



MARTA ABREU: PIONEER OF CUBAN PHILANTHROPY

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The life of the patriot and benefactor from Villa Clara, Marta Abreu de Estévez (1845–1909), was a continuous endeavor of generous actions that only ended with her death. Hers was a vocation of service to her fellow citizens and to her homeland, hardly comparable in 19th-century Cuba—both because of her class background and her condition as a woman, traditionally excluded from social protagonism during the colonial period.

She could have been a wealthy and cultured lady, destined for a marriage of convenience with another member of her class, and a frivolous life of travel and social gatherings. However, she chose instead—against her father’s wishes—to marry a man who was not only much poorer, but also four years younger and who shared her civic ideals and patriotic concerns: the lawyer from Matanzas, Luis Estévez Romero, the first vice president of the independent republic.

Given her family lineage—her father was a cavalry lieutenant; her paternal grandfather, a militia sub-lieutenant; and her maternal grandfather, a city councilman and chief constable—she might even have been a supporter of Spanish rule. However, she was the opposite. In a rare gesture within colonial society, she rejected the noble title of Countess of Santa Clara, with which the City Council had sought to honor her.

Biographers agree on the strength of character and moral fortitude of this exceptional woman, who in her youth was a sweet and melancholic girl with a natural charm. Her many accomplishments were facilitated by her intelligence, refined manners, and elegant dress.

Where did young Marta learn this devotion that led her to embrace the public good as a way of life? All who have chronicled her life point to her mother, Doña Rosalía Arencibia de Abreu, as the guiding spirit of her philanthropic vocation. Yet Marta far surpassed the altruism and selflessness inspired by her mother, embodying a modern philanthropy—one that went beyond charity for its own sake and sought broader social and cultural goals that transcended both giver and receiver. This was made possible by a favorable national and local context that enabled her virtuous mission.

The historical moment when Marta Abreu began to systematically carry out her charitable works coincided with a time of major changes on the island following the peace without independence signed in 1878. The 1880s saw the colonial administration implement parts of the Spanish Restoration's legal framework, enabling the emergence of a civil society—limited, but legal and authorized. Within this context, the Laws of Associations and the Press Law were enacted, and institutions in education, recreation, mutual aid, religion, the professions, student life, sports, charity, and culture flourished.

Among the most important charitable institutions founded or revitalized during this time were: the Royal Association of Sunday Schools (for educating poor youth and domestic workers), the Society of Home-Based Charity (for aiding indigent families), the Protective Society for Children of the Island of Cuba (for children of all races and social conditions), and numerous mutual aid societies (helping immigrants adapt to modern life). All shared the ideal of enlightening and modernizing colonial society.

These ideals also guided Marta Abreu's charitable efforts in Santa Clara, which served the dual purpose of modernizing the city and developing the intellectual and physical abilities of its citizens for a more productive social life. At the time, the city was undergoing a period of growth and expansion.

Her first charitable foundation was the San Pedro Nolasco School, named in honor of her father. This school opened on January 31, 1882, with educator Eduardo Rodríguez Veytia as its first principal. It is said that, in an extraordinary gesture, Marta broke with formal protocol during the inauguration

ceremony, spontaneously giving 400 pesos to poor onlookers and donating another 100 to the Saint Vincent de Paul Association.

From that day on, her efforts in education, health care, commemoration, construction, science, and public service did not stop until 1895, when she went into exile. Among her most important projects were: the El Gran Cervantes School for Black children (1882), the San Pedro and Santa Rosalía poorhouse (1883), the Santa Rosalía School for poor girls (1885), the obelisk to priests Juan Martín de Conyedo and Francisco Antonio Hurtado de Mendoza (1886), the Conyedo School, the Fire Station and Police Headquarters (all in 1886), public laundry facilities (1887), the El Amparo dispensary for poor children (1895), the bridge to Cayo (1895), the Santa Clara–Cienfuegos train station, and a modern electric power plant (1895). That year, a replica of the Eiffel Tower—supreme symbol of industrial progress—and several triumphal arches were erected in the Main Square.

Simultaneously, Marta visited and donated to the San Lázaro and San Juan de Dios hospitals, as well as the meteorological observatory run by young scientist Julio Jover Anido. She also helped repair the road from Santa Clara to Camajuaní, endowed the cemetery with a tomb for the poor, built the Progreso Lodge and La Trinidad School for Black children, funded medical studies for young men from Villa Clara, financed scientist Carlos de la Torre's travels in Europe (entrusting him with her son Pedro's education), and sponsored the publication of science books like the one by Matanzas-born Sebastián Alfredo Morales on Cuban flora. In the Republican era, she donated books and electric lighting to the municipal library.

Her most important and lasting work was the La Caridad Theater, inaugurated on September 8, 1885, the feast of Our Lady of Charity, Cuba's patron saint. The total cost was 150,000 pesos. It was built by engineer Herminio Leiva and decorated by painter Camilo Salaya with images representing Genius, Fame, and History.

At Marta's express request, proceeds from performances were to be donated to the city government for public education and charity, and to the Saint Vincent de Paul Association for distribution among the poor. The building was administered by the city and the Society of Home-Based Charity, with expenses covered by renting out coffeehouses, restaurants, and hair salons.

Notably, Marta stipulated that the theater could not host "immoral or unedifying plays, which would detract from the civilizing mission of dramatic art: to instruct by delighting." Theater companies were required to submit their repertoire in advance, and any such plays were to be excluded. Nor were

political rallies allowed, "to prevent damage that might be caused by large crowds, even if organizers promised to take responsibility."

Another crucial aspect of Marta Abreu's biography was her religiosity, reflected not only in her merciful devotion but also in the many contributions she made to the Catholic Church. These included donating a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to the Main Parish Church, financing the restoration of the church and the Church of Buen Viaje, donating 300 pesos and a carved image of Saint Peter Nolasco made in France to the church in Encrucijada.

As important as the Abreu Estévez family's contributions were to Santa Clara's beautification and moral advancement, so too were the generous financial contributions Marta and her sisters—Rosa Abreu de Grancher and Rosalía Abreu de Sánchez Toledo—sent from exile in Paris to support the War of Independence in 1895.

This was so significant that Generalissimo Máximo Gómez said in 1899, when asked his opinion of Marta: "You Villalareños, and Cubans in general, do not know the true worth of that lady. One who knows it well is Tomás Estrada Palma—go and ask him what patriotic value the illustrious Marta holds. If her merits were put to a vote by the Liberation Army, I dare say it wouldn't be difficult for her to be awarded the same rank I bear."

Upon hearing of Antonio Maceo's death, Marta sent a telegram to Tomás Estrada Palma, the Cuban Revolutionary Party's delegate, on December 19, 1896, saying: "Confirm if the heartbreaking news is true. Count on ten thousand pesos. Forward. Ignacio Agramonte." Shortly after, she added: "It is not in well-tempered souls to falter at a blow of misfortune, but rather to draw renewed strength to carry forward the great enterprise. That is why I sent my telegram saying 'Forward' and offering ten thousand pesos."

"Bayardo Camagüeyano" (a reference to Ignacio Agramonte) was the pseudonym Marta Abreu used when she wrote from Bayonne on February 15, 1897: "... I feel I am merely fulfilling a simple duty as a daughter of the land where those truly deserving of epic tales are shedding their generous blood to give everyone a free homeland. How could those of us who are able not make extraordinary efforts, so that our compatriots' titanic struggle might be crowned with glorious success?" During the harsh days of Weyler's Reconcentration, Marta and her sisters supported a soup kitchen at the Passionist Fathers' convent in their hometown.

According to French historian Paul Estrade: “Her donations to the Cuban Revolutionary Party’s Treasury totaled 186,000 pesos. Including what she gave for the Ceuta prisoners, Rafael Cabrera’s expedition, various local collections, and the Parisian Delegation, her total contribution (together with her husband Luis Estévez) exceeded 210,000 pesos (1,100,000 francs)—representing half of the total raised by the Cuban colony in Paris.”

All of Marta’s biographers agree that she was an exceptional woman who embodied the three great aspects of all apostolic work: Goodness, Charity, and Love. It is also notable that the central focus of her life revolved around the trilogy of homeland-patriotism-heritage. Marta Abreu was a magnificent example, in colonial Cuban society, of someone who successfully combined her philanthropic vocation, innovative spirit, and profound patriotism—understood both in relation to her hometown, Santa Clara, and to Cuba.

Marta wanted Santa Clara to be a cultured and modern city; to that end, she provided it with a magnificent theater, a railway station, and an electric power plant. But she also wanted a socially balanced society, where the poor could find education, sanitation, and relief from their suffering.

As a symbol of gratitude and pride from her hometown, various works commemorate her immense figure as a philanthropic woman, such as the portraits preserved by the Provincial History Museum and the beautiful bronze sculpture with a golden patina—created by the French sculptor Auguste Maillard—inaugurated on February 24, 1924, facing the bandstand that adorns Leoncio Vidal Park, in the same place where the bell tower of the former Major Parish Church once stood.

Likewise, the enlightened patriots and intellectuals of Villa Clara who promoted the creation of a center for higher learning in Santa Clara chose her name as a symbol of the educational work Marta Abreu carried out in the 19th century. Thus, on November 30, 1952, the “Marta Abreu” Central University of Las Villas was founded, and on its beautiful campus, a monument also stands in reverence of her memory.