**Excerpts from the Cuban Travel Diary of Joseph J. Dimock (1859)**


**Background:** In the nineteenth century, Americans were deeply interested in the Spanish colony of Cuba. The island was located in the Caribbean Sea, less than 100 miles off the coast of Florida. Trade between the United States and Cuba (imports and exports combined) was valued at $65.2 million in 1841 and increased to $108.6 million by 1859. By the 1820s, Americans owned over fifty sugar plantations in Cuba and they began to invest in Cuban copper and iron mines. In the late 1840s, many Southerners hoped that Cuba would enter the Union as a slave state, balancing the conquered Mexican territories in the west. In 1848, United States President James Polk offered to purchase Cuba from Spain for $100 million, but the offer was rejected. In 1854, President Franklin Pierce offered Spain $130 million, but the offer was rejected again. Among the Americans with an interest in Cuba was a merchant named Joseph J. Dimock. Dimock was born in Virginia and at different times in his adult life lived in Boston, Massachusetts, New York City and New Haven, Connecticut. He was married to Isadora DeWolf, whose family owned a Cuban sugar plantation. In February and March, 1859, Dimock traveled to Cuba. While there, he mailed, via steamship, a series of news dispatches for publication in *The New York Times*. Diary entries he kept during this trip give insight into the attitude of a northern merchant based in New York toward Cuba, the sugar industry, slavery and people of African ancestry.

**Wednesday, February 16, 1859:** “This estate I am informed is a small one being about one mile in extent each way, but every available piece of land well stocked with cane. It is like nearly all others, laid out in a circle one mile in diameter, the intervening land being waste, or belonging to the government. It is situated near the great savannah, De La Palma, which is scarcely cultivated. The number of slaves here is about one hundred in all, men, women, and children, and about a dozen hired Creoles, and the number of boxes of sugar produced about 2,000. Some of the larger estates have a much greater number of slaves and make much more sugar. One, the estate of San Martin about three leagues from here, has about 1,500 hands and makes annually about 25,000 boxes of sugar, the average price of which is about $18 a box, so the gross receipts of the estate will amount to at least $450,000, and the profits on this are at least twenty percent. You see that sugar making is a lucrative business. When the crop is a good one, as it is this year being unusually large and the prices well up” (36-37).

**Thursday, February 17, 1859:** “I learn that there are Americans in all parts of the island, and the number permanently located here last year was estimated at twenty-five hundred, mostly employed as machinists and mechanics, though there are quite a number of planters and administrators on estates who are Americans.” (40).

**Friday, February 18, 1859:** “A sugar plantation is called an estate (Ingenio – pronounced yenhanyo) and the number of boxes of sugar produced is proportionate to the number of hands employed. This estate is a small one comparatively and owns about one hundred Negroes of all kinds and produces annually some two thousand boxes of sugar (this includes in the estimate the muscovada sugar and molasses). The cane is ready for cutting about the middle of December, and it is continued until all is cut, generally finishing about the first of May. It is cut just as fast as can be ground and no great amount is left cut and waiting to be ground at any time. The cane does not require planting except where old and worn lands are broken up to be re-worked, and it is not hoed as formerly, but ploughed through with a cultivator. A few days after being cut the new cane commences springing up, so the first cutting this year is the first ready for cutting next season. The cutting of the cane is done by the Negroes of both sexes, with a long heavy knife called a machete, and the stalks only are put upon the cart to be carried to the mill; the leaves and tops are left upon the field and answer the purpose of manure, except the portion saved for food of the horses and cattle on the place, of which they are very fond, preferring it to corn leaves. Good land lasts for twenty years or more without ploughing, or any artificial manures. The cane is brought to the mill in huge carts, and the grinding is performed by means of a steam engine, which after pressing the juice from the stalk throws off the refuse, which is called bagasse, and this after being dried in the sun, constitutes the fuel for fires to boil the juice. The boiler is heated by wood of which there is an abundance on the surrounding hills. The juice is run into huge pans set over a long range or furnace, and then boiled down and passed from one pan to another, till it acquires the
proper consistence and is then dipped into tanks to cool. (While boiling, the Negroes beat it with long wooden paddles, and sing a kind of medley and chant, which is peculiar to the sugarhouse. I could hardly make out the words but it sounded like, ‘a–a cha candala e bla–ebla fuerte–echa candala,’ etc., etc., which is a cry to the firemen to put on more heat, more fire, etc. This monotonous chant is heard without intermission day and night for the Negro cannot work without talking or singing and each new gang take up the same song. After the boiled syrup is partly cooled it is poured into iron cones or tubes to purge and packed over with clay to whiten. The molasses is drained through from these tubes and carried off by troughs into a large tank, these to be put into hogsheads. The sugar is carried to the drying house, and when sufficiently cured in the sun, is packed up in boxes and ready for shipping. (These boxes are mostly made in New England and cost here $1 each.) Each box contains from 450 to 500 lbs. and is sold by the box at prices varying with the demand. The average price is about $20 a box. The muscovada or brown sugar is not purged or whitened, and is packed in hogsheads weighing from 1,000 to 2,000 lbs. each and this sells from $1.00 to $1.50 per arroba or 25 cents according to quality. About 300 hogsheads are made here annually, and also about 300 hogsheads of molasses each year, which is taken from the tanks by the distiller at about $12 per hogshead. Some idea may be formed of the quantity of saccharin fluid in the cane, when I say it requires about 500 gallons of cane juice to make one box of sugar, so there are on this place boiled up every year one million gallons of juice.

During the grinding season the Negroes are divided into two gangs, in order to work all night, and to avoid the want of fresh hands, changing at midnight. Every ten days or so the grinding is stopped for two or three days, to give an opportunity to clean the pans, boiler and engine and to give the hands rest. While at work the Negroes are continually singing their African melodies and keeping time by beating the boiling sugar of which I believe I have just spoken. They are well treated, and well fed, but as to clothing it is difficult to keep much of anything like clothing on them during the day. They seem contented and if they get enough to eat and occasionally a cigar to smoke they rarely complain. They are constitutionally indolent, and have no more judgment than an animal, consequently there are always some in the hospital. With a good owner (the one here is too indulgent, I think) whipping is rare, but the most common punishment is placing in the stocks for a few hours, or solitary confinement in the calaboose, and fed on bread and water. The Negro dreads being alone, and craves companionship, food, etc. When the owner of an estate lives abroad, the whole is under charge of an agent called ‘administrador.’ There are also employed on the estate, an engineer, carpenter, a mayoral or overseer, a majordomo or clerk and first and second sugar masters. There are also under drovers, etc., and generally Negroes, and these are the most tyrannical and cruel of all others. The engineer and carpenter are generally Americans and the others guajiros or natives of the island” (43-46).

Sunday, February 20, 1859: “On the plantations the slaves of both sexes wear hardly clothes enough to make them appear decently. The intense heat of the summer to those exposed to field labor is the excuse given for this, and all the clothing a real guinea or congo Negro desires to wear in the field is a broad palm leaf hat. The more intelligent sometimes wear a cloth wrapped around the loins and a fancy colored handkerchief twisted about the head” (50).

Sunday, March 13, 1859: The colored population of the island is estimated at about eight hundred thousand, in which estimate the free negroes are included, amounting to an insignificant proportion. The free negroes in the town are journeymen laborers; many are artisans, few have shops and fewer still are the proprietors of small houses. It is not uncommon for them to know how to read, and even write; but they generally attain only a very limited knowledge of these important requisites. . . . The slaves in Cuba have certain rights, of which they are deprived in the United States. One of the authorities called the sindico, sees that these rights are fully enjoyed, and he cannot exact anything from the negroes, though they may possess property. He can compel the owner of the negro to give him permission for three days absence to look for another master without being obliged to assign the cause. If the owner values his negro at too high a price, appraisers are appointed to regulate it. The slave can also at any time give money to his master on account of the price of his freedom and require him to declare what that price is, and it cannot be raised afterwards for any cause. Those who have given fifty dollars or over are called coartados, and they are entitled to have certain days to themselves, and are sometimes allowed to work on their own account by paying to the master one real daily for each hundred dollars of the price. It is by no means uncommon to meet with slaves,
who having [the] requisite amount of money do not want to obtain liberty, and this too, on sugar plantations where the work is the hardest. Many of the negroes (particularly it is the case with native Africans) have the singular pleasure of keeping all their earnings in earthen pots buried in the ground and they sometimes die carrying the secret with them. A parcel of land is allotted to each negro every year, the products of which belong to him, and it is devoted to the cultivation of yuca, rice, okra, peanuts, sweet potatoes, corn, etc., during his leisure hours. Besides Sundays there are many days throughout the year, when by laws of Church and State, all work is suspended. Slaves are allowed to raise a pig, poultry, and sometimes a mare, and they can always find a market for their stock at the nearest tavern, or sell to their masters. Many have accumulated sufficient money to buy their wives and children and themselves, and it is a fact, that a negro owner is the worst of tyrants to his slave. When work is pressing, a bargain is sometimes made with the slaves to labor on feast days at about fifty cents a day. This price is allowed them also for a cord of wood cut during their own time. They are supplied daily with plenty of food consisting of *tasajo* or jerked beef, dried fish, plantain, rice, and various vegetables growing here. The two principal dishes for the negro are *funché*, or hominy, and plantains, and these they prefer to all others. Two or three times a year (*always* on Christmas), a shirt and pantaloons are given to each male, and a gown to the female, and occasionally a fancy cotton handkerchief for a head dress too, but a blanket and woolen jacket which is given Christmas is the event of the whole year. All negroes desire to have a thick pilot cloth short jacket such as sailors wear and are quite as likely to put it on while the thermometer stands at 90º – as during a norther and mercury at 60º. Clothing here is devoted to the cultivation of yuca, rice, okra, peanuts, sweet potatoes, corn, etc., during his leisure hours. Besides

The slave trade will exist just so long as Spain holds the island, and it is far from suppressed for only last week Lawton told me of a cargo of over 900 lately landed at St. Juan de los Remedos (near Lavalette’s place), and that a cargo is daily expected off his place, which is hardly fifty miles from Cardenas. The government officials and Capitan de Partido are undoubtedly liberally fee’d and no difficulty is experienced in landing on the coast. After getting clear of the English and American squadrons on the coast of Africa, it is plain sailing and no obstacles. This too, in the face of the treaty obligations which Spain has with other nations. Our American squadron would do more to suppress the slave trade, and also to protect American interests here, if stationed *around the island of Cuba*, and the time will come I imagine when such will be the case" (94-101).