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The 1812 Aponte [?] Rebellions in the Provinces of Cuba

Las rebeliones de Aponte [?] de 1812 en las provincias de Cuba

As rebeliões de Aponte [?] de 1812 nas províncias de Cuba

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Abstract: Over the last twenty-five years, scholars of Cuban history have investigated of a series of slave rebellions and conspiracies that spread across the island from January to April 1812 known collectively as the Aponte Rebellion, or Aponte Conspiracy. The scholarship on the Aponte Rebellion has largely focused on what happened in Havana in 1812, and the cultural reconstruction of the world of the rebels, and Aponte's Libro de Pinturas, in particular. By contrast, this article examines the rebellions outside of Havana that have been collectively labeled as part of the Aponte Rebellion going back to the pioneering work of José Luciano Franco (1963). Drawing upon archival sources from national, regional, and international archives in Cuba and Spain, the article asks: Was it one island-wide coordinated movement based in Havana led by Aponte?; Or were there four separate movements in Puerto Principe, Bayamo, Holguin, and Havana from January 1812 to March 1812? At least from the extant archival and documentary records and other studies completed to date by historians, there is very limited contemporary evidence generated in 1812 of an island-wide movement coordinated and directed by Aponte from Havana.
Keywords: Slave Rebellion; Aponte Conspiracy; Cuba.

Resumen: Durante los últimos veinticinco años, los estudios de la historia cubana han investigado una serie de rebeliones y conspiraciones de esclavos que se extendieron por la isla entre enero y abril de 1812, conocidas colectivamente como la Rebelión de Aponte, o Conspiración de Aponte. Los estudios sobre la Rebelión de Aponte se han centrado en gran medida en lo que sucedió en La Habana en 1812, y en la reconstrucción cultural del mundo de los rebeldes, y en el Libro de Pinturas de Aponte, en particular. Por el contrario, este artículo examina las rebeliones fuera de La Habana que han sido llamadas colectivamente como parte de la Rebelión de Aponte, y que se remontan al trabajo pionero de José Luciano Franco (1963). Basándose en fuentes de archivos nacionales, regionales, e internacionales de Cuba y España, el artículo pregunta: ¿Fue un movimiento coordinado a nivel de toda la isla con base en La Habana dirigido por Aponte?; ¿O hubo cuatro movimientos separados en Puerto Príncipe, Bayamo, Holguín y La Habana desde enero de 1812 hasta marzo de 1812? Al menos a partir de las fuentes documentales y de archivo existentes, y de otros estudios realizados hasta la fecha por historiadores, existe evidencia contemporánea muy limitada generada en 1812 de un movimiento a nivel de toda la isla coordinado y dirigido por Aponte desde La Habana.
Palavras-clave: Rebelión esclava; Conspiración de Aponte; Cuba.

Resumo: Nos últimos vinte e cinco anos, acadêmicos da história cubana investigaram uma série de rebeliões e conspirações de escravos que se espalharam pela ilha entre Janeiro e Abril de 1812, conhecidas coletivamente como Rebelião de Aponte ou Conspiração de Aponte. Os estudos sobre a Rebelião de Aponte centraram-se particularmente no que aconteceu em Havana em 1812, na reconstrução cultural do mundo dos rebeldes, e no Livro de Pinturas de Aponte. Em contraste, este

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artigo examina rebeliões fora de Havana que foram coletivamente chamadas de parte da Rebelião de Aponte e que remontam ao trabalho pioneiro de José Luciano Franco (1963). Baseando-se em fontes de arquivo nacionais, regionais e internacionais de Cuba e Espanha, o artigo pergunta: Aponte liderou este movimento que foi coordenado em toda Ilha? Ou existiram quatro movimentos distintos em Porto Príncipe, Bayamo, Holguín, e Havana, de Janeiro de 1812 a Março de 1812? Pelo menos a partir de fontes documentais e de arquivo existentes e de outros estudos realizados até à data por historiadores, há evidências contemporâneas muito limitadas geradas em 1812 de um movimento em toda a ilha coordenado e dirigido por Aponte a partir de Havana.
Palavras-chave: Rebelião escrava; Conspiração de Aponte; Cuba.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty-five years, a Cuban historiographical *foco* has developed and put down deep roots in the investigation of a series of rebellions and conspiracies that spread across the island from January to April 1812 known collectively as the Aponte Rebellion, or Aponte Conspiracy. Although often mentioned in fiction and general historical accounts published in the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, José Luciano Franco's brief, insightful, and well-documented La conspiración de Aponte (1963) was the only archival study of the event until very recently.[2] Beginning in the 1990s several scholars at the Instituto de Historia and other research centers had begun working through the files Asuntos Políticos del Archivo Nacional, related to Aponte and other topics of slavery and rebellion. Most notably, the work of Gloria Garcia, La Esclavitud desde la Esclavitud (1996) and the chapters by Eduardo Torres-Cuevas and Maria del Carmen Barcia, in La Colonia (1994) began to build on Franco's pioneering work and point to new directions and possibilities for investigation. However, because of economic challenges related to publishing in the "Special Period," a lot of these scholars had limited opportunities to publish their work and disseminate their findings.[3]

Over the last 20 years the scholarship on Aponte, his Libro de Pinturas, and the conspiracy has changed dramatically. A quick scan of the secondary literature on the Aponte Rebellion clearly shows that the files in the Archivo Nacional de Cuba have been worked through by Ada Ferrer, Gloria Garcia, Maria Carmen Barcia, Eduardo Torres-Cuevas, Jorge Pavez-Ojeda, Stephan Palmié, Juan Antonio Hernandez, Sybille Fisher, and surely many others.[4] Other documentary sources in Havana's ecclesiastical archives dealing directly

2 José Luciano Franco, La conspiracion de Aponte (Havana: Publicaciones del Archivo Nacional, 1963).

3 Gloria García, La esclavitud desde la esclavitud; la visión de los siervos (Mexico: Centro de Investigación Científica, 1996), pp. 45-48; and María del Carmen Barcia, Gloria García, and Eduardo Torres-Cuevas, eds, La colonia: evolución socioeconómica y formación nacional. Desde los orígenes hasta 1867 (Habana: Editora Política, 1994), esp. chapters 6-8, and pp. 331-332 in particular.

4 Ada Ferrer, Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University

and indirectly with the Aponte Rebellion have been consulted by Jane Landers and Linda Rodriguez.[5] And regional Cuban archives and various archives in Spain have been consulted to dig deeper into clues and evidence that can help us understand Aponte in more detail. Over the last 20 years, the scholarly work being done on the intellectual world of Aponte and his ever-illusive Libro de Pinturas has quite simply been impressive both in its volume and insights. Taken collectively as a whole, Cuban historiography should thank Stephan Palmié for his polemical critique laid down in 2002 that questioned whether Aponte was even involved in the rebellion, which prompted many scholars to dig through archives and libraries to show him otherwise. While the documentary evidence and scholarly conclusions over the last twenty years overwhelmingly show Aponte's intimate involvement and detailed planning for the rebellion in Havana, Palmié methodologically challenged many of scholars writing about Aponte to engage theory and evidence more directly and move between the historical "event" of the Aponte Rebellion and the various contemporary and historiographical "discourses" surrounding Aponte and his Libro de Pinturas.

This boom in scholarship on Aponte has largely been focused on what happened in Havana in 1812, and the cultural deconstruction and reconstruction of the world of the rebels, and Aponte's Libro de Pinturas, in particular. In this article, I will move the examination away from Havana and Aponte and his co-conspirators, and rather, turn a detailed focus on the rebellions outside of Havana that have been collectively labeled as part of La Conspiración de Aponte going back to the pioneering work of José Luciano Franco (and even earlier).[6] In this article, I want to ask a rather basic question: Was it one island-wide co-

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Press, 2014); Gloria García, García, Conspiraciones y revueltas: la actividad política de los negros en Cuba (1790-1845) (Santiago, Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2003),pp. 66-74; María del Carmen Barcia, Los ilustres apellidos: Negros en la Habana colonial (Habana: Ediciones Boloña, 2009), pp. 290-295; Matt D. Childs, The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Spanish translation: La rebelión de Aponte de 1812 en Cuba y la lucha contra la esclavitud Atlántica (Santiago, Cuba: Editorial Oriente; Instituto Cubano del Libro, 2012); Jorge Pavez Ojeda, "Lecturas de un códice afrocubano: Naturalismo, etiopismo y universalismo en el libro de José Antonio Aponte (La Habana, circa 760-1812," Historia Crítica (Bogotá), 45 (Sept-Dec., 2011), pp. 56-85; ibid, "Expediente contra José Antonio Aponte, La Habana, 1812," Anales de Desclasificación, vol. 1, no. 2 (2006), pp. 717-768; Stephan Palmié, Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity & Tradition (Durham Duke University Press, 2002; Juan Antonio Hernández, "Hacia una historia de lo imposible: La revolución haitiana y el libro de José Antonio Aponte," PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2005; ibid, "Prólogo: El 'Libro de Pinturas' de José Antonio Aponte y los imaginarios de la revolución haitiana en el caribe del siglo XX [sic]," in José Luciano Franco, (comp.), Las conspiraciones de 1810 y 1812 (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho 2010), pp. ix-lxxiv; Sibylle Fischer, Modernity Disavowed, Haiti and the Culture of Slavery in the Age of Revolution (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 41-47; Jiménez Marata, Anette, ed. José Antonio Aponte: perspectivas interdisciplinarias (Habana: Instituto Cubana de Investigación Juan Marinello, 2019).

5 Jane G. Landers, Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); ibid "Catholic Conspirators? Religious Rebels in Nineteenth-Century Cuba," Slavery & Abolition, vol. 36, no. 3 (2015), pp. 495-520; Linda M. Rodriguez Vicente Escobar and José Antonio Aponte: Redefining Art, Race, and History in Colonial Cuba (book manuscript in preparation).

6 For an earlier treatment of the historiography on Aponte, see Childs La rebelión de Aponte, pp. 21-33.

ordinated movement based in Havana led by Aponte as Captain General Someruelos confidently concluded with his April 7 1812 broadside?[7] Or, were there four separate movements that erupted on plantations and subsequently squashed by colonial authorities in Puerto Principe, Bayamo, Holguin, and Havana from January 1812 to March 1812? At least from the extant archival and documentary records and other studies completed to date by historians, there is very limited contemporary evidence generated in 1812 of an island-wide movement coordinated and directed by Aponte from Havana.

For me at least, what is striking is that when authorities investigated the rebellions in the interior provinces, there is very little referencing of events in other parts of the island. Of course, part of this is explained by the difficulty of sending news rapidly as these rebellions, conspiracies, and investigations happened in "real time" from January to March of 1812. But even after the rebellions on plantations outside of Havana had been suppressed, in the lengthy interrogations at La Cabaña fortress that took place from March 1812 through the end of the year, colonial authorities asked very few questions of the conspirators, prisoners, and rebels about any connections to events in Puerto Principe, Bayamo and Holguin. These movements most certainly shared a chronological and ideological affinity, but with one possible exception (that I will take up below shortly), there was not an individual, or cadre of leaders, that somehow explains the coordination of these events across the island from the extant records I have consulted.

REVOLTS AND CONSPIRACIES IN THE PROVINCES

For now, let me provide a very quick summary of the events in the provinces from January to March 1812 that make up the events known as La Conpsiración de Aponte. Then I will explore any connections to Havana — and in particular related to Aponte and the other leaders.

The first revolts occurred near the east-central city of Puerto Príncipe two months earlier. Over the course of two days, beginning on 15 January 1812, slaves and free people of color rose in rebellion on five plantations all located within three miles of Puerto Príncipe. The first insurrection began at the plantation Najasa and immediately involved all the slaves. The rebels burnt the master's house, killed three whites, and then spread the movement to neighboring plantations.[8] Within a matter of hours, slaves revolted at the Daganal plantation where they killed the white overseer, Pedro Cabrajal. Then the uprising moved to the

7 "Bando del Capitán General de la Isla," Havana, 7 Apr. 1812, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, fondo Asuntos Políticos (hereafter ANC-AP), leg. 12, no. 24.

8 Sedano to Someruelos, Puerto Príncipe, 4 Feb. and 22 Mar. 1812, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, fondo Papeles de Cuba (AGI-PC), leg. 1640.

San José sugar estate where the insurrectionaries killed two whites. Later, they spread their movement to the Santa Marta plantation where they killed another white and seriously injured two others. The uprising ended at the Montalban plantation where the rebels killed one white and injured another before the local militia, standing army, and armed citizens finally suppressed the insurrection.[9] By the time the rebellions ended, slaves and free people of color had killed eight whites, injured numerous others, and burnt or partially destroyed several plantations. Colonial officials responded to the bold challenge to their authority by staging a public execution. A crowd of spectators greeted with "enthusiasm" the execution of fourteen slaves and the shipment of sixty-three prisoners to Saint Augustine, Florida.[10]

Shortly after the rebellion's suppression, authorities in Puerto Príncipe reported that several "black bandits" had escaped to the mountains where they planned to spread their "terrible movement" to the eastern cities of Bayamo and Holguín.[11] The governor of Puerto Príncipe warned Lieutenant Governor Corral in Bayamo to patrol the countryside for rebels who had eluded capture. Rumors, stories, and reports circulated that as many as "180 of the revolted blacks from Najasa" were heading toward Bayamo, according to one terrified resident.[12] The planned rebellion in Bayamo came to an end on the night of 7 February 1812 when the slave Antonio José informed his master Lorenzo Vásquez Tamayo of the uprising.[13] According to the slave, the plan called for "many blacks from the town and others from elsewhere were going to unite . . . burn various houses . . . block the entrances [to the city] . . . and attack the military headquarters to seize gunpowder, bullets, and rifles."[14] Bayamo's Lieutenant Governor Corral concluded from the interrogations that "the blacks from the Hacienda Najasa in the jurisdiction of Puerto Príncipe had proceeded in agreement with those of this city" when they began the uprising.[15] The discovery in free black José María Tamayo's

9 "Testimonio del quaderno de las confesiones que sieguen adherentes al numero: 3," AGI-PC, leg. 1865A, fol. 12; Sedano to Someruelos, Puerto Príncipe, 1 Feb. 1812, AGI-PC, leg. 1640; "Sobre la Conspiración intentada por los negros esclavos para invadir la villa a resultas de la libertad que suponen estarles declaradas por las Cortes Generales y extraordinarias del Reyno de Puerto Príncipe." (Jan. 1812), ANC-AP, leg. 11, no. 37, fols. 63v-65; Cabildo Minutes, Puerto Príncipe, 17 Jan. -31 Jan. 1812, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Camgüey, Actas Capitulares (AHPC-AC), leg. 27, fols. 34v-65.

10 Sedano to Someruelos, Puerto Príncipe, 1 Feb., 4 Feb., and 22 Mar. 1812, AGI-PC, leg. 1640; Cabildo Minutes, Puerto Príncipe, 17 Jan. - 23 Mar. 1812, AHPC-AC, leg. 27, fols. 35-121, passim.

11 Armiñan to ?, Holguín, 17 Feb. 1812, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Holguín, Tenencia de Gobierno (AHPH-TG), leg. 69, exp. 2048.

12 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 9, fols. 4, 71; Corral to Urbina, Bayamo, 27 Feb. 1812, AGI-PC, leg. 1548.

13 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 9, fol. 14.

14 Ibid., fol. 18.

15 Corral to Someruelos, Bayamo, 16 Feb. 1812, AGI-PC, leg. 1649, no. 66.

house of two rebels who escaped capture in Puerto Príncipe provided the crucial evidence of the link between the two rebellions.[16]

Bayamo authorities extended their search for runaway slaves suspected of participating in the conspiracy to Holguín where they believed the fugitives had found refuge.[17] Colonial officials in Holguín decided to "exhaust all preventive measures" and "brought the women from the countryside to the city until the movement has been pacified."[18] The town council of Holguín adopted measures to suppress any possible rebellion and calm the panic of white residents because "nowhere else is an uprising of blacks more feared than in this city."[19] With the imminent threat of rebellion terrifying the white population, judicial officials began to question vigorously any suspected rebels to get to the bottom of the planned insurrection. The suspicion of possible connections with revolts in other towns only increased when a rural patrol arrested three runaway slaves from Puerto Príncipe near Holguín at the end of February.[20] The questioning of numerous slaves and free people of color finally yielded some results when a slave denounced the rebellion on 11 March.[21]

Despite the Captain General's assurance in February that the "rebellions had been suppressed," a month later slaves rose again.[22] This time, however, the revolts erupted not in the interior of the island, but "in the outskirts of the capital."[23] On the night of 15 March an insurrection began at the Peñas-Altas sugar plantation involving slaves and free people of color. In a matter of hours, the insurgents razed the entire estate.[24] During the uprising, the rebels killed the technician in charge of refining sugar, his two children, and two white overseers.[25] The insurgent slaves and free people of color then spread their movement by splitting into three groups to attack three nearby sugar plantations: Trinidad, Rosario, and Santa Ana. At the plantation Trinidad, the slave Amador torched the sugar cane once the group

16 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 9, fols. 101-103.

17 Alvarez to Corral, Bayamo, 15 Feb. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 9, fols. 124-125v.

18 [Armiñan ?], Holguín, 14 Feb. 1812, Archivo del Museo Provincial de Holguín, fondo Colonial (AMPH-Colonial), no. 191.

19 Cabildo Minutes, Holguín, 7 Feb. 1812, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, fondo Gobierno General (ANC-GG), leg. 545, no. 27103.

20 Urbina to Governor of Holguín, Santiago, 26 Feb. 1812, AGI-PC, leg. 1548.

21 Armiñan to Urbina, Holguín, 16 Mar. 1812, AGI-PC, leg. 1548; Armiñan to Urbina, Holguín, 15 Mar. 1812, ANC-GG, leg. 545, no. 27103.

22 Someruelos to Pezuela, Havana, 14 Feb. 1812, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, fondo Ultramar (AGI-UM), leg. 84, no. 343.

23 "Quaderno de los autos formados contra varios negros de aquella ciudad [La Habana] por insurrección," 21 July 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 13, no. 15, fol. 70.

24 ANC-AP, leg. 13, no. 1, fol. 128.

25 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 25, fol. 100v; leg. 13, no. 1, fols. 13, 42v-43.

from Peñas-Altas arrived.[26] During the course of the uprising at Trinidad, the revolutionaries killed five whites, including the overseer and his family.[27] Before the insurrection could spread to other plantations, the local militia, standing army, and armed citizens successfully "repelled the . . . attack" on the plantations.[28] Shortly thereafter, the rebels dispersed and took refuge in the countryside. Over the next several months, colonial authorities hunted down most of the rebels. Once caught, the government subjected them to trial, punishment, and execution to calm "the outcry of the public."[29]

"REVOLUTIONS WITH THE REVOLUTION?"

After providing this brief analysis of the various movements collectively known as the Aponte Rebellion of 1812 (more lengthy accounts can be found in Chapter 4 of my book *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion*), one crucial question to return to is whether it was one unified revolution or several separate uprisings and conspiracies? Colonial authorities and judicial officials simply concluded that Aponte and the others inspired and directed the rebellions from Havana without documenting or explaining in detail how they did so. Strong evidence indicates that the events in Bayamo and Puerto Príncipe were part of the same movement. Slaves and free people of color in the two regions had either contacted each other before January 1812, or decided to join forces once the rebellion began. The leader of the Karabali cabildo in Bayamo, José María Tamayo, explained that he provided shelter for two Karabali slaves who participated in the Puerto Príncipe uprising because they were his "relatives," in reference to their common African ethnicity.[30] The slave Gertrudis from Bayamo informed authorities that she had learned from several of her Karabali friends that they had "collectively sang" about the rebellious blacks from Puerto Príncipe that came to Bayamo.[31] Judicial authorities, colonial officials, and even foreign observers all concluded with sufficient evidence that the rebellion in Puerto Príncipe was linked to the denounced conspiracy in Bayamo.[32]

Establishing connections between events in Puerto Príncipe, Bayamo, the denounced conspiracy in Holguín, and the rebellion in Havana remains difficult, and ultimately

26 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 14, fol. 41.

27 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 23, fol. 3; leg. 13, no. 1, fols. 176-77, 188-89.

28 ANC-AP, leg. 13, no. 1, fols. 103v-104.

29 ANC-AP, leg. 13, no. 15, fol. 70.

30 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 9, fol. 102.

31 Ibid., fol. 62.

32 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 9, fols. 4, 6v-7; no. 27, fol. 3; Francisco Curado to John Cunningham, Montego Bay, Jamaica, 9 Feb. 1812, British National Archives, Colonial Office, (hereafter NA-CO), 137/134, fol. 48; Someruelos to Ministerio de Gracia y Justicia, Havana, 5 Mar. 1812, AGI-PC, leg. 1752, no. 348.

only suggestive. All the political leaders of the eastern portion of the island believed the rebels from Puerto Príncipe would spread their movement to Holguín.[33] Bayamo resident José Antonio Alvarez had heard that as many as "180 blacks could arrive" in Bayamo or Holguín from Puerto Príncipe.[34] Military officials in Puerto Príncipe believed they had confirmed the rumors of a rebel slave invasion in late February when they arrested three slaves who reportedly planned to spread the rebellion to Holguín.[35] Unfortunately, without the court testimony and trial record from the Holguín conspiracy, establishing connections between the movements without any additional records remains elusive.[36]

When judicial officials investigated the rebellion in Havana, they surprisingly failed to ask about connections with other movements on the island. The interrogated conspirators certainly had every incentive not to mention any involvement or knowledge of the other rebellions, as it would be regarded as a clear indication of guilt. Nonetheless, given the wide range of questions posed to the rebels, it is puzzling that little information about the revolts in Holguín, Bayamo, and Puerto Príncipe can be found in the Havana judicial proceedings. Suggestive evidence could indicate that the rebels coordinated the planned insurrection in Holguín and the plantation uprisings in Havana to start on the same day in March. Unknown to judicial officials in the two cities, who simultaneously conducted their own separate investigations, the denounced conspiracy in Holguín had been planned for the same day the rebellion erupted on the Peñas-Altas plantation in Havana.[37] Judicial officials either assumed that all the rebellions had been planned from the colonial capital and felt no need to prove it, or possibly, but definitely less likely, the coordination from Havana was so well known that it did not require an investigation, and thus, never entered the court records. Colonial officials and judicial investigators may have simply assigned the leadership to the Havana rebels to calm quickly the fears of white residents, terrified by a rebellion that had engulfed the entire island.

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33 Urbina to Someruelos, Santiago, 15 Feb. 1812, AGI-PC, leg. 1548, no. 456; [Armiñan?], Holguín, 14 Feb. 1812, AMPH-Colonial, no. 191; Francisco Curado to John Cunningham, Montego Bay, Jamaica, 9 Feb. 1812, NA-CO, 137/134, fol. 48; Alvarez to Corral, Bayamo, 15 Feb. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 9, fols. 124-124v; Armiñan to Urbina, Holguín, 1 and 8 Feb. 1812, ANC-GG, leg. 545, no. 27103.

34 Alvarez to Corral, Bayamo, 13 Feb. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 9, fols. 124-124v.

35 Urbina to Arminan, 26 Feb. 1812, Santiago, AGI-PC, leg. 1548

36 The colonial collection at the AMPH was created by the single efforts of local historian José García Castañeda who selectively chose documents that had been abandoned and were most likely going to be destroyed. It is possible that he may have decided to save the cover letter but not the court records. I did not find any copies of the testimony or any mention of the court records in municipal, regional, specialized, national, or colonial archives in Cuba, Spain, England or the United States. I would like to thank Angeles Aguilera at the AMPH, José Abreu, historian of the Cuban Communist Party in Holguín, and José Novoa, Director of the Casa de Iberoamérica, for their efforts to locate the court records and long discussions about their possible location and disappearance.

37 Armiñan to Urbina, Holguín, 15 Mar. 1812, ANC-GG, leg. 545, no. 27103.

Perhaps even more surprisingly, colonial officials, judicial authorities, slaveowners, and others never questioned how the rebellions had been coordinated over a geographic area that spanned more than 500 miles from Havana in the West to Bayamo in the East. The lack of attention to this important detail pointedly reveals that although hundreds of miles separated the main cities of Cuba, the island functioned as an integrated political unit. Communication across the diverse regions certainly occurred. Frustrated efforts by colonial officials to prevent the flow of information and individuals from one region to another indicate the hidden communication networks of slaves and free people of color. In the aftermath of the rebellions and conspiracies, the governor of Santiago reprimanded Juan Falcón for his inability "to prevent communication among the blacks" in the jurisdictions of "Bayamo, Holguín, and this city [Santiago]."[38] Likewise, the town council of Puerto Príncipe called for the "utmost vigilance. . . [to] absolutely prohibit slaves from communicating with others."[39] Military officials and slave catchers often arrested runaway slaves and free people of color traveling without licenses far away from their homes. A slave patrol in Bayamo arrested the escaped slave Feliciano from Havana shortly after military officials discovered the planned conspiracy.[40] Many examples demonstrate that slaves clandestinely traveled throughout the island.[41] Free people of color also moved throughout the island with forged travel passes, and could have spread the movement.[42] Logistically, planning and coordinating the rebellion throughout the island was clearly possible.

Now let me turn to the suggestion of José Luciano Franco who identified Hilario Herrera as the key individual who connected the rebellions and conspiracies in the East with Havana.[43] Orders sent out across the island for the arrest of Hilario Herrera, a resident of the village of Azúa on the Spanish border separating the island of Hispaniola, may provide key evidence of a single individual who linked the various rebellions. During the last days of February 1812, Governor Francisco Sedano of Puerto Príncipe, concluded that "Hilario Herrera, alias, the Englishman," had been "the primary organizer of the bloody uprising" in the eastern part of the island.[44] Santiago Governor Urbina described him as "the author of the

38 Urbina to Falcón, Santiago, 10 Apr. 1812, ANC-Correspondencia de los Capitanes Generales (Hereafter ANC-CCG), leg. 94, no. 10.

39 Cabildo Minutes, Puerto Príncipe, 15 Apr. 1809, AHPC-AC, leg. 25, fols. 189-189v

40 Archivo Histórico Provincial de Granma (hereafter AHPG), Protocolos, leg. 11, libro 3, 18 Mar. 1812, fols. 108v-109.

41 Urbina to los Alcaldes de Jiguaní, Santiago, 26 Nov. 1811, ANC-CCG, leg. 93, no. 2; Rudesindo de los Olivos to Someruelos, 24 Dec. 1799, Havana, AGI-PC, leg. 1679; Sedano to Someruelos, 1 and 8 Mar. 1812, Puerto Príncipe, AGI-PC, leg. 1640; Urbina to Someruelos, Santiago, 23 Feb. 1812, AGI-PC, leg. 1548, no. 463; Urbina to los Alcaldes de Jiguani, Santiago, 17 Feb. 1812, AGI-PC, leg. 1548; ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 9, fols. 62v-64.

42 Hitar to Someruelos, Havana, 17 Dec. 1810, AGI-PC, leg. 1679; ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 9, fol. 22.

43 Franco, La conspiración de Aponte, 31-33.

44 Sedano to Urbina, Puerto Príncipe, 23 Feb. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 214, no. 46, fols. 1-2.

horrible catastrophe the island of Cuba would have suffered, from which, we have happily been saved."[45] Previously wanted for "stealing a cow," Herrera had escaped capture, spread the rebellion to the cities of Bayamo and Holguín, and was attempting to return to Santo Domingo to evade arrest, according to Sedano.[46] Colonial officials ordered a manhunt for Herrera in Santiago, Bayamo, Holguín, Puerto Príncipe, and even in Santo Domingo.[47]

Cuban political leaders sent physical descriptions of Herrera across the island so that he could be identified and arrested. Authorities described him as a "free black, Dominican, tall, robust, trimmed beard, somewhat gray-haired, more than fifty years old, always wears a bandanna on his head and jewels on his hands, he is called Hilario Herrera, alias, the Englishman."[48] The generic description of Herrera, which could have fit many people, combined with the panic created by the rebellions, resulted in several reported sightings of Herrera in different parts of the island. Bayamo resident and Santo Domingo émigré, Rosa de Matos informed Lieutenant Governor Corral that "Hilario Herrera passed through this town on his way to [Santiago de] Cuba during the past Christmas."[49] Judicial officials in Havana suspected Herrera may have been in the capital after Pablo Serra reported that his slave had talked with a "black who wore a bandanna on his head."[50] Cuban historian José Luciano Franco believed that Herrera "served as the agent of the conspiracy planned by Aponte in the eastern zone of the island," providing the link to the leadership in Havana. Herrera may even have attempted to coordinate "on the day of the rebellion the arrival in an undetermined place on the northern coast a boat from Haiti carrying three hundred rifles for the rebels."[51] The search for the elusive rebel in several cities only turned up the barren report that the "black Hilario Herrera boarded as a passenger on the Spanish sloop Dos Amigos," bound for Santo Domingo on "the first of February."[52] Herrera left behind a trail of unanswerable questions

45 Urbina to Gobernador Político Interno de Santo Domingo, Santiago, 29 Feb. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 214, no. 55.

46 Sedano to Urbina, Puerto Príncipe, 23 Feb. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 214, no. 46, fols. 1-2.

47 Urbina to ?, Santiago, 29 Feb. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 214, no. 54; Urbina to Gobernador Político Interno de Santo Domingo, Santiago, 29 Feb. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 214, no. 55; Buenaventura to Urbina, Santiago, 1 Mar. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 214, no. 56; Urbina to Teniente Gobernador de Holguín, Santiago, 29 Feb. 1812, AHPH-TG, no. 71; Urbina to Sedano, Santiago, 1 Mar. 1812, ANC-CCG, leg. 94, no. 7.

48 Sedano to Urbina, Puerto Príncipe, 23 Feb. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 214, no. 46; Corral to Alcalde Ordinario, Bayamo, 29 Feb. 1812, ANC-CCG, leg. 94, no. 4; [n. a, n. d (Feb. 1812?)] ANC-CCG, leg. 94, no. 3.

49 Corral to Alcalde Ordinario, Bayamo, 29 Feb. 1812, ANC-CCG, leg. 94, no. 4.

50 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 14, fol. 86.

51 Franco, La conspiración de Aponte, 31-33. I could find no sources in Spanish or Cuban archives, or Franco's personal papers housed at the AOHCH, to document his statements. Nonetheless, Franco may have been correct to suggest a possible link to Haitian military aid. At the time of the search for Herrera, Holguin Governor Armiñan reported the arrival of a "French corsair." Armiñan to Urbina, Holguín, 5 Apr. 1812, ANC-GG, leg. 545, no. 27103. Gálvez and Novoa omitted this important section of the letter that they reprinted as a document in, 1812, 66.

52 Urbina? to Gobernador del Puerto Príncipe, Santiago, 3 Mar. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 214, no. 61; Urbina? to Go-

for colonial officials and historians on his role in the Aponte Rebellion. He did not leave his revolutionary activities in Cuba; the same year Herrera escaped from Cuba, he participated in a revolt in Santo Domingo.[53]

"OUR MAN [ONLY] IN HAVANA"

José Antonio Aponte's name became synonymous with the movement immediately after authorities suppressed the rebellions. Just one year later, Antonio J. Valdés' Historia de la isla de Cuba, briefly mentioned the insurrections headed by the "Black Aponte and the other accomplices" that "disturbed the tranquility of the island's inhabitants."[54] "Aponte" the man entered history with the political movement known as the "Aponte Rebellion of 1812." What requires further examination is to determine if history has done justice to Aponte's role in the rebellion, or slighted the participation of others.

Regardless of evidence indicating meetings at Aponte's house attended by various slaves and free people of color involved in the rebellion, when authorities discovered the Libro de Pinturas that contained images of black soldiers defeating whites in battle, it was all the proof they needed to justify his execution. Even before they found the book, Juan Ignacio Rendón, the lawyer in charge of the investigation, had concluded from the interrogation of others that the book contained "references to the crime."[55] Aponte's own acknowledgement that the maps had been "copied with the exact attention to the entrances and exits of the military forts" of Havana, only confirmed Rendón's suspicion that the book served as a blueprint for locations to attack.[56] Before Rendón had concluded his investigation, he labeled Aponte and other free people of color as the leaders and charged them with seducing the slaves to revolt.[57] As slavery defined the patron-client networks and the asymmetrical reciprocity relations that governed Cuban society, "masterless" free people of color were especially vulnerable to the repressive authority of the colonial state.[58]

Colonial administrative changes in Cuba also favored quickly finding the leaders and ending the investigation. Someruelos ended his otherwise extremely successful twelve--year tenure as Captain General with the difficult task of suppressing the rebellions. Undoubtedly, Someruelos did not want a long investigation that would delay the end of his rule

vernador de Santo Domingo, Santiago, 3 Mar. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 214, no. 60.

53 Franco, La conspiración de Aponte, 31; Geggus, "Slavery, War, and Revolution," 42, note 115; Méndez Capote, 4 conspiraciones, 38.

54 Valdés, Historia de la isla de Cuba, 263-264.

55 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 17, fols. 3-5.

56 Ibid., fols. 17v-18.

57 ANC-AP, leg. 13, no. 15, fols. 6v-50v.

58 Rendón to Peñalver, Havana, 10 June 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 25, fols. 130-31.

and call into question his effectiveness as a colonial administrator. The execution of Aponte and others on 9 April 1812, represented Someruelos' last official act as Captain General.[59] When he died over two years later, the printed eulogy praising his service in Cuba specifically singled out his "prompt and orderly" actions in suppressing the rebellion and executing the leaders.[60]

The transition of power meant that Juan Ignacio Rendón conducted the investigation with little supervision from either Captain General Someruelos or his successor Apodaca. Rendón received his training as a lawyer in Spanish Hispaniola before emigrating to Cuba as a result of the Haitian Revolution. His personal experience with rebellion certainly provided a heightened sense of alarm to the images in Aponte's book. Rendón later stated that "within the span of four days," he had "discovered the conspiracy. . . led by the rebellious José Antonio Aponte."[61] Rendón fell ill over the course of the investigation, which may explain why he asked very few questions about events in other parts of the island.[62] Less than one week after the plantation uprisings outside of Havana began, Rendón declared José Antonio Aponte the leader of the island-wide movement.

The need to discover the leaders, administer swift punishments, and the exigencies created by the transition in colonial administrations, all made finding the authors of the movement an immediate necessity. Political expediency, however, does not mean Aponte had no role in the movement. Aponte hosted several crucial meetings at his house during the planning of the insurrection. The slave Antonio Cao from Peñas-Altas solidified the link between the plantation slaves and Aponte's home when he stayed there during his frequent visits to Havana.[63] Clemente Chacón reported that Aponte told him "he had more than four hundred blacks at his command" for the rebellion.[64] Several rebels testified that Aponte finalized the last details for the insurrection during meetings at his house between the days of 15-17 March 1812.[65] Given the life and death situation for the interrogated rebels, they most certainly did everything possible to direct guilt away from themselves. Blaming Aponte for their participation in the rebellion could save their lives. On the other hand, because any

59 Apodaca to Pezuela, Havana, 15 Apr. 1812, AGI-SD, leg. 1284, no. 1; Apodaca to Ayuntamiento, Havana, 24 Apr. 1812, AOHCH-AC, leg. 84, fols. 198-199v.

60 Filomeno, Elogio del excelentismo Señor Don Salvador de Muro y Salazar, Marques de Someruelos, 21-22, P. K. Yonge Library Special Collections, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

61 Antonio Cano Manuel to Juan Madrid Davila, Cádiz, 17 Feb. 1813, AGI-UM, leg. 98.

62 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 25, fol. 74v; Estanislao Godino y Muñoz, Cádiz, 26 Nov. 1812, AGI-UM, leg. 98.

63 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 25, fols. 88-89v; leg. 13, no. 1, fols. 42, 51-52, 95-98.

64 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 14, fol. 71 [emphasis in original].

65 Ibid., fols. 73v-75; leg. 13, no. 1, fol. 44.

association with the leader would most definitely be interpreted as an admission of guilt, it is amazing how many admitted to talking about the rebellion with Aponte.

Criminal testimony – especially testimony of slaves and free people of color involved in conspiracies and rebellions – is inherently contradictory. Slaves and free people of color questioned for their suspected involvement asserted their innocence by denying statements made against them and counter-accusing their accusers.[66] In the confusion of their own testimony, they often contradicted their earlier statements. Aponte was no exception. At first, he denied any meetings at his house and his reported warning that "any man of color who did not join them would have his head cut off." Once Aponte realized he would be found guilty, he admitted that the conversations had taken place in his house. Aponte acknowledged "that it appeared just that all the people of color should unite, and they would only chop off the heads of those who resisted."[67] Aponte also admitted to participating in the rebellion when he answered "it is true" to statements identifying him as a leader. Aponte told judicial authorities that he "became involved in the project in concert with others, but always advised moderation." Aponte argued his influence placed restraints on Salvador Ternero and Clement Chacón because he "could not commit atrocities with a heart of steel."[68] Later, Aponte also admitted to hosting meetings at his house when the rebellion was planned and organized.[69] After Aponte confessed his knowledge of the movement and participation in the project, Rendón and other lawyers only asked about the rebellion in Havana, and not about the revolts and conspiracies in other parts of the island.

Aponte may have provided testimony on his association with insurrections across Cuba that have yet to be found by historians and archivists. After Aponte's execution, the investigation and questioning of suspected rebels continued for months. Judicial officials questioned free black Pilar Borrego with information from what they described as "the statements given by Aponte and Chacón the day before their execution, and with the knowledge they would die on the following day from their punishment."[70] When authorities interrogated free black Melchor Chirinos in May, they mentioned "Aponte's last confession" before his execution.[71] Military official Vicente de la Huerta later informed Captain General Apodaca in October that "in the afternoon on the day 8 April, at the time when José Antonio Aponte, Clemente Chacón, and the other prisoners were in the chapel" receiving their last rights, they "gave an interesting declaration." Huerta stated that he immediately called a "judge and

66 See the numerous examples in ANC-AP, leg. 12, nos. 9, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 25; leg. 13, nos. 1, 38; leg. 14, no. 1.

67 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 18, fol. 29.

68 ANC-AP, leg. 12, no. 14, fol. 79.

69 Ibid.; leg. 13, no. 1, fols. 98, 170.

70 ANC-AP, leg. 13, no. 1, fol. 224.

71 Ibid., fol. 170.

a court clerk" to take their last testimony. Reportedly, the final confessions "lasted past eight at night." The next morning on 9 April, the testimony was given to Someruelos.[72] The last confessions by Aponte, Chacón, and others are not included with the court testimony and trial record that have been housed at the Cuban National Archive for more than a hundred years. Historian Ada Ferrer tracked down and consulted the personal papers of Someruelos in Toldeo, Spain, but neither Aponte's Libro nor his last confession was included among the documentation.[73]

This "last confession" like the Libro de Pinturas is missing. To be as clear as possible: my point in drawing attention to this possible last confession is for other scholars to perhaps find this missing documentation or other sources. Contrary to what Stephan Palmié wrote: "But appeals to the missing 'last confessions' of Aponte and some of his alleged co-conspirators won't do us any good. Negative evidence is a tricky beast: the dog that didn't bark in the night. But sometimes positive evidence still needs to be interrogated as to what it is evidence for."[74] I have not made any causal and or interpretive arguments based upon this last confession. If I have, please point those out to me and let's debate it. Rather, I have simply drawn attention to the fact that this "last confession" is referenced several times in documents generated shortly after Aponte's execution and used for what we would recognize today as "cross-examination" questions by lawyers. Just like the Libro de Pinturas that nobody has seen to my knowledge, we still have many questions about the purpose of the book and its possible explanations. The questions posed at us from the documents and the sources from judicial officials challenges us to make sense of this missing evidence. I do not think we should walk away from this challenge. Should we just ignore these references to the last confession as it is "negative evidence"? If that's the case, I am glad that standard does not apply to the testimony where various deponents describe the Libro de Pinturas that has not been found, even if it would be classified as "negative evidence." I sure have learned a lot from so many scholars trying to make sense of ANC-AP, leg, 12, no. 17 in particular, despite this "negative evidence" of the missing Libro de Pinturas.

Simply put: we should not ignore documentation in reference to Aponte's possible last confession as it can force us to think about other possible interpretations and hunt down other evidence. The crucial evidence for Aponte's role as the leader of the island-wide movement may be included in his last confession. Or it may not. That is my point to consider when we are charged with writing history as a constructed narrative that toggles between a social science of data analysis and a literary enterprise that requires a story.

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72 Huerta to Apodaca, Havana, 24 Oct. 1812, ANC-AP, leg. 13, no. 1, fol. 335 [emphasis in original].

73 Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror*.

74 Palmie, "La historia de los dos Aponte," in *José Antonio Aponte: perspectivas interdisciplinarias* (Habana: 2019), p. 187.

The last statement given by Aponte the day before he died, perhaps with the incentive to clear his consciousness, and even protect others by taking responsibility for the movement, remains absent from the extant documentation. Judicial officials might have misplaced the testimony when they requested the Aponte Rebellion court records from government archives during their investigations of other criminal activities. In 1839, Juan de Velasco requested the court records from the Aponte Rebellion to investigate the "clandestine meetings of blacks in this capital." Velasco suspected that Juan Ignacio Rendón had previously questioned some of the slaves and free people of color "for their involvement many years ago in the investigation of Aponte, Lisundia, and others for planning a conspiracy against the whites."[75] Several years later, when the extensive La Escalera conspiracy erupted in Matanzas and Havana during 1843-44, the Military Commission in charge of the investigation requested the Aponte Rebellion court records.[76] Reportedly, the Military Commission returned all the records to government archives, but they could have misplaced Aponte's testimony. Aponte's last confession was not included with the trial records for the later investigations. If Rendón and Someruelos agreed that Aponte had served as the leader of an island-wide rebellion based upon his last confession, the document could answer many crucial questions about the movement. Perhaps the most important question would be, if indeed, the revolts and conspiracies that rocked Cuba during January, February, and March deserve the title "The Aponte Rebellion of 1812."

CONCLUSION

Correctly or incorrectly, the politics of blame turned to fame for José Antonio Aponte: History has known him ever since as the leader of the Aponte Rebellion of 1812. The rebellion began in Puerto Príncipe, with the insurrection of slaves on several plantations. The movement then spread to Bayamo, where the cabildos played an active role in organizing and planning the insurrection during festival days. Word of slave and free people of color rebellion terrified white residents throughout the island. In Holguín, this fear contributed to the questioning of slaves on several plantations and the movement's denunciation. Havana slaves and free people of color rose in revolt on 15-16 March through an elaborate plan that united the urban and rural populations. The available documentation ultimately does not provide enough evidence to argue that the rebellions represented one coordinated plan of revolution directed by Aponte and other leaders from Havana. However frustrating it may be for historians looking for conclusive evidence to get the facts straight, the primary con-

75 Juan de Velasco to Captain General, Havana, 13 Dec. 1839, ANC-AP, leg. 40, no. 33.

76 ? to Captain General, Havana, 6 Apr. 1844; Eugenio Solas to Pedro Vidal Rodríguez, Havana, 28 May 1845, ANC-AP, leg. 40, no. 33.

cern of colonial officials was putting an end to the movement. Their goal was to suppress the rebellions, punish the leaders, and restore order. They focused on identifying specific individuals and the sequential chains of meetings that transformed conspiratorial plans to coordinated insurrections. Despite our need to look for proof that would pass as acceptable evidence in a modern courtroom, the records stubbornly resist such levels of verification; judges and lawyers simply did not apply these standards to their evidence.

I am the author of this article and I find this lack of information and a conclusive answer frustrating. Just like I and countless other scholars have found the absence of the Libro de Pinturas extremely frustrating. This is, of course, a heavily sedated understatement of trying to figure Aponte out. I have now spent many years in one form or another working on Aponte. Perhaps, this is what is so interesting about Aponte and the rebellion that bears his name: how do historians practice their discipline when there is an absence of documentation, but every indication that these documents once existed? And may indeed still exist somewhere? Hopefully (?). Maybe (?). Perhaps (?) I think other historians far smarter than me should try and figure it out now. Just one piece of advice: as with so many aspects of the La Conspiración de Aponte, it might be wise to return to the work of el maestro José Luciano Franco for clues and possibilities.