

Florida Prepaid College Foundation  
Hispanic Heritage Month 2017  
Middle School Winner

Title- Vicente Martinez Ybor: The Man Who Made Tampa the Cigar Capital of the World

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From Juan Ponce de Leon's arrival in 1513 to Pitbull's performances on stage today, Hispanic-Americans have long had a powerful influence on the shaping of Florida. When it comes to culture and community, there are few that have had a greater impact than Vicente Martinez Ybor.

Born September 7, 1818 in Spain, Ybor was sent to Cuba by his father at the age of 14. Once in Cuba, Ybor worked as a clerk at a grocery store and then as a cigar broker before manufacturing his own brand of cigars. In 1869, after the start of the Cuban Ten Year War (1868-1878), Ybor moved his cigar manufacturing to the United States, and opened a factory in Key West bringing other owners and employees to the island city. By 1880, Key West was the largest and richest city in Florida due to the cigar factories. Eventually, labor and transportation problems caused production to slow down and Ybor to look for an alternative location for his factories. At the advice of a friend, Ybor ended up moving to a small fishing village in Florida known as Tampa Town.

Beginning in 1885 with forty acres, Ybor began making his mark on the Tampa area, not only constructing factories, but sawmills, houses, restaurants, hotels, saloons, grocery stores, real estate and mortgage companies, barber shops, and other venues necessary to everyday life, eventually establishing a brand new town known as Ybor City. Ybor was so respected and admired that other cigar manufacturers followed his lead and brought their businesses to Ybor City.

When he came to the area in 1885 the population of Tampa was 800 people. Within ten years the population had increased to 15,389 and by 1914 there were more than 60,000

residents in what had become known as 'The Cigar Capital of the World.'

Ybor City became a melting pot of Spanish, Cuban, Afro-Cuban, Italian, German, Scottish and Irish working in the factories and providing support in the area's businesses.

Many of these immigrants formed what are known as mutual aid societies in order to provide support for their members. These societies offered medical and health services from birth to death, with hospitals and cemeteries, providing a blueprint for what are today known as HMOs. They also offered social clubs, cantinas, theatres, ballrooms, and other venues that allowed each of these groups to continue to embrace their cultures in a new land.

Although Ybor passed away in 1896 and the cigar-making industry is no longer active in Florida, his lasting impact can still be found in the buildings, the culture and the shape of Ybor City and the Tampa area.

The Tampa Morning Tribune said it well upon Ybor's death, "He was the founder of the great prosperity which the city of Tampa has enjoyed for the past ten years, and the end is not yet." Even now, nearly 150 years after his arrival in Florida, Tampa is still prospering thanks in large part to the vision of Vicente Martinez Ybor.

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