

# Book review: 'Slave Revolts in Puerto Rico: Conspiracies and Uprisings, 1795-1873'



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# Slave Revolts in Puerto Rico



*Winner of the Puerto Rico PEN Club Award*

**Guillermo A. Baralt**

When Guillermo A. Baralt published the original Spanish-language version of “Slave Revolts in Puerto Rico: Conspiracies and Uprisings, 1795-1873,” there was a strong reaction to its contents. To research the book, Baralt combed through municipal archives and old news reports to find documentation of over 20 revolts by enslaved Africans and a high incidence of self-liberated Blacks in Puerto Rico before slavery officially ended on the island in March of 1873.

“Up until the book’s publication, the conventional wisdom was that slaves in Puerto Rico were docile, had no reason to rebel and were generally treated well,” Baralt notes in his 2007 preface to the English-language version of the book. “Nevertheless, as ‘Esclavos Rebeldes’ demonstrated, researching the municipal records of many towns on the island during the period between 1796 and 1848 revealed a radically different story.”

Puerto Ricans of whatever skin color will invariably insist that they are from a culture where there is traditionally little racism. Because most Puerto Ricans are indoctrinated with this understanding that they have a pan-ethnic island heritage, there is often an underlying belief that race prejudice has never been practiced on the island—and that if it ever was, it is certainly different than the Black/white race-based dichotomy that was, and in many ways still is, in force in the United States.

Many Puerto Ricans have been taught the famous Fortunato Vizcarrondo poem, “Y tu aguela aonde ejta?” (“And where is your grandmother?”), which details how white-skinned Latinos will boast about a European-based heritage while not acknowledging their African roots—the title literally refers to their Black grandmother, who is hidden away toward the back of the house. But this poem indicates, with its apparent disparaging of African heritage, that race relations have not been so rosy.

There is little historical understanding that Puerto Rico also enslaved people of African descent and kept them in that position based on their Black skin color—slavery in Puerto Rico was no kinder or better for enslaved Africans than it was anywhere else in the Americas. Wealthy Puerto Rican landowners used slaves to help produce their crops. To maintain their businesses at a profit, they were often cruel to the people they owned. However, Puerto Rico’s slave owners were frightened of their slaves. They believed the Haitian Revolution was due to have a terrible effect on all of the Caribbean colonies, a fear confirmed by later uprisings in Guadeloupe, Saint Lucia, Cuba and Venezuela.

Baralt writes about the increase of the slave population on the island and the subsequent rise in revolts. After the Haitian Revolution, the need for more Puerto Rican sugarcane plantations increased. Haiti had been the source of 40 percent of the sugar consumed in the world, and after its revolution, there was an opportunity for other Caribbean islands to fill that role. As Puerto Rico increased its population of enslaved Africans, it tried to augment its sugar output, but the influx of recently arrived African-born slaves, who were known as “bozales,” often led to more individuals unwilling to accept that the rest of their lives would have to be lived in slavery.

In one uprising, for example, enslaved Blacks in the southern district of Guayama, where their numbers had grown dramatically, secretly made plans for a “Republic of Boricua.” The plan was to have as many enslaved Afro-Puerto Ricans as possible rise up on a given date and kill their enslavers and “then go into town on the eve of the feast of St. Michael. The ultimate goal was to end up being the rulers of the country.” The plan was discovered and the rebellion suppressed.

Ponce, Puerto Rico's second largest city, also faced African revolts. "Five of the 22 slave conspiracies on the island between 1795 and 1848 took place at the haciendas in Ponce," Baralt notes. "These were the most well-organized conspiracies, involved the largest number of slaves and were, by far, the ones that presented the most serious and dangerous predicaments for the state."

As the revolts grew and the number of enslaved Afro-Puerto Ricans increased, Puerto Rico's governor, General Juan Prim y Prats, put forth a law to corral local Blacks in May of 1848. Baralt writes:

"[Prim] issued the Bando Contra La Raza Negra [Decree Against the African Race]. This was a repressive and punitive decree that made no distinction between free Africans and slaves. It was enough merely to be African or a descendant of Africans to be included in the stipulations of the decree. According to Article I, any offense in which members of the African race, free or enslaved, were involved, would be tried and punished by a military court. Article II reaffirmed the superiority before the law of the white person over the Black person when it pointed out that any African taking up arms against whites 'even if the aggression were justified,' would, if he were a slave, be executed and if a free person, would have his right hand cut off.

"Africans and their descendants would always be guilty before the law. Article III made it clear that if a Black person verbally insulted, roughly handled or threatened someone with a stick, stones or in any other manner, he would be sentenced to six years in jail if he were a slave. If he were a free man he would be given a punishment corresponding to the circumstances surrounding the deed. Article V authorized masters to kill any slave who rose up in such an act." (p. 105)

These new laws were meant to help keep the threat of slave revolts down. The laws became part of the official slave code and were meant to act as an additional deterrent to the brutal punishments and even executions Afro-Puerto Ricans suffered if caught conspiring to fight for their freedom.

And yet still, Black Puerto Ricans continued with attempts to free themselves from slavery on the island: Ponce would go on to see another uprising attempt in July of 1848; and in the north, not far from San Juan, the district of Vega Baja saw a planned revolt in August 1848. Baralt explains that the Vega Baja and Ponce revolts were the last attempts by enslaved Afro-Puerto Ricans to free themselves and take over the island. After 1848, there were further Afro-Puerto Rican uprisings, but these later attempts were by slaves who were less concerned with taking over the island and more concerned with exacting revenge upon their enslavers.

Baralt's "Slave Revolts in Puerto Rico" demonstrates that Afro-Puerto Ricans waged a war for their freedom during enslavement; slavery was no less brutal in Puerto Rico; and Black Puerto Ricans were no more complacent about being denied their liberty.

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