

From Colonies  
to Countries  
in the North  
Caribbean

# From Colonies to Countries in the North Caribbean:

## *Military Engineers in the Development of Cities and Territories*

Edited by

Pedro Luengo-Gutiérrez  
and Gene Allen Smith

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Military Engineers in the Development of Cities and Territories

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## CHAPTER SIX

# A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF JULES SAGEBIEN'S ARCHITECTURE PROJECTS IN THE CITY OF MATANZAS

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Once Havana had become established as one of the key logistical ports along the route taken by Spain's West Indies Fleet, considerable effort was made to convert the city into one of the most militarised enclaves of Spain's American territories. However, it was not only the bay surrounding the capital and the city's environs that became the focus of the governors' and military engineers' concerns. It soon became apparent that unprotected zones further afield were a source of danger and were of key importance to maintain control over the whole territory. It was this political context that led to the construction of the Fort of San Severino de Matanzas in 1693<sup>1</sup>. The fort's design was indebted to the modern approaches that had been employed in the defensive architectural projects built in the Americas in the time of Spannocchi and Antonelli. The construction of this military project led to the foundation of the city of San Carlos de Matanzas, which was intended to supply the fort with supplies and services. From the outset, the city became one of the most interesting examples of the approaches to urban planning that were developed in Latin America. From the early years of its foundation to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both its designers and its inhabitants displayed a persistent concern that the city should be built in accordance with models that were both exemplary and based on order. The military engineer Juan de Herrera y Sotomayor was commissioned to design the original city plan, and this

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<sup>1</sup> Francisco Castillo Meléndez, *La defensa de la Isla de Cuba en la segunda mitad del siglo XVII* (Sevilla: Diputación provincial, 1986), 328-356; Silvia Hernández, *El Castillo de San Severino: insomne caballero del puerto de Matanzas (1689-1898)* (Matanzas: Ediciones Matanzas, 2006), 36-43.

came into effect between 10 and 30 October 1693 when the city was officially inaugurated. Both the original plan of the city and the events that marked its foundation are still conserved today and they make it clear how the city's design drew on Renaissance urban planning models, despite the fact that more than a century had passed since the publication of their principal point of reference, Philip II's 1573 *Ordenanzas de Nueva Población* [Ordinance on New Settlements]. As a result of this lengthy process, the foundation of Matanzas at the end of the seventeenth century was a twofold project, both urban and defensive, despite the fact that it was indebted to and arose from a humanistic outlook<sup>2</sup>.

Matanzas went on to become one of the main sugar exporting ports and the growth of the sugar trade brought with it a new spirit of commercial enterprise: a contemporaneous outcome of this was the definitive development of the city's urban plan. The revaluation of land prices led to the renovation of its buildings. Starting at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the modest buildings that had served as homes to simple labourers and the troops stationed at the San Severino Fort underwent a transformation: "the number of houses that we built back then was 232, they were almost all tiled, masonry constructions that were built according to a regular architectural design. They were distributed over 500 building sites, artist's workshops were introduced, a great deal of maintenance was undertaken, and everywhere there were signs of a general transformation". These urban development figures were also reflected in demographic statistics: "The general population shared in this most favourable period of progress; from 7,233 souls, which as has been said was the old figure for the city's population [the rural population included], it rose to the number of 11,552 and instead of living in misery and lacking commodities, they enjoyed abundance, comforts and the good things in life"<sup>3</sup>.

After this date, the population continued to rise and eventually the land beyond the San Juan and Yumurí Rivers had to be incorporated into the city. This rapid development led to further building projects, both infrastructural and architectural, being completed and many of the engineers who worked for the municipal administration took part in them. One of the first of these major building projects undertaken in Matanzas was the customs house, which was begun in 1818. As a symbol of a new

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<sup>2</sup> Alicia García Santana, *Matanzas La Atenas de Cuba* (Ciudad de Guatemala: Polymita, 2009), 18-32.

<sup>3</sup> "Documentos del Siglo XIX," *Boletín del instituto de Historia y del Archivo Nacional*, no. 65 (1964): 37-40.

by other architects such as the Bailén bridge built by the military engineer Carlos Benítez, which was also built across the San Juan river<sup>213</sup>.

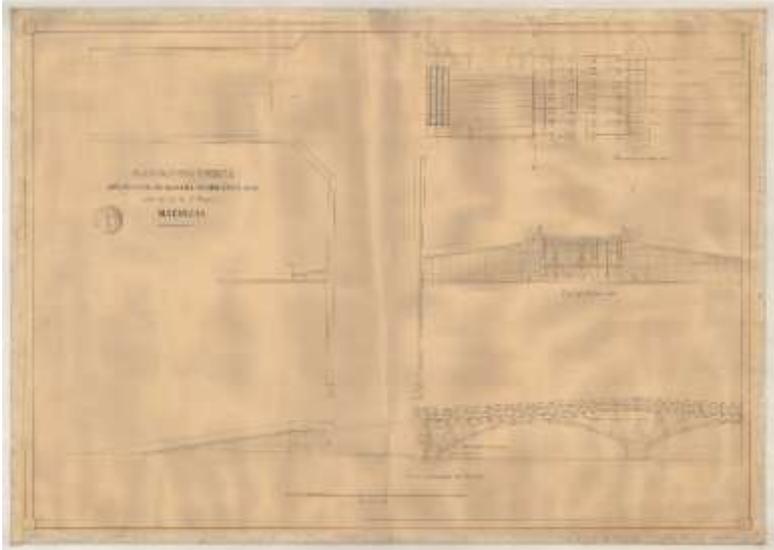


Fig. 26. Nameless. 1834 c. *Plano, vista y perfil del puente de madera nombrado S. Luis sobre el río de S. Juan. Matanzas.* España, Ministerio de Defensa, Instituto de Historia y Cultura Militar, Archivo General Militar de Madrid, CUB-47/09.

All that is known of Sagebien’s training is his apprenticeship in a Parisian carpentry workshop<sup>214</sup>. Although this would have informed the skill he applied to complete this project, it is unlikely he could have undertaken it with this simple knowledge alone, which is all the more

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<sup>213</sup> Ignacio J. López Hernández, “Carlos Benítez y los puentes de la ciudad cubana de Matanzas en 1849,” *Laboratorio de Arte*, no. 26, (2014): 301-313.

<sup>214</sup> Jacques Beal, *Exposición. Jules Sagebien, un ingeniero francés en Cuba* (La Habana: Copération France, 2009).

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