

“Ybor City: A Worker’s Paradise?” – A Document-Based Question

By Scott Fields, McKeel Academy

Directions: Examine the following Documents A-J. Answer the guided questions for each document. Using your background knowledge regarding immigration and America’s industrialization in the late 19th century and immigration, and your analysis of the following documents, answer the essay question.

Question

Between the years 1880-1920, immigrants were mostly Catholic and Jewish, and came from southern and eastern Europe. Their decision to move to the United States came from both "push" and "pull" factors. [“Push” factors included religious and political persecution and poor economic conditions, while “pull” factors included opportunities to make a decent living, protection under U.S. laws, and freedom to practice their religions.] **How did the Cuban immigrants in Ybor City fit the pattern of most new immigrants, and how did they differ?**

You will need to use your prior knowledge of this topic to answer the question, as well as the documents that follow.

Historical Context

American Indians introduced tobacco to Spanish explorers in the 16th century, who in turn introduced it to the rest of Europe. It was not until the early to mid-19th century, though, that smoking cigars became popular. Cigars made in Havana, Cuba, from Cuban-grown tobacco, were considered to be the pinnacle of quality. In turn, American, as well as European, markets soon made Cuban tobacco growers and cigar factory owners very wealthy.

In 1857, in an attempt to raise revenue, the United States Congress placed a high tariff on Cuban cigars. Many cigar factory owners in Cuba continued to grow wealthy despite these new taxes, because Cuban cigars became even more popular in America, and "clear Havana" cigars were simply the best. To avoid paying the tariff, some Cuban cigar factory owners moved their factories to Florida, New York, and other parts of the United States. They also prospered because their cigars continued to be made by highly-skilled Cuban workers from tobacco leaves imported from Cuba.

Vicente Martinez Ybor was a cigar factory owner who moved his operation to Key West. In 1885, he relocated yet again, to an area two miles northeast of the small village of Tampa. This area, which became popularly known as “Ybor City”, became part of Tampa in 1887.

Part I: Examine each of the following documents carefully and answer the question or questions that follow. Each document relates to the theme of Cuban immigration to Ybor City in the late 19th- and early 20th century.

Document A: Map of Florida and Cuba



Nearly all Cuban tobacco used for cigars was shipped from the port of Havana, Cuba. The Tampa area became an important cigar manufacturing location after railroad lines connected it to the major transcontinental railroads and the port was deepened.

- 1.) Which of the following American cities was closer to Havana, Cuba: Tampa, Miami, or Key West?
- 2.) Why might Vicente Ybor and other owners of Cuban cigar factories have thought of Key West as a good place to start their first American cigar factories?

Document B: The History of Ybor City

Ybor City, a section of the large metropolitan area of Tampa, Florida, owes its beginning to three Spaniards who came to the "New World" in the 19th century: Gavino Gutierrez, Vicente Martinez Ybor, and Ignacio Haya. Ybor immigrated to Cuba in 1832, at the age of 14. He worked as a clerk in a grocery store, then as a cigar salesman, and in 1853 he started his own cigar factory in Havana. Labor unrest, the high tariff on Cuban cigars, and the start of the Cuban Revolution in 1868 caused Ybor to move his plant and his workers to Key West, Florida. While his business there was successful, labor problems and the lack of a good fresh water supply and a transportation system for distributing his products led him to consider moving his business to a new location.

Gavino Gutierrez came to the United States from Spain in 1868. He settled in New York City, but he traveled often—to Cuba, to Key West, and to the small town of Tampa, Florida, searching for exotic fruits such as mangoes and guavas. During a visit to Key West in 1884, he convinced Ybor and Ignacio Haya, a cigar factory owner from New York who was visiting Ybor, to travel to Tampa to investigate its potential for cigar manufacturing. That same year Henry Bradley Plant, a businessman from Connecticut, had completed a rail line into Tampa and was in the process of improving the port facility for his shipping lines. These methods of transportation would make it easy to import tobacco from Cuba as well as distribute finished products. Tampa also offered the warm, humid climate necessary for cigar manufacturing, and a freshwater well.

After visiting Tampa in 1885, both Haya and Ybor decided to build cigar factories in the area. Gutierrez surveyed an area two miles from Tampa, even drawing up a map to show where streets might run. Ybor purchased 40 acres of land and began to construct a factory. He continued to manufacture cigars in Key West as well, until a fire destroyed his factory there in 1886. Afterwards, Ybor spent all of his time on his operations in the Tampa area. At age 68, Ybor began developing a company town "with the hope of providing a good living and working environment so that cigar workers would have fewer grievances against owners."

There had been Spanish and Cuban fishermen in the Tampa region before Spain ceded Florida to the United States in 1819, but the city had grown slowly. As late as 1880, the population was only about 700. In 1887 when

the city of Tampa incorporated Ybor City into the municipality, the population increased to more than 3,000. By 1890 the population of Tampa was about 5,500. Most residents made their living from cigar making, while the occupations of many other workers revolved around the cigar trade. For example, some workers made the attractive wooden cigar boxes in which the hand-rolled cigars were shipped and which, in most American homes, came to be used for holding keepsakes. Other workers made cigar bands, pieces of paper around each cigar denoting its brand, which once were collected by children all over the country.

Ybor City developed as a multiethnic community where English was a second language for many of its citizens. Cubans made up the largest group, about 15 percent of them were African Cubans. Next were the Spaniards, who came in large numbers after 1890. Together these two groups dominated the cigar industry and set the cultural tone for the community. Ybor City also attracted Italians, mostly Sicilians, who had first come to work in the sugar cane fields in Louisiana. Some Italians worked in the cigar industry, but many operated restaurants and small businesses or farmed for a living. Most became bilingual in Italian and Spanish. Other immigrants included Germans, Romanian Jews, and a small number of Chinese. The Germans contributed to the cigar industry through their superb cigar box art. The lithographs incorporated into their cover designs were considered the best in the world. Romanian Jews and Chinese immigrants worked mainly in retail businesses and in service trades.

Ybor City eventually outproduced Havana as a manufacturing center of quality cigars. Both Ybor and Haya offered plant sites and other incentives to lure other major cigar factory owners away from Cuba and Key West. There were also hundreds of small cigar-making shops. By 1900 Tampa's Ybor City had become known as the "Cigar Capital of the World." Nearby West Tampa also profited from Ybor City's success. By 1895 it had 10 cigar factories of its own, and it also supported additional box making and label-printing factories.

Ybor City continued to grow and prosper through the 1920s and into the 1930s. Several factors soon converged to bring about hard times, however. Cigarette consumption began to grow, a major depression struck the nation, and improved machinery for rolling cigars began to produce a product comparable in workmanship to the hand-rolled variety. At first, these machine-produced cigars could find little market because the hand-rolled "Havana" type cigar had such a good reputation. Then the producers of the machine-made cigars launched a notorious "spit" campaign. In their advertisements they falsely claimed that human saliva played a major role in the production of hand-manufactured cigars.

The combined effect of the "spit campaign," the Great Depression, and the growing popularity of cigarettes finally changed Ybor City. Large factories either mechanized or went out of business. As machines took over for people, many of Ybor City's residents moved elsewhere in Tampa to find work. Between 1930 and 1940, some Cubans left the city and returned to their homeland.

In the 1960s Ybor City was split apart by an urban renewal project. Seventy acres of the old city were leveled, including several hundred houses, one mutual aid society building, and a fire station. An interstate highway took up part of the leveled ground, but the rest was never redeveloped because federal funds and private investments did not materialize. This destruction did have one positive effect, however. Years later, it prompted a number of civic organizations to band together to preserve what remained of the city's historic buildings and ethnic heritage.

- 3.) Why did Vicente Martinez Ybor leave Cuba to start a cigar factory in Key West, Florida?
- 4.) What factors caused him to relocate a second time to Tampa, Florida?
- 5.) How was Gavino Gutierrez influential in establishing Ybor City?
- 6.) What was the approximate percent of growth in Tampa from 1880 to 1890, and how does this demonstrate the impact of the cigar industry on Tampa?
- 7.) What factors caused Ybor City's cigar-making industry to decline?

Document C - Ybor City's Cigar Workers

The men and women of Ybor City who made the hand-rolled cigars earned good wages for the times and had a certain amount of control over their work day. Because they were paid by the number of cigars they turned out each day rather than by the hour, they set their own rate of production (a "quota" system). These cigar workers were artisans, and the goal for both the factory owner and the individual worker was to produce perfect handcrafted cigars.

Each worker in the factories' large workrooms contributed about 25 cents per week for the services of *lectores* (readers). A lector sat on a platform above the workers and in a loud, clear voice, read through several daily newspapers, often commenting on their contents. He also might read aloud from Spanish poets, or from the works of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, author of novels, plays, and tales. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* has long been one of the world's best loved books. Because they listened to the reader for several hours a day, the workers probably were better informed than most Americans of the time. These readers were talented, well-paid

men who commented on the news with wit or irony and who used their voices to indicate different characters in the poems and novels they read.

After work hours, most cigar workers took advantage of Ybor City's mutual aid societies. Different ethnic groups founded these social and cultural organizations to help members adapt to a new land while retaining their ethnic traditions. Mutual aid society members could gather at their clubhouse to socialize over dominoes or cards, attend a performance or dance, or participate in a variety of other recreational activities. However, these societies provided more than entertainment. For a small fee collected weekly from their members, clubs contracted with doctors and hospitals to provide medical care. The societies also operated pharmacies and provided burial services for their members. The Spanish-speaking population founded four of these clubs. Italian and German immigrants each established a club as well.

El Centro Espanol, founded in 1891, was the first mutual aid society in Ybor City. To join, applicants had to be either Spaniards by birth or loyal to Spain. Members paid 25 cents a week to enjoy social privileges as well as death and injury benefits. In 1975 the club still had some 2,000 members who used its restaurant and coffee shop, and attended movies during the week and live performances on weekends. El Centro Espanol has been vacant, however, since the mid-1980s. Three of Ybor City's mutual aid society clubhouses, El Centro Asturiano, El Circulo Cubano, and L'Unione Italiana, have remained in continuous use since they were constructed in the first quarter of the 20th century. By providing everyday services such as recreation and medical care, Ybor City's mutual aid societies successfully helped immigrant residents maintain their ethnic identity while adapting to life in a new country.

- 8.) What would be an advantage of working to a quota everyday, as opposed to working a time shift (for example, 7:00AM-5:00PM)?
- 9.) How did *lectores* make the cigar makers' workplace more pleasant?
- 10.) How did the *lectores* affect the workers' knowledge of politics?
- 11.) Why were mutual aid societies founded?
- 12.) What services did they provide for their members?
- 13.) Do you think that the life of immigrants in Ybor City was better or worse than that of most immigrants in America during the same time period? Why?

Document D - Ybor Cigar Factory, c. 1886-90



When Vicente Ybor built this three-story factory in 1886, it was the tallest building in the Tampa area. The June 9, 1886, issue of the *Tampa Guardian* declared that there was "not a more substantial structure in the state of Florida.

14.) What does the appearance of the factory indicate about Ybor's expectations for the cigar-making industry in Tampa?

15.) What evidence does the photo provide that indicates Ybor's status as a cigar manufacturer at the time?

Document E – Cigar Workers' Houses



Most cigar workers in Ybor City lived in houses built and owned by factory owners. The houses pictured in this photo were built in the late 19th century and had no electricity or plumbing.

16.) List some of your observations about the worker housing.

17.) Imagine that you recently immigrated to Ybor City to work in a cigar factory. What might be some of the advantages and disadvantages of renting a house from the factory owner?

Document F - Cigar factory workers at the Ybor Factory, 1925



Approximately 1,150 cigar makers filled this room at the Ybor factory in 1925. The factory contained two other rooms of this size and several smaller ones. Note the *lector* sitting at the far upper right.

18.) List your observations about the workers and the factory itself.

19.) What might the lector be reading to the workers?

20.) Do you think you would have liked to work here? Why or why not?

Documents G, H, & I – Ybor City Clubhouses

Document 7 - L'Unione Italiana, 1919
Asturiano, 1925



Document 8 - Circulo Cubano, 1926



Document 9 - Centro



L'Unione Italiana was founded in 1894. Construction began on the current clubhouse in 1917 after a fire destroyed the previous one. The \$80,000 Italian Renaissance-style building, featuring classical columns, terra cotta relief and marble, included a theater, dance floor, library, cantina (bar), and bowling alley.

The Cubans formed El Club Nacional Cubano in 1899, which was renamed El Circulo Cubano in 1902. The current clubhouse, completed in 1918, replaced an earlier building damaged by fire. The \$60,000 clubhouse contained a cantina, a ballroom decorated by Cuban painters, a theater, pharmacy, library, gymnasium, and boxing arena. Imported tile, stained glass windows, and marble provide decorative detail.

Centro Asturiano, founded in 1904, was named for the province in Spain from which most of its members came. The Beaux Arts style clubhouse that stands today was unveiled in 1914. It was built for the then-astronomical cost of \$110,000 and touted as "the most beautiful building in the south" by the *Tampa Tribune*. It contained a 1,100-seat theater, cantina (bar), library, and ballroom. Even today activities at the club include theatrical productions in both Spanish and English, concerts, and operas.

21.) What features do the three clubhouses shown in Photos 4-6 have in common?

22.) What do the appearances of the buildings reveal about the importance of the clubhouses to club members?

Document J – Evening festivities at Centro Asturiano, 1920s



23.) In which room of the clubhouse do you think this photo was taken? Why?

24.) Based on what you have learned so far, do you think this scene would have been typical in the clubs? Why or why not?

Part II: Answering the Document-Based Question

Between the years 1880-1920, immigrants that came to America were mostly Catholic and Jewish, and came from southern and eastern Europe. Their decision to move to the United States came from both "push" and "pull" factors. "Push" factors included religious and political persecution and poor economic conditions, while "pull" factors included opportunities to make a decent living, protection under U.S. laws, and freedom to practice their religions. How did the Cuban immigrants in Ybor City fit the pattern of most new immigrants to the United States, and how did they differ?

You will need to use a large Venn diagram comparing what you learned about Immigration & Industrialism in class, and what you have learned in this lesson regarding immigration to Ybor City during the same time period.

After you complete your Venn diagram, you may begin writing an essay comparing and contrasting Cuban immigration to Ybor City with the immigration patterns to the rest of the United States during the same time period. Use a 5-paragraph essay format, with an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.