



History of Pathology

Anatomic pathology in Cuba before 1959: a personal recollection



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ABSTRACT

Reminiscing when reaching life's twilight is a human condition and hopefully leads to an objective self-evaluation of the past years. I have just done that with this recollection and now I can conclude that, in spite of the outcome of my professional life in Cuba, I remain convinced that one should not complete a journey just because it was started, that everything we learn in life will be sued in due time, and that we should always pursue our dreams because we become our best in the process.

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When we humans reach the twilight of our lives and become aware of our mortality, we start reminiscing and reconnecting with old friends and work colleagues of years past and recollecting our memories and experiences. I have been doing just that for several years with various degrees of success because the task is more difficult after one has experienced major changes, such as emigrating from your native country, as I did 33 years ago.

We reminisce spontaneously but sometimes we need a small push. That happened to me when in May 2015, a Cuban journalist asked for my help in obtaining biographical information about several of my fellow Cuban marine biologist colleagues, which he had been unable to find. I jumped to the opportunity fundamentally because that allowed me to write memories of times past before they vanished into oblivion.

It happened again a few days ago when I e-mailed something about my years of training in anatomic pathology in Cuba from 1952 to 1958 to a good and admired friend I met when working at Mount Sinai Medical Center who suggested I should write down my experiences because they would be interesting to others and that is the origin of this short historical account on anatomic pathology in Cuba before 1959. While looking for published information about those who trained me, I was struck, although not surprised, by the absence of data. I will comment about that latter but first, before I start my account, it is necessary to put into historical context the relations of Cuba to the rest of the world before 1959.

1. Relations of Cuba to with the rest of the world before 1959

Between 1811 and 1825, Spain lost all its American colonies except for Cuba and Puerto Rico fundamentally because both were islands and, as such, isolated from independence movements that could spread through contiguous frontiers, as what happened with Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador when Simón Bolívar (1783-1830) fought and

won their independence. Cuba also fought for its independence from 1869 to 1879 and again from 1895 to 1898, but Spain held its grip on Cuba until the Treaty of Paris (1898) that ended the Hispano-American War and gave the US temporary control of Cuba (1898-1902) and ownership of Guam, Marianas, Palau, the Philippine Islands, and Puerto Rico [1–3].

During the 19th century, the very wealthy and well-educated Cuban upper class looked always more toward Europe and the United States than to the recently emancipated Spanish colonies, and Spain considered Cuba as the most precious of its remaining colonies because from 1825 to 1897 it was the source of 60% to 75% of all Spain's gross income. The Cuban connection with the United States, which even sparked an "annexationist" movement parallel to the independence efforts, was reinforced during the first US intervention (1898-1902) when Leonard Wood, US Military Governor (1899-1902), structured Cuba's modern governance, even creating a provisional constitution that included a clause allowing future intervention if need be, as what happened in 1906 to 1909.

Cuban entrepreneurs and industrialists were ahead of Spain and all other Hispano-American countries in many innovations such as the introduction of steam-operated machinery and ships (1829), a railroad line with steam locomotive propulsion (1837), a whole industrial complex operated by electricity (1877), a telephone system (1879), and public electrical lighting (1889) in Havana. Cuba's economy and culture after 1902 were even more closely aligned with that of the United States than to any other country in a period dubbed as "neocolonial" by the apologists of the Cuban communist government.

2. Pioneers of Cuban pathology

Medical advances in Cuba before 1959 were numerous, including those of Tomás Romay Chacón (1764-1849), considered "The Father of Cuban Medicine." In 1797 he performed autopsies to understand how yellow fever affected its victims' internal organs and in 1804 introduced

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small pox vaccination, only 6 years after Edward Jenner (1749-1823) had discovered the principle and developed its application [4–8].

Another physician, Carlos J. Finlay (1833-1915), studied at the Jefferson Medical College (Philadelphia) (1853-1855) completing his studies in Havana and Paris. In 1881 he postulated that a mosquito was the vector of yellow fever, and in 1882, he identified *Aedes aegypti* as such vector. His hypothesis was demonstrated by the Walter Reed commission (1900) and acknowledged by Leonard Wood (1860-1927), a physician and Cuba's US Military Governor. The Yellow Fever Commission developed hygienic protocols guaranteeing the survival of the workers constructing the Panamá Canal (1904-1914) that had enormous positive economic implications for World commerce. Finlay's discovery was considered so important that from 1905 to 1915, he was nominated 10 times for the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology.

Juan Guiteras Gener (1852-1925), another Cuban physician, immigrated with his family to the United States in 1868. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania (1873), he went to Germany to study anatomic pathology with Rudolf Virchow and bacteriology with Robert Koch. In 1879 he became US Navy physician, reported filaria Bancrofti for the first time in the United, and was appointed Professor of Pathology at the University of Pennsylvania (1884-1898). He returned to Cuba in 1898 with the second Yellow Fever Commission and in 1900 demonstrated the viral nature of the yellow fever agent after being able to transmit the disease to volunteers using blood from

infected patients that had been filtered through Berkefeld and Chamberland filters. He later went to the London Tropical Medicine School and in 1900 became Professor of Pathology and Tropical Medicine at Havana University. He was the founder of the *Journal of Tropical Medicine*, where he published numerous works and was appointed Director of Public Health in Cuba (1902-1921). He had a fructiferous and internationally recognized career as pathologist and bacteriologist.

As a consequence of the onset of the 1869-1879 "Ten Years" Cuban independence war, Arístides Agramonte Simoni's (1868-1931) family emigrated from Cuba in 1870, initially to New York and later to Mérida, México. Repatriated in 1878, he returned to New York (1880) and graduated from medical school at Columbia University (1892). In 1898 he was an Assistant Surgeon in the US Army and worked for the second Yellow Fever Commission (1900-1902) in Cuba. In 1900 he revalidated his medical degree in Cuba and became director of anatomic pathology and bacteriology laboratories at Havana University and later became Bacteriology Chair (1901-1931). In 1903 he participated in the sanitation of the US Panama Canal Zone. He wrote 2 books and 150 monographies and articles and had a prestigious internationally recognized career, so much so that in 1903, the English pathologist John George Adami (1862-1926) nominated him for the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology, and C.L. Alfonse Laveran (1845-1922), himself a 1907 Nobel Laureate, did the same 5 more times from 1912 to 1917 (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Pioneers of Cuban pathology. (1) Tomás Romay Chacón (1764-1849). (2) Carlos J. Finlay Barres (1833-1915). (3) Juan Guiteras Gener (1852-1925). (4) Arístides Agramonte Simoni (1868-1931).

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