

DEVELOPMENT OF NEW YORK'S PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY

Sherrie L. Baver

The early history of the Puerto Rican community in New York began in the 1860s, when the island was still a part of the Spanish Empire. A small number of islanders came to New York as merchants in the growing sugar and molasses trade between the Spanish West Indies and the United States. The Puerto Ricans most likely would have lived in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, New York's Spanish neighborhood at that time.

Around 1867, a group of Puerto Rican political exiles came to New York and joined with Cuban exiles to plot the end of Spanish colonial rule in their islands. The best known of these mid-nineteenth century Puerto Rican supporters of independence and the abolition of slavery were Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances and Segundo Ruiz Belvis. They worked with the Cuban exile community to launch a joint rebellion in 1868. These patriots envisioned Puerto Rico and Cuba as sovereign republics in federation with each other and with the Dominican Republic. Although the rebellion in Puerto Rico, *El Grito de Lares*, and the one in Cuba, *El Grito de Yara*, ended in failure, independence supporters from both islands continued coming to New York to attempt liberating their islands.¹

The writer Eugenio Mariá de Hostos, joined physicians Julio J. Henna and José Francisco Basora in 1869 to revive efforts of the Republican Society of Puerto Rico to form an independent nation, yet the biggest boost to the revolutionary cause came with the arrival of the Cuban hero, Jose Martí, in 1885. In 1895, Martí returned to Cuba to launch the Independence War and was joined there by radical Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. In contrast to Martí, however, the most widely supported leader in Puerto Rico at this time, Luis Muñoz Rivera, did not fight for

independence, but went to Spain to request autonomous status for the island. Spain granted what was to be a very short-lived autonomy to Puerto Rico in 1897. The U.S. entered what became known as the Spanish-American War in the late spring of 1898 and took over Spain's colonial possessions in the Caribbean and the Pacific. In the Treaty of Paris of 1898, the United States formally acquired Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines as colonies; autonomy or independence did not become options for these islands for several decades. Cuba became a United States protectorate for four years, and finally gained independence in 1902.

Not all Puerto Ricans who had joined the small Spanish community in New York, however, were merchants or dedicated revolutionaries. Cigar makers, or *tabaqueros*, arrived to work in many of the 3,000 cigar factories in the city by the mid-1890s. The *tabaqueros* were quick to show interest in U.S. electoral politics, and in 1893, two Puerto Rican cigar makers, Antonio Molina and Pachin Marín, established one of New York's earliest Hispanic workers' organizations, the Populist Committee.²

After Puerto Rico became a U.S. colony in 1898, immigration from the island to the United States increased steadily. It should be understood, however, that Puerto Rican immigration has been largely shaped by the labor needs of the U.S. economy. It is not surprising, therefore, that after the American takeover of the island, the first large-scale migration of Puerto Ricans was to labor-short Hawaii, where they were recruited to work in the sugar fields during the period 1900-1901.³

About 2,000 islanders migrated to New York and other parts of the States between 1900-1909 but a significant increase came after 1917 when the U.S. entered World War I and faced acute labor shortages. Puerto Ricans were made American citizens in 1917, and between 1917 and 1920, the U.S. Department of War and the Bureau of Insular Affairs brought between 12,000 and 13,000 islanders to work on the mainland. Large numbers of these workers came to New York to work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and some workers made their homes in that borough.

In 1917, however, a distinct Puerto Rican neighborhood was forming in East Harlem around 116th Street; by that time, residents commonly referred to their community as *el barrio latino* (the Latin neighborhood). The total Puerto Rican population of New York City by 1918 was estimated at about 35,000.

Like other immigrant groups to the city at this time, the Puerto Rican community developed a native language press as well as civic, cultural, and political organizations. *La Prensa*, a Puerto Rican newspaper founded

as a weekly in 1913, became a daily in 1918. Civic clubs like *La Liga Puertorriqueña* and the Puerto Rican Brotherhood of America appeared in the early 1920s. In the aftermath of the Harlem riots of 1926, a two-week period of violence directed at the growing number of Puerto Rican shopkeepers in East Harlem, community defense organizations appeared such as the Puerto Rican and Hispanic League and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

The growing community continued to show interest in national politics and, as early as 1918, about 7,000 Puerto Ricans were registered to vote in New York. Although the overwhelming majority considered themselves Democrats, and political clubs appeared in the Hispanic neighborhoods of Manhattan and Brooklyn, individual Puerto Ricans were not making much headway in electoral politics. While language may have posed some barrier, there were even more compelling causes for the lack of progress. First, the Puerto Rican community was still small compared to other ethnic groups in the city at that time. Second, Puerto Ricans represented a mixed-race community. By 1898, segregation was public policy in the United States, and New York City was not immune to the insidious effects of Jim Crow laws. By the late 1920s, however, some East Harlem politicians began to take notice of their growing Puerto Rican constituency. In 1928, for example, Representative Fiorello LaGuardia introduced a bill in Congress to require the governor of Puerto Rico to be native-born and to be elected by islanders rather than appointed by the president. (This change did not take place until 1948.)

The first major study of Puerto Ricans in New York City was done by Lawrence Chenault in 1935. He estimated the Puerto Rican population to be about 50,000. Chenault was careful to note, however, that this figure was probably conservative, since the U.S. Census did not count those people born on the U.S. mainland as Puerto Rican. Chenault also mapped Puerto Rican neighborhoods and found that about 80% of New York Puerto Ricans lived in east and south Harlem. Other concentrations were residing along the Brooklyn waterfront from the Navy Yard south to Gowanus Canal, on the West Side of Manhattan, and in Washington Heights. Smaller Puerto Rican neighborhoods were located in Lower Manhattan, the South Bronx, and Long Island.⁴

The Depression of the 1930s hit the Puerto Rican community extremely hard. Large numbers returned to the island during the decade, although not with serious hope of making better lives there. Through the 1930s, Puerto Rico was called "the poorhouse of the Caribbean," and the average daily wage on the island was \$.75. For those who stayed in New York, the men fortunate enough to find employment typically worked as

porters, errand runners, or laundry and hotel workers, although some professionals, restaurant owners and shopkeepers were listed in the 1933 *Hispanic Guide*. At least a quarter of Puerto Rican women worked outside the home, typically in the garment industry, or as domestics, typists, or stenographers. The women who stayed at home also contributed to family incomes through piecework, childcare, or taking in lodgers.⁵

The most important politician to *el barrio* in the 1930s and 1940s was East Harlem's congressman, Vito Marcantonio, an Italian-American radical who had been a protégé of LaGuardia. While Marcantonio's name was associated by the New York press with the influx of Puerto Ricans, it is incorrect to conclude that he actually brought islanders to New York. An astute politician, he understood their importance as his constituents; therefore, he sought favor in the Puerto Rican community by his support of popular positions like the island's independence, antidiscrimination, and antipoverty measures. These positions flowed fundamentally from his commitment to radical politics rather than opportunism, for he articulated pro-Puerto Rican views in the mid-1930s, long before Puerto Ricans became a large proportion of his constituency. In fact, he was much more successful in politics in the late 1930s and early 1940s before the large-scale Puerto Rican migration than after it began in the later part of the decade.⁶

With the end of World War II, the migration of Puerto Ricans from the island to the mainland took on massive proportions. The overarching reasons for the migration were: island officials warning of serious problems resulting from overpopulation and a postwar economic boom on the mainland. Island economic planners had two strategies for dealing with the job shortage. One, an official strategy called Operation Bootstrap, was a program to bring factories to Puerto Rico; a second strategy, never made official, was to encourage emigration to the States. Thus, in 1940 New York City had 61,000 Puerto Ricans; by 1950, 246,00; by 1980, 860,552.

Because New York was where most of this "airborne migration" first landed, the large majority of islanders stayed to find work in the city. Also important were the periodic trips by politicians such as Robert Wagner, who flew to the island to emphasize the availability of jobs. Most immigrants worked in the garment industry, in other factory jobs, or in the service sector. Unfortunately, soon after the mass migration of Puerto Ricans to New York, the city began losing its factory jobs to the suburbs, the southern U.S., other countries, and to automation. New York's change from an industrial to a post-industrial city generally has not been propitious for the Puerto Rican community.

Not only was the scale of migration changing after the War, so were the residential patterns of Puerto Ricans. Although 88% of Puerto Ricans were still living in New York in 1950, they were moving throughout the city especially to The Bronx and Brooklyn. The cause of this dramatic population shift in less than two decades is part of the larger story of the changing shape of New York City in the postwar era. Probably the person most responsible for the physical layout of New York in the mid-20th century was the master builder and "power broker," Robert Moses.⁷ In the late 1940s, at the time of the increasing migration of Puerto Ricans to New York, the federal government began to fund large-scale urban renewal or slum clearance projects. As head of the Mayor's Slum Clearance Committee after 1948, Moses oversaw several projects that had the effect of creating more middle class housing in Manhattan while sending the poor to the outer boroughs.

The federal Title I urban renewal legislation clearly stated that city officials and private developers had to relocate all residents displaced in slum clearance projects to "decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings." Unfortunately, through legal loopholes and other tactics, many of Moses' slum clearance projects resulted in exacerbating inadequate housing elsewhere. Many of the 170,000 evicted in the period 1945 to 1952 were Black or Puerto Rican and were limited in their housing choices by both poverty and racism. They relocated to areas where relatively inexpensive housing existed such as the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Brownsville in Brooklyn and the South Bronx. These apartments stayed relatively inexpensive as landlords continued to divide them into smaller units. Apartments were becoming available in these neighborhoods as the earlier tenants or their children partook of America's postwar affluence and migrated to the suburbs.

In 1960, Manhattan still had the largest number of Puerto Ricans (225,639), but The Bronx and Brooklyn were close behind with 186,885 and 180,114 respectively. Furthermore, in the 1960 to 1970 period, the population shifts were even more dramatic; by 1970, 316,772 Puerto Ricans lived in The Bronx, 271,769 in Brooklyn and 185,323 in Manhattan. In other words, between 1960 and 1970, the Puerto Rican community grew by 70% in The Bronx, and by 50% in Brooklyn, while decreasing by 18% in Manhattan.

The 1950s were a time of flux for Puerto Rican New Yorkers. Because the community was being dispersed throughout the city, local leaders faced serious challenges in creating civic, cultural, and especially, political organizations. At least two other reasons may have contributed to the essentially depoliticized state of the Puerto Rican community in the



Hon. Herman Badillo

The Bronx County Historical Society Collection.

1950s. First, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico's Labor Migration Office, established in 1948, provided services such as job and housing referral that ethnic politicians had provided in an earlier era. Secondly, the Puerto Rican community was perceived as fairly radical (at least in part owing to the politics of Vito Marcantonio); this reputation was a clear disadvantage in the politically conservative 1950s and may have prevented the city's Democrats from trying to organize the new migrants. Nevertheless, at least a few Puerto Ricans gained political visibility during the decade: Felipe N. Torres won a State Assembly seat in The Bronx in 1953, Tony Méndez became East Harlem's district leader in 1954, J. López Ramos won an Assembly seat in Manhattan in 1958, and Encarnación Padilla de Armas served as coordinator of the Spanish Division of the New York State Liberal Party from 1946 to 1962.

After the quiescent 1950s, however, men and women emerged to create civic organizations and political openings for the New York Puerto

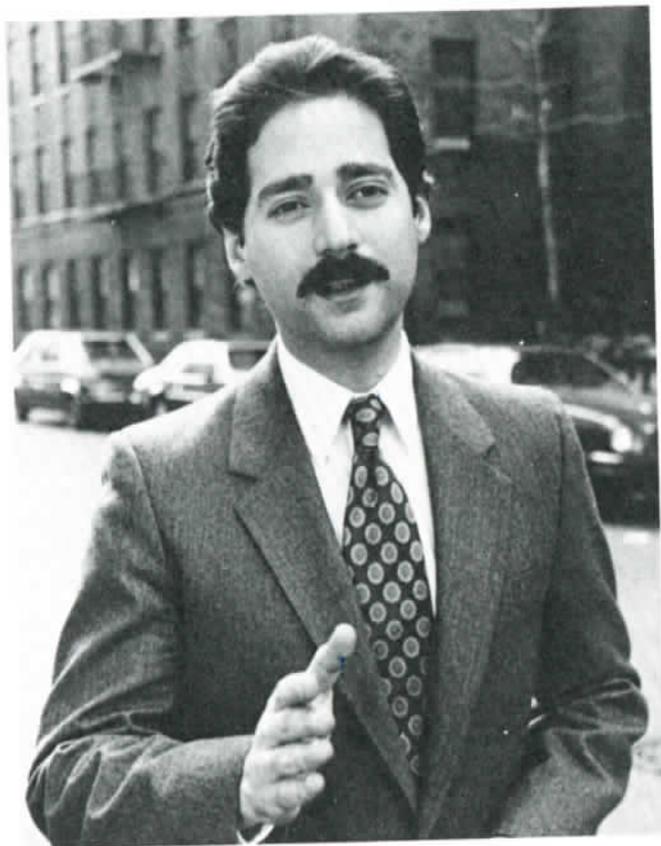
Rican community. Concerned educators and social service providers founded organizations such as *Aspira* and the Puerto Rican Forum. In politics, three men arose who would control the arena of Puerto Rican politics for the next two decades: Herman Badillo, Gilberto Gerena-Valentin, and Ramón Vélez. Given the large-scale shift of the Puerto Rican population to The Bronx, these three activists have maintained their political bases in the borough.

Herman Badillo, a moderate, is the best known Puerto Rican politician in New York. He got his start in politics in 1961, when Mayor Wagner appointed him first Commissioner of Relocation; his mandate was to redesign and ameliorate the controversial process of finding new homes for people evicted through urban renewal programs. In 1964, New York State passed a law allowing potential voters to take a literacy test in languages other than English. Without doubt, this law helped create a new pool of Puerto Rican voters and allowed Badillo to win the Bronx Borough Presidency in 1965. In addition, he won three congressional races in the South Bronx / East Harlem District in the early 1970s. Furthermore, while he lost several bids for Mayor, he served as Deputy Mayor in the Koch administration from 1978 to 1980.

Gilberto Gerena-Valentin has described himself as "a socialist who works with, if not within, the system," and has carried on the militant tradition in the city's Puerto Rican community.⁸ He formed the National Association of Puerto Rican Civil Rights in 1965 and headed the City's Human Rights Commission Business and Employment Division from 1966 to 1971. In the 1970s he served as part of the Bronx delegation to the City Council.

Ramón Vélez is the third important Bronx-based politician to have emerged in the 1960s. Vélez most closely resembles the old-style ethnic machine politician. Historically, political machines have arisen in poor communities, so it is no surprise that one functions in the South Bronx, the poorest congressional district in the United States. Ramón Vélez has translated his ability to dispense jobs and housing through local antipoverty programs into a strong political base; through his political organization, he won a City Council seat in the 1970s. Vélez lost influence in the late 1970s, when he was the target of several corruption investigations during the first Koch administration. Ironically, though, because of Mayor Koch's rapprochement with the Bronx Democratic Organization after 1980, a move opposed by Badillo and Gerena-Valentin, Vélez may have regained much of his previously lost influence at the expense of the other two politicians.

In the 1980s, over two million Puerto Ricans live in all of the fifty



Borough President Fernando Ferrer

The Bronx County Historical Society Collection.

states. The 320,098 Puerto Ricans in The Bronx, comprise the largest such community on the mainland. Puerto Ricans now make up 27% of the Bronx population, while all Hispanics make up 33% of the borough's total. Thus, The Bronx will continue to be a center for Puerto Rican civic and cultural organizations and a base for ethnic politicians. Significantly, in April 1987, Fernando Ferrer, a politician in his mid-thirties was named Bronx Borough President. His appointment signaled increased opportunities for second-generation New York Puerto Ricans to take a more active role in politics and community affairs generally.

Throughout the 20th century, New York's Puerto Rican community

has been affected by economic, political, and social processes over which it had little control. Yet, the community has demonstrated the energy and creativity characteristic of earlier immigrant groups that settled in New York and went on to make important contributions to the city, state, and nation.

NOTES

¹Manuel Maldonado-Denis, *Puerto Rico: A Socio-Historical Interpretation* (New York: Random House, 1972), Chapter 2.

²Angelo Falcon, "A History of Puerto Rican Politics in New York City: 1860s to 1945," in J. Jennings and M. Rivera, *Puerto Rican Politics in Urban America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 20.

³"Report of the Commissioner of Labor on Hawaii," *Bulletin of the Department of Labor*, No. 47 (Washington, D.C. 1903), reprinted in Adalberto Lopez, ed. *The Puerto Ricans: Their History, Culture, and Society* (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1980), pp. 351-362.

⁴Lawrence R. Chenault, *The Puerto Rican Migrant in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938. Reissued in New Jersey: Russell and Russell, 1970), pp. 91-97.

⁵Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, "Survival of Puerto Rican Women in New York Before World War II," in Clara Rodríguez, et al, eds, *The Puerto Rican Struggle: Essays on Survival in the U.S.* (New York: Puerto Rican Migration Research Consortium, 1980), pp. 47-57.

⁶Salvatore J. LaGumina, *Vito Marcantonio: The People's Politician* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1969), p. 130.

⁷Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Random House, 1974), chapter 41.

⁸See "The Saga of a Dishwasher: Gerena Valentin" in Stan Steiner, *The Islands: The Worlds of the Puerto Ricans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 401-406.