

The Spanish Abolition Process

Introduction:

By the first quarter of the 19th century the Spanish empire was reduced to Cuba and Puerto Rico. This was due to the independence of her Latin American colonies and the Dominican Republic.

In 1818, Spain also signed the treaty with Britain promising to end her slave trade in 1820. The trade flourished however until the 1840's. Importation of forced laborers from Africa continued until the 1860's. It ceased only after the mighty U.S. who had investments in the Cuban sugar industry declared slavery illegal in 1865. In the 18th century, enslaved workers were the key to Cuba's prosperous sugar industry. They had picked up the gap caused by the Haitian revolution and cemented themselves as the key producer of cane sugar until the 1860's.

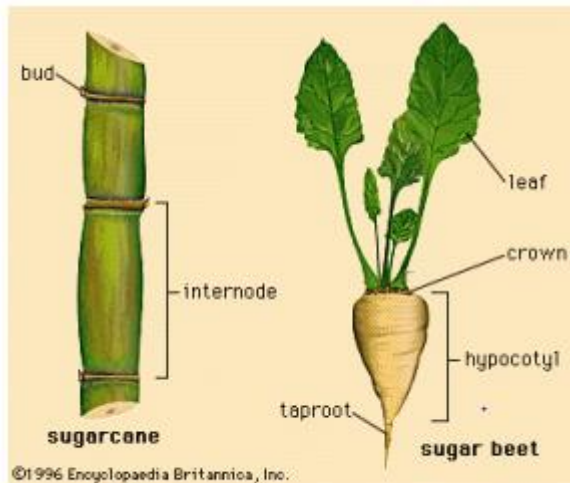
Spanish system of abolition was peculiar in that it was encouraged and agitated for by the colonists themselves. This includes the very planters! In fact, in 1866, Puerto Rican delegates sent to Spain demanding the abolition of slavery as "moral and economic necessity". In 1870 the **Moret Law** was passed. All children born to enslaved mothers after 1868 were born free and all enslaved 60 years and older were declared free.



Puerto Rican child slaves

On **March 22, 1873** slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico. The newly freed people were required to enter into a contract to work with their former masters for no less than three years.

Cuba was the largest producer of cane sugar in the 1860's. She used both enslaved and immigrant labor. She also used some amount of mechanization. She did not depend chronically on enslaved labor. At this time she was experiencing stiff competition from beet sugar.



Sugar beet

Cuban planters realized that mechanization and free labor would be far less expensive and save her from further decrease in profits. Besides the British and French had long freed their enslaved. They did not want to have to contend with rebellions from their enslaved workers.

In both Cuba the abolition movement was tied to the independence movement.

In 1865 the Anti-Slavery Society was formed. It was committed to immediate emancipation. They were forced however to wait some 20 years. The Ten Years War for independence (1868-1878) took precedence over the cause of abolition. In any event if they gained their independence they would simply pass a law abolishing the system of slavery. In **1870 they too passed the Moret Law.**

Meanwhile a number of liberal planters had freed and armed their enslaved workers to help them fight in the war. At the end of the war they were set free. The remaining enslaves, as is expected demanded their freedom the year after (1879). They refused to work unless they were freed like their brothers.

The Spanish government agreed. She would rather abolish slavery than lose her prosperous colony. In 1880 she passed the law abolishing slavery. The enslaved were to serve a period of eight years of apprenticeship. The system ended prematurely on **October 7, 1886.**