

From Chapter 1

A Marriage of Convenience

Havana, January 1847

The brooding Aldama family palace, with its dark columned recesses, made a fitting scene for the plotting of a political scheme dedicated to the preservation of private wealth. The four-story marble edifice, with its Romanesque arches, wrought-iron balconies, hand-painted tiles, and lavish interior patios stood as a monument to both the beneficence and the curse of Cuban slavery. Certainly it attested to the riches that slavery had brought to Havana's Aldama family. Its patriarch, Domingo de Aldama, was one of Cuba's largest planters and owned a major share of the Havana Railway Company. The parlor furniture alone for his home had cost \$30,000. When family members ventured outside, they traveled by coach with liveried servants and outriders. But the palace also augured bloody racial apocalypse. During its construction, in October 1841, forty slaves had revolted and fought an intense battle with Spanish troops. Afterwards, Miguel de Aldama, son of Domingo, grew worried about the survival of Cuban slavery under Spain and several years later helped found the Club de la Habana, a cabal of Creoles, whites born in Cuba, dedicated to vanquishing Spain's control over Cuba and binding the island to the United States of America.

Miguel de Aldama typified those wealthy Creoles of Cuba who, fearing slave revolts, had become annexationists, advocates of the island's acquisition by the United States. Fears that Spain—which seemed weaker with each passing year—might eventually yield to pressures from British abolitionists and free the island's slaves nourished a growing conviction that only membership in the republican union to the north could rescue the island from a rising tide of social, economic, and political troubles. Such fears increased dramatically in 1843 when rumors of a massive slave uprising planned for Christmas Day swept the island. Whether or not the revolt, alleged to have been encouraged by the British abolitionist David Turnbull, was ever more than a rumor, reaction to it was swift and brutal. Captain General Leopold O'Donnell, the island's chief colonial official, had been appointed to his post that autumn to end a rash of slave revolts that had already darkened the decade. In the weeks after Christmas, all of those accused of involvement in the alleged conspiracy were strapped to a ladder (escalera), beaten, then executed.

In the wake of what became known as La Escalera conspiracy, more and more of Cuba's wealthy Creoles became annexationists. Creole pride might have preferred outright independence, but fears of inadvertently igniting a slave revolt were stronger. The United States seemed the best alternative to royalist Spain: an option that promised relative autonomy, a likely end to the slave trade, but immediate protection of Cuban slavery—and all without massive social upheaval.

While reciprocal calls from the United States for Cuba's annexation had been raised since at least 1806, the two movements usually operated without coordination and, not infrequently, at cross purposes. By the mid-1840s, however, a marriage of the two Cuban annexationist movements—one in the United States, the other in Cuba—had become inevitable. Only the time and place of the ceremony, and the officiating minister, remained in doubt.

Hudson Strode, *The Pageant of Cuba* (Harrison Smith and Robert Haas: New York, 1934), 98 and plate 9; Basil Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba, 1848-1855* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 39; James Suchlicki, *Historical Dictionary of Cuba* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, Inc.: 1988), 11.

For background on this conspiracy, see Robert L. Paquette, *Sugar Is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

Gerald E. Poyo, "With All, and for the Good of All": *The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1848-1898* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989), 5-8.