

Teaching Guide for The History of Puerto Ricans in the U.S.

Part Three: *Puerto Rican New York during the Inter-War Years*

The use of the *Puerto Rican Heritage Poster* and this *Teaching Guide* complement *The History of Puerto Ricans in the U.S.* course created by Dr. Virginia Sánchez-Korrol.

This guide includes:

- Discussion Questions for the Brief Historical Chronology Poster
- Activities
- Recommended Readings

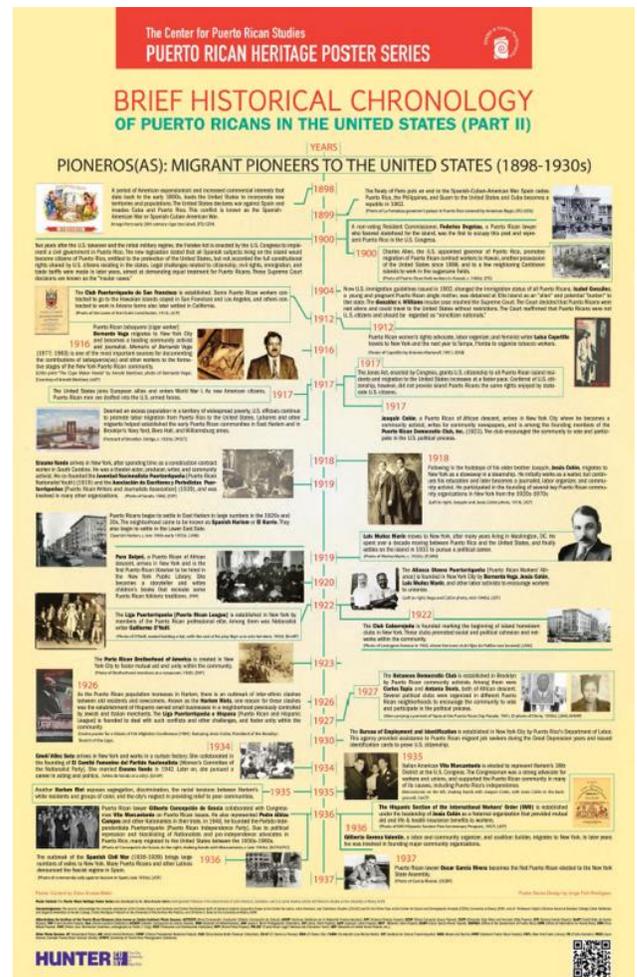
Poster Series Used: *Brief Historical Chronology of Puerto Ricans in the United States, Part II*

Pioneros(as): Migrant Pioneers to the United States (1898 to 1930s)

This poster (Part II of the Historical Chronology) starts with the U.S. takeover of Puerto Rico in 1898 that put an end to the Spanish colonial regime on the island. Less than a year before the U.S. intervention, Spain had granted a Charter of Autonomy to Puerto Rico that allowed self-government for the island as a province of Spain. The poster illustrates that from the onset, the new territorial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States was a major contributing factor to Puerto Rican migration.

Ironically, migration became a frequent public policy tool used by Puerto Rico's U.S.-appointed governors and other officials to deal with the island's widespread poverty and unemployment, and what was perceived at the time to be an "overpopulation" problem. First, the poster highlights the pre- and post-World War I (1910s-1930s) steamship migratory waves to the United States—what is now known as the *pioneros(as)* [pioneers] migration. The captions describe early community organizations founded by Puerto Rican migrants and underscores some of the community's activities, including efforts at cultural preservation, mutual aid, labor organizing, and civic and political engagement, as Puerto Ricans begin to build their communities and struggle for their rights, equal treatment, a better life, and making their presence more visible in New York and other geographic locations.

Because of Puerto Rico's new colonial status as an "unincorporated" territory of the United States that belonged to the U.S. nation but was not granted a clear path to eventual statehood or independence, this poster also introduces some of the early legal challenges



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made by Puerto Ricans in order to determine which constitutional rights and protections enjoyed by U.S. citizens living in the states would apply to island residents. These legal challenges were related to areas such as immigration, citizenship status, trade tariffs, and civil rights. Essentially, these cases sought equal treatment for island Puerto Ricans. Those that ended with Supreme Court decisions are known as the “insular cases.” As an unincorporated territory of the United States, Puerto Rico’s representation in the U.S. Congress began in 1900 and is still limited to the election of a non-voting Resident Commissioner.

During the early 20th century, Puerto Rican migrants, the majority of working class background, built their larger communities in Brooklyn’s Navy Yard, Boro Hall, and Williamsburg neighborhoods, and in Manhattan’s East Harlem (what is known as Spanish Harlem or El Barrio) and Chelsea areas. It is during this early period that some prominent grassroots community leaders who left some written record of their experiences as migrants come to New York. Among the most notable were **Bernardo Vega**, **Joaquín Colón**, and **Jesús Colón**—Vega arrived in 1916, Joaquín Colón in 1917, and his brother Jesús Colón, in 1918. The three of them came from Puerto Rico’s mountain town of Cayey, a tobacco-growing region and a major center of artisanal cigar manufacturing.

This early migration period shows a clear presence of Puerto Rican artisans, mostly *tabaqueros(as)* [cigar makers] and typographers, and other working class migrants in the United States. Many of these early migrants had been involved in the labor movement struggles in Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican cigar makers stand out during this period and their socially and politically conscious work culture and activism were recreated in the early *colonias hispanas* [Hispanic neighborhoods] of New York City, and in the writings of several prominent community figures. Some of these writings are memoirs or autobiographical accounts, as is the case with Bernardo Vega and Joaquín Colón. Jesús Colón’s writings include journalistic articles, stories, and poems, some of which address his own experiences in New York, but also the collective lives of Puerto Rican migrants. Many other migrants frequently published plays, novels, poetry, journalistic articles, letters to the editor, and *crónicas*, narrative accounts that focus on events or notable personalities commonly found in the numerous Spanish-language newspapers that burgeoned in the community during those years. A few of these historically neglected newspapers of the 1910s to the 1930s have survived the test of time and are now preserved in libraries and archival collections, testifying to the working conditions, social and political concerns, and the civil rights struggles of those who were ethnically and racially different than the U.S. white majority population.

The *tabaqueros(as)* began to arrive in U.S. cities—such as Tampa, Key West, New York, and Philadelphia—as early as the 1880s, and continued doing so up to the 1930s. These cities had large concentrations of tobacco factories and cigar making shops. A significant number of Spaniards, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans, as well as immigrants from other countries, came to the United States seeking employment in this expanding sector of the U.S. economy. The cigar workers were known as a self-educated militant sector of the labor movement and for their socialist ideals. Among them were also some anarchists who defended individual freedom, resented state control, and denounced the exploitation of workers and the injustices that they perceived to be inherent to the capitalist system.

One of the most prominent Puerto Ricans among the *tabaqueros(as)* coming to Tampa and New York during the 1910s was **Luisa Capetillo**. She was a labor organizer, reader in the tobacco factories (a job mostly dominated by men), and one of the most ardent defenders

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of women's liberation. Capetillo left an impressive body of writings on feminism and women's rights, and is now an important icon of the first wave Puerto Rican feminist movement.

The struggles of the working class in U.S. society during the early decades of the 20th century have been captured in **Bernardo Vega's** *Memoirs* (first published in 1977 in Spanish and in 1984 in English). Vega's *Memoirs* represent a crucial text for understanding the formative years of New York's Puerto Rican community of the 1920s and 30s. His book delivers a detailed account of the efforts of Puerto Rican migrants to survive and adapt to a less than welcoming environment—from dealing with all the urban complexities and inter-ethnic conflicts of New York City, to confronting the mistreatment of immigrant/migrant workers, and the racism and segregation that were so clearly demarcated in U.S. society during those years. The written legacy left by the brothers **Joaquín** and **Jesús Colón**, adds to Vega's recollections by also introducing a vast array of early migrant experiences that offer a composite of the realities and challenges Puerto Ricans faced and endured during the formation of their communities. Those early generations of Puerto Rican migrants carried on their battles against racism and discrimination and their exploitation as migrant workers without the benefit of the civil rights protections that were later enacted by the U.S. Congress in the 1960s.

This poster also underscores how early migrants began to create organizations to fight for their rights, serve the community, and assist other migrants in their transition and adaptation to U.S. society. Puerto Ricans developed cultural, social, and mutual aid organizations and networks, and strove to forge a sense of solidarity and unity within their early *colonias* (settlements). Those were not easy goals to achieve since there were several factors that contributed to marked divisions among Puerto Ricans themselves and among the various Hispanic national groups in the city. Some of the most obvious were based on social class and racial differences, despite the fact that, historically, racial mixture has been common practice and more accepted in Puerto Rican and other Caribbean and Latin American societies than it has been in the United States. However, the prevailing racial polarization and racial categories of the U.S. nation, which historically divided the U.S. population into whites and non-whites (now commonly referred to as people of color), only intensified racial prejudice and a consciousness of racial lines among Puerto Ricans and other Latinos(as) living in the United States.

Additionally, political divisions regarding the colonial status of Puerto Rico occurred among Nationalists and other pro-independence supporters, annexationists promoting statehood for Puerto Rico, and autonomists clamoring for a larger degree of self-government for the island without severing its ties to the United States. Since the beginnings of U.S. rule, a considerable sector of the population view Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States as beneficial in reducing high levels of poverty and unemployment and propelling the socioeconomic development and modernization of Puerto Rican society. Adding to the antagonisms produced by island partisan politics, were marked ideological divisions among socialists, anarchists, communists, anti-imperialists, and those who favored capitalism and bourgeois values.

The political repression and blacklisting against Nationalists and other independence advocates, and against labor activists in Puerto Rico, intensified in the 1920s and 1930s and continued in subsequent decades. This repressive environment propelled a significant exodus of Puerto Rican political migrants to the United States. A large number of Nationalists, some of

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whom had spent time in federal prisons, made their presence felt through the political and cultural organizations and newspapers that later emerged within the diaspora, most notably in the Puerto Rican communities of New York and Chicago. It is then not surprising to see some of these migrants engage in political and cultural activities with a clear nationalistic tenor that fostered a strong sense of Puerto Rican identity reflected in the histories of these particular communities. Paradoxically, these expressions of Puerto Rican nationalism and anti-colonialism were largely suppressed in Puerto Rico by U.S. and island authorities for most of the 20th century, but found a less repressive environment within the communities of the diaspora. As Puerto Rican migrants endured racism and unequal treatment in U.S. society, and were excluded from the Anglo American mainstream, the affirmation of their *puertorriqueñidad* [Puerto Ricanness] was a powerful tool in their efforts to survive, provide for their families, protect their communities, and strive to make a better life for themselves and their offspring.

The *pioneros(as)* also left a wide-ranging legacy of Spanish-language community newspapers, theater and music, hometown social clubs, political clubs, cultural organizations, and service agencies, all aimed at enhancing the quality of life of the communities and upholding their identity as Puerto Ricans. Along with these efforts, they stated their claims for participation and representation in city and state politics, and contributed with their labor to the U.S. economy and to the building of their communities.

With the growth of El Barrio or Spanish Harlem, inter-ethnic conflicts due to territorial encroachment on older Harlem residents—which at the time included Italian, African American, and Jewish earlier settlers—began to occur leading to clashes and disturbances, later to be known as the Harlem riots. The first one was in 1926. A second riot ensued in 1935, due to the unequal treatment of Harlem's population of color by the mostly white police, and the city's neglect of poor neighborhoods during the years of the Great Depression. However, these confrontations were not unusual in U.S. society and have been occurring since the nineteenth century in New York City and other U.S. urban centers which share a long history of inter-ethnic conflict and neighborhood encroachments among old immigrant settlers and new arrivals, and between white and non-white populations.

Discussion Questions for the Brief Historical Chronology Poster

1) How did the following individuals contribute to the early Puerto Rican community:

- Pura Belpré
- Jesús Colón
- Emelí Vélez de Vando
- Bernardo Vega

2) What specific factors influenced each of these individual's decision to migrate to New York?

3) How did each of these individuals experience being part of U.S. society in the first half of the 20th century as migrants from Puerto Rico?

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4) What were the roles of the following early community organizations?

Liga Puertorriqueña e Hispana [Puerto Rican and Hispanic League]
Alianza Obrera [Workers' Alliance]

Activities

1) Brief Summaries: Ask students to summarize the poster's major themes in a sentence or two and relate their view of how certain landmark events have influenced the Puerto Rican community in the United States.

2) Minute Paper: Ask students to respond to two questions: (a) What was the most significant thing you learned from this poster?; and (b) What questions remain in your mind after studying this poster?

3) The Muddiest Point: Ask students to identify any issues, concepts, or information that remain unclear to them after studying the poster. Then, to describe how they can find additional information from the Study Guide's recommended readings to enhance their knowledge and understanding.

4) Profiles of Notable Individuals: Ask students to write a brief, focused profile of an individual, a group, or an organization or institution highlighted in the poster whose values, goals, or actions the reader admires based on the provided poster content.

Recommended Readings

- Acosta-Belén, Edna and Carlos E. Santiago. 2006. *Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
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- Rivera Ramos, Efren. 2005. "Insular Cases." 2005. In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States*. Vol. 2. Suzanne Oboler and Deena González, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 385-387.
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