lavergue, however they were soon released and returned to their respective homes.

In 1897, Mattei Lluberas visited the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Committee in New York City. There he met with Ramon Emiterio Betances, Juan de Mata Terreforte and Aurelio Méndez Martinez and together they proceeded to plan a major coup. The uprising was to be directed by Betances, organized by Mendez Mercado and the armed forces were to be commanded by General Rius Rivera. At the time Rius Rivera, who joined José Martí's struggle for Cuban independence as a member of the Cuban Liberation Army, was the Commander-in-Chief of the Cuban Liberation Army of the West. In accordance to the plan, Mattei Lluberas purchased 30,000 machetes which were to be distributed amongst the rebels. Mattei Lluberas returned to Puerto Rico with a Puerto Rican flag and began to proceed with the plans of the revolt with his group. The Budet Rivera brothers established an insurgent training camp in the farm of Guillermo Velazco. Fellow rebels, Gerardo Forest Velez and Agustin F. Morales (himself a general in the Army of the Dominican Republic), were in charge of propaganda and traveled throughout the island seeking public support for their cause. Cuban revolutionist Tomas Estrada Palma, offered a contribution of 500 rifles with half a million rounds of ammunition and his comrade offered a steamship with an invading force of 200 men under the command of General Agustin F. Morales. The revolution was set for the beginning of the month of December 1897.

The political situation at the time in Puerto Rico was different then the one in 1868, when "El Grito de Lares" occurred. Luis Muñoz Rivera and his Autonomist party had signed a pact with Praxedes Mateo Sagasta, the leader of the Spanish Liberal Party, which stated that if he (Sagasta) and the liberals assumed power in Spain, he would grant Puerto Rico autonomy. Thus, the political leaders of Puerto Rico believed that any attempt by the separatist movement to seek full

independence for the island would be a threat to what they were trying to accomplish and instead of being granted more autonomy, the island would be dealt with harshly by the Spanish authorities. Therefore, when the Mayor of Yauco Francisco Lluch Barreras heard the rumors of the planned uprising, he immediately notified General Sabas Marín González the governor of the island.



Flag flown by Fidel Vélez and his men during the "Intentona de Yauco" revolt

Fidel Velez, a native of Sabana Grande and one of the separatist leaders, found out that the Spanish authorities knew about their plans and immediately held a meeting with Mattei Lluberas and the other leaders. Fearing that they all would soon be arrested, he demanded that the insurrection start immediately and not in December. In the discussion that followed, the other leaders did not agree with him, fearing that such a haste action would lead to the same disastrous results of *El Grito de Lares*.

On March 24, 1897, Fidel Velez and his men met at Susua Arriba, just outside of Yauco. They unfurled the Puerto Rican flag for the first time in Puerto Rican soil and marched towards the town. They planned to attack the barracks of the Spanish Civil Guard with the aim of gaining control of the arms and ammunition, that were stored there. The plan did not succeed because when they arrived they were ambushed by the Spanish forces, who had set up positions and were waiting for them. A firefight ensued upon the arrival of the group and the rebels quickly retreated. On March 26, another group headed by Jose Nicolas Quiñones Torres and Ramon Torres attempted to fight the Spaniards in a barrio called "Quebradas" of Yauco, however said revolt also failed. Over 150 rebels were arrested, accused of various crimes against the state and sent to prison in the City of Ponce. Velez fled to St. Thomas where he lived in exile, while Mattei Lluberas went into exile in New York City and joined a group known as the "Puerto Rican Commission".

Aftermath

Sagasta's party won the elections in Spain and on November 25, 1897, Spain granted Puerto Rico autonomy. Muñoz Rivera served as Secretary of Grace, Justice and Government and Chief of the Cabinet for the independent Government of Puerto Rico. In December 1897, those who participated in the *Intentona de Yauco* were granted clemency and released from jail.

Following the sinking of the battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor, Cuba, the United States forwarded an ultimatum to Spain to withdraw from Cuba. In response, Spain broke off diplomatic relations with the United States, and on April 23, 1898, Spain declared war. On April 25, the U.S. Congress declared that a state of war between the United States and Spain had existed since April 20. One of the United States' principal objectives in the Spanish-American War was to take control of Spanish possessions in the Atlantic — Puerto Rico and Cuba.