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An Historical Saltwater Highway: South Florida's Cuban Heritage Long Predates Castro Era

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Many contemporary accounts trace the origin of South Florida's dynamic Cuban population to the mass exodus of Cubans from their homeland following Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution. In reality, the historical record reveals that Cuba's influence on South Florida's language, customs, and social history dates back a half-millennium. Since Ponce de León's first recorded *entrada* in 1513, the Hispanic influence over South Florida has proved long, influential, and vibrant. Placing the *Cubanoamericanos* of South Florida in a proper historical perspective sheds new light on the notion that the Cuban ethnic transformation of Miami and South Florida originated from the post-Castro migration of 1959. This understanding of the Cuban experience in South Florida illustrates just how deeply and profoundly the Cuban-influenced traditions and inhabitants of Miami-Dade and the Keys has existed over a time much longer than the post-1959 influx of émigrés.

Miami-Dade currently boasts a growing population of nearly three-million residents, with 66.6 per cent of that number classified in the current U.S. Census projections as Hispanic or Latino. Of Miami-Dade's total population, 51.3 per cent are foreign-born persons, and 72.2 per cent of residents over five years of age speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census, Quick Facts). The Census of 2010 enumerated 856,007 "Cuban" residents of Miami-Dade. As of 2010, Cubans comprised the largest percentage of immigrants to South Florida (over half of all immigrants), with 93 per cent of all foreign-born residents migrating from the Caribbean and Latin America at large. Of the Hispanic-Latino heritage population of Miami-Dade, 63.77 per cent spoke Spanish at home (U.S. Census, Miami-Dade County, Florida, 2010). Cuban-Americans have, indeed, transformed Miami into an international hub of Latin American and Spanish-speaking cultural and business attractions that are exceptional

to the United States in many ways. Yet, as noted, the Spanish-speaking, Cuban heritage, as large and robust as it is today, has been a mainstream of demographic and cultural patterns in South Florida for centuries.

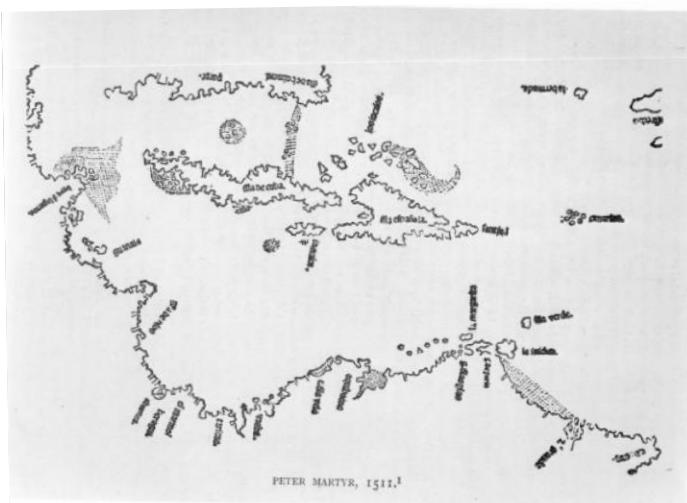
History books often credit Juan Ponce de León for completing the first recorded European contact with Florida in 1513. Most interpretations of this encounter suggest that Ponce followed a Gulf Stream saltwater route from Cuba, past the Tortugas (Keys), up to the coasts of Florida. He sighted land during or near the Catholic celebration of Easter which resulted in the Spanish name *La Florida*, or *Pascua de la Florida*, in 1513. Ponce returned to the peninsula in 1521 with his crew and a contingent of “*gente y mujer de tierra*” in a planned mission to colonize *La Florida*.¹ As a result of a fierce battle with the Calusa Natives of the southern peninsula, Ponce sustained a mortal wound, after which he returned to die in *Isla de Cuba* at the Spanish settlement now known as Havana. These accounts are generally derived from the Spanish chronicler Antonio de Herrera’s *Historia General de los hechos de los Castellanos en las Islas i tierra firme del Mar Oceano*, which still stands as an important gateway source for the early Cuban-Florida nexus (Herrera, 1-2, 6-7).

Other Spanish adventurers also attempted to penetrate *La Florida* looking for treasure, but they also ended in failure or tragedy. In 1528, Pánfilo de Narváez explored the Gulf coast of La Florida in attempts to locate gold, but the attacks by the Tocobaga and other indigenous peoples forced the expedition to flee. Narváez and his followers sought to sail by rafts to Mexico. However, the voyage across the Gulf proved fatal for all but four of his original 300-man excursion to Cuba’s land to the north. One of those survivors was Narváez’s treasurer, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who later recorded a classic narrative of the misadventures in Florida and during the Gulf escape. That work provided a first-hand account of the Narváez mission from Cuba to the “mainland provinces” of *La Florida*, which then was defined as stretching from the Spanish redoubt in Cuba to the “peninsula” of Florida (Krieger/De Vaca, 21-23). Building on the exploits of Ponce and Narváez and the maps and charts their missions had produced, Hernando de Soto, the governor of Cuba, led yet another ill-fated mission to *La Florida*. Outfitted in or near Havana in 1539, de Soto too followed the waterway that skirted the Keys and then provided maritime access to the west and east coasts of

Florida. One of de Soto's men, Luys Hernández de Biedma, recorded in his memoir that the mission landed at "Baya Honda," but in all likelihood de Soto first landed in either San Carlos Bay, Charlotte Harbor, or perhaps Tampa Bay on the west coast of Florida (Hernández de Biedma, 225; Weddle, 219-33). His goal for this Cuban-originated mission was to create settlements and to discover riches in Cuba's sphere of influence to the north. De León's, Narváez's, and de Soto's interchange with certain groups of the 200,000 or more Natives of Florida ushered in roughly a 300-year Spanish colonial period and an expedient saltwater highway between South Florida and Cuba.²

There is compelling evidence that Spanish treasure hunters and slavers had sailed to the coasts of southern Florida in sizable number prior to the missions of Ponce de León and Hernando de Soto (Gannon, 16). To their astonishment, Spanish mariners often heard the Native Americans call out Spanish words to the early expeditionary crews as their ships plied the shoreline and inland waters of *La Florida*. These excursions included likely landings of Cuban-origin sailors at present-day Key West (*Cayo Huesos*), Key Biscayne (*Cayo Biscaino*), and Biscayne Bay (*Chequescha*) in search of fresh water, edibles, and respite from dodging the perilous reefs that paralleled the Keys. Biscayne Bay proved especially attractive to sailors by offering a sanctuary of shallow salt and fresh water situated only 197 nautical miles north of Havana. The Florida peninsula proper appeared as a northwest extension of Cuba in the portolan-style Cantino manuscript nautical/ chart map of 1502. That rare and innovative map is now secured in the Biblioteca Estense in Modena, Italy; the original map and charts predate Ponce's contact with Florida by more than a decade (Thrower, 69). More original nautical and geographical information appeared in other maps in the early sixteenth century, for example, the famous narratives and maps of Italian priest and intellectual Peter Martyr, who served Ferdinand II of Aragon. These revolutionary drawings, charts, and maps were included in his pioneering reports of explorations in the New World, *De orbe novo decades (Decades of the New World)*, released in 1511 in his account of Spanish exploration in a collection of ten reports, titled *Opera, Legatio, Babylonica, Oceanidecas, Paemata, Epigrammata*. Martyr created perhaps the first nautical map showing and naming the islands and land just north of Cuba. On the map, presumably representing Spanish captains' oral and written accounts,

Florida's cartographic location came to be defined as a "península" lying but a short distance north of Cuba and west of "*Isla de beimeni parte*," later named Bimini in the Bahamas. Eventually, the salt water passage through the *Canal de Bahama* and/or skirting the Keys provided the strategic sailing route for the numerous Spanish treasure ships sailing from Havana to Seville, Spain on the Iberian Peninsula (Martyr, 1511; Windsor, 232; Gannon, 16-17, 33). Thus grew a cross-water interaction between Cuba and Florida that would last from the early 1500s to the present time.



Peter Martyr's Map of Cuba with Florida to the North (Apian, Image RC11128, Florida Memory) 3

Although not readily acknowledged, the South Florida coastline marked the site of many Spanish shipwrecks and stranded sailors until the historic mission of Pedro de Menéndez de Avilés. Florida *Adelantado* (king representative but self-supported) Menéndez, who characterized Florida's proximity to Cuba as simply a "Suburb of Spain" in the New World, set out to rid Florida of René de Laudonnière's French encroachment at Fort Caroline near present-day St. Augustine. Menéndez pursued other objectives, as well—to spread Catholicism and the mother-country's economic hegemony across the region, to create permanent Cuban-origin settlements in Spanish Florida, and to establish that a navigable, deep water route existed between Cuba and the extended coasts of Florida in the 1560s.

Although most famous for his destruction of the French Fort Caroline and the ensuing execution of its leader, Jean Ribault, and his followers, and the creation and early settlement of Spanish St. Augustine in northeast *La Florida* in 1565, archeologists now believe that Menéndez also created an ill-fated Catholic mission among the Calusa at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River in southwest Florida. In the same era, the *Adelantado* established a hamlet with a Spanish garrison near the historical mouth of the Mayaimi (Miami) River and a Jesuit mission headed by Francisco Villareal, who had sailed to Florida from a Cuban port with Menéndez. The *Adelantado* undertook these actions at Biscayne Bay in an effort to convert the local Tequesta population then under control of a Calusa cacique (chief) in the southern peninsula (Lyon, 2-3, 5, 7-8, 11; Milanich, 60-61). Menéndez's larger mission on this voyage was to create a Spanish presence overseeing what is currently South Florida. The Tequesta soon destroyed the Spanish edifices, repulsed a second attempt to establish a mission among them, and thereafter Spain largely ignored contemporary South Florida for the next eighty years.

Even more contact between Cuba and *La Florida* resulted from Menéndez's creating the first permanent supply network between the two land masses (Lyon, 4-5). This lead in time to the populating of this region of Florida with Cuban settlers and itinerants. Moreover, the likelihood of numerous Cuban fishing expeditions to the region in personal vessels over the years also spurred the growth of a Cuban-Spanish influence in that sector of today's State of Florida. While only a brief recorded encounter between the New World Spaniards and Native Americans, the contact nevertheless imprinted to a degree the Spanish-language, primarily Castilian, and the Spanish-Cuban culture on the permanent inhabitants of the nearby Cuban-extension of the southern peninsula. Historian Amy Turner Bushnell has termed the resulting Cuban-Florida ethnogenesis in this historical era as the "Republic of Spaniards" (Lyon, 40-61; "Miami's Hispanic Heritage," 2019, Bushnell, 76-90).

In the 1740s, the Spanish colonial council, under the aegis of the *Capitanía General de Cuba*, attempted to establish a small fortification and second mission at or near Miami's modern Coconut Grove neighborhood. Cuban sources refer to this precursor to modern-day Miami as *Pueblo de*



Artist's Reconstruction of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés in Miami (Image Number RC07567, Florida Memory, 2019).

Santa María de Loreto. Spain's intent was to establish a military and Catholic presence there, small as they may be, to protect Cuban refugees and fisherman and to attend to their spiritual needs. Jesuit priests Joseph Maria Monaco and Joseph Javier Alaña supervised this southernmost mission in Florida; a small contingent of soldiers from Cuba accompanied them for protection. Maria Monaco and Javier Alaña provided a description of what was to become the megalopolis of millions in our time. In a report to the governor of Havana and Captain General of Cuba, Juan Francisco de Güemes y Horcasitas, the two Jesuit friars depicted the progenitor of Miami as:

At the mouth of the river we found a village, that is, five huts (*chozas*) in which up to one hundred and eighty people were living crowded together between men, women, and children, the [later of which] made up about half this number. For the most part the adult men understand and speak Castilian moderately well because of the frequent commerce with boatmen from Havana.

At the mouth of the river we have constructed a regular triangle stockade [with] three wall guns (*pedreros*) with twelve men . . .

In this and other passages, Maria Monaco and Javier Alaña refer to Miami's original seaside attraction to foreigners, which has been a major factor in the development of Miami-Dade through the modern area (Maria Monaco and Javier Alaña, 420, 430).

Despite the military attempts at protection, the small settlement soon fell under attacks by Yuchi Indians and allied indigenous peoples. Like its predecessor under Menéndez, *Pueblo de Santa María de Loreto* lasted but a few months ("Miami's Hispanic Heritage," 2019). The priest Javier Alaña wrote in his report of events that he and Maria Monaco now had to end their missionary work with their south Florida subjects. He added that the settlement had also come under the sway of the more inland Mayaimies, Santaluces, and Mayacas Native peoples, whose names now still characterize place locations in South Florida (Milanich, 230, see Childers, 59-82). Even though the Spaniards, operating under the suzerainty of Cuban territoriality, failed to create lasting settlements in South Florida at Biscayne Bay, they nevertheless planted the seeds of an eventual Spanish-speaking, Hispanic population in what is now Miami-Dade and the Keys. This included fisher folk and laborers, who over time regularly plied the salt-water highway between South Florida and Cuba (Milanich, 230). That initial Cuban-influenced contact sprouted and grew over the course of South Florida's evolving historical narrative, an historical story that now underlies its prevailing demographics and customs, including the lasting traits of the Spanish language, Catholicism, music and literature, and place names.

La Florida existed under the watchful eye of Spanish Cuba until the conclusion of the Seven Years' War, or what Americans termed the French and Indian War. In 1763 at war's end, Florida passed to British colonial control. In the early years of the British occupation, many Spanish-speaking residents of Florida evacuated to Havana. British Governor, Gen. James Grant, estimated the Spanish population in East Florida at approximately 4,000. Much of his early duties as Royal Governor were spent addressing the numerous land grant claims of those evacuees, who had over time populated and developed the region (Nelson, 45, 6). Not all residents of Florida elected to return to Cuba, though, as some remained as fisher folk, turtle hunters,

and salvagers of wrecked ships in the Keys (which the Spanish had named *Los Mártires* and still claimed as extensions of Cuba). This “chain of shoals,” as noted in Spanish records, subsequently became labeled the Keys, with the near end-point designated as *Cayo Huesos* (Key of Bones), today known as Key West, the southernmost U.S. city ((Milanich, 60-62; Hahn, 1991). Since the British allowed free sea lanes through the Keys, those and adjacent lands across the Straits of Florida continued to be home or destination for numerous Cuban salt water fishermen and maritime laborers sailing out of Cuba in Florida’s British Era from 1763 to 1783. So intensive was the interchange across the 90-mile saltwater highway from Havana to Key West that Cuban officials and maritime workers termed the small island as *La Habana del Norte*, or North Havana in English.

Spain re-acquired Florida as a result of the treaty that ended the American Revolution in 1783. As Madrid took possession of Florida in 1784, Vincente Manuel de Zéspedes departed Cuba to become governor of the province of East Florida. Zéspedes had orders to attempt to repopulate Florida after the retrocession in Spain’s attempt to increase the Catholic population of Florida. Historically, this type of land grant had been under the authority of the Law of the Indies as overseen by the Captain-General of Cuba or his representatives and notaries in Havana (Spanish Archives: Spain’s Land Policy). Zéspedes brought with him close friends and a Cuban retinue of would-be settlers.

Soon joining the group in the second Spanish colonial era were numerous *Floridanos*, or residents of Cuba who had been born or lived in Florida during the first Spanish period and now comprised a Cuban “resettlement” population (Lockey, 18). The governor issued or confirmed new land grants for some settlers, including a 175-acre grant to Pedro Fornells on *Cayo Biscaino*. In 1805, Fornells took possession of the tract on Key Biscayne which he described as “the only cultivatable land” on the small island in Biscayne Bay. With this act, land in south Florida and the Keys transformed from the domain of “Miscellaneous Sovereign Land” to the new classification of exclusive private ownership (Blank, 19). Once again Cubans moved to Florida, but not in the sizable numbers that had characterized the first Spanish colonial period of 1565 to 1763. For its part, South Florida numbered few permanent residents, although it appears from the various

accounts of the era that a relatively brisk trade and contact with fishermen and wreckers occurred between those settlers and the Bahamians and Cubans. Because of the evacuation of Florida to Cuba during the British interregnum from 1763 to 1783, many contemporary Cubans, including Afro-Cubans, can trace their family roots to colonial Florida. Similarly, many residents of American Florida trace their heritage to Cuban settlers of the peninsula and Keys during the first and second colonial periods.

In 1819, Spain agreed to the terms of the Adams-Onís Treaty, which provided for Florida and the Keys to become a U.S. Territory in 1821/22. The first census of the territory enumerated a sparse population remaining after the transfer from Spain to the United States, with South Florida numbering but 317 residents (presumably most of Cuban heritage). In the same period, American entrepreneur John Simonton concluded his purchase of *Cayo Hueso*, thereafter Key West, for a grand sum of \$2,000 in an historic Havana transaction. The transfer of Florida to the United States and the American occupation of Key West ended the two Spanish Colonial eras of *La Florida*, but not the indelible Spanish-Cuban influence on the region. Indeed, for over three centuries Spanish influence on Florida, primarily Cuban in derivation, had shaped the culture, place names, and political landscape of the present State of Florida. The Spanish Crown, operating out of Havana or Santiago, Cuba, typically, had created and controlled Florida's ports, forts, religion, government, and fishing grounds for decades even prior to the Pilgrims settling New England in 1620. In hindsight, early colonial Florida for much of its two eras existed as an extension of Cuba itself.

Territorial Florida lasted until 1845, at which time it transitioned into statehood. Florida remained sparsely populated in this time period but still reflective of many Cuban influences, including enslavement of persons of African heritage. In January 1836, the U.S. governor of Territorial Florida created Dade County in the southern quadrant of the peninsula at a site of Hispanic-Cuban settlement attempts that dated back roughly 300 years. Monroe County to its south encompassed the Keys and the adjacent reefs. Other than an outpost for a few Seminole Wars engagements, South Florida remained essentially a backwater of the State of Florida. Most settling and trading occurred at or near the Miami River and Key West, which offered an international telegraph cable connection to Cuba beginning in 1867.

The following year ushered in yet another surge of Cuban immigrants to the United States following the outbreak of the initial phase of the Cuban independence movement. From 1868 to 1878, Cubans rebelled against Spain in a bloody conflict subsequently termed the Ten Years' War. Spain eventually quelled the insurrection, but the prolonged and bloody episode resulted in thousands of Cuban nationalists seeking to escape the war and promote their independence cause by moving to the United States. Many of those insurgents relocated to New York City, but thousands as well relocated to Florida, particularly the island city of Key West located only 91 nautical miles from Cuba's shore. By the mid-1880s, 4,517 Key Westers, or almost one-third of the island's total population, identified Cuba as their birthplace. Historian Consuelo Stebbins has researched this event and described it as the foundation of a new nineteenth-century "Key West Colony" (Stebbins, 16, 6).

In Key West, independence exiles such as Vicente Martinez Ybor planted the roots of a Cuban cigar industry that would flourish for some thirty years. Within a few decades, thousands of Cubans émigrés lived in boomtown Key West. The island colony at this time boosted dozens of major "Havana Leaf" cigar factories (with a combined payroll of over a million dollars yearly), numerous Spanish-language papers and self-help organizations, and frequent personal contacts with the homeland. Cubans also became active in the political life of Key West, for example, the son of noted Cuban independence leader, Carlos M. de Cespedes, served as the city's mayor from 1875 to 1876. As Key West rose as one of the fastest-growing cities in America under Cuban influence, Cuban migrants to Florida, as they had over the centuries, created yet another wave of Cuban-Florida transnational impacts (Stebbins, 6, 10, 12, 15).

In the 1890s, José Julián Martí y Pérez, the "Father of Cuban Independence" (commonly referred to as José Martí), consolidated much of the ongoing Cuban independence movement under his Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC-A). The independence movement, dating from the Ten Years' War in the 1860s, now swept the island, resulting in the displacement of many Cuban nationals to Key West, which offered the closest geographical, climatic, and cultural connection for many exiles and Revolutionaries of the era. In this capacity, Key West afforded not only sanctuary, but an attractive business climate for displaced Cubans, who contributed to the island's

population boom from 2,832 in 1860 to 19,945 by 1910 (Population.US: Population of Key West, FL).

Key West thus arose as a center of Cuban influence and Revolutionary activity, while in the process offering a new opportunity for traditional Cuban family businesses, called *Chinchales*, which sprang up in the city with the preponderance pursuing cigar production. In addition to the Cuban family businesses, *los patrones del cigarro* such as Vicente Martínez Ybor, Ygnacio Cobo, and Eduardo Hidalgo Gato created larger cigar manufacturing centers, which, like the smaller *Chinchales*, produced world-class *cigarros* hewn from the famous “Havana Leaf” tobacco that sold in both domestic and foreign markets. The worker émigrés soon converted Key West into a bastion of hand-rolled cigar businesses, staffed by hard-working Cubans who transplanted many of the values of their home island to their new American island. For its part, Key Westers’ habits of practicing “live and let live” provided a particular culture of acceptance to the new Cubans now contributing to its economy and growth (Kerstein, 4). In the process of the transnational blending of cultures, the recent Cuban émigrés planted the seeds of a dramatic modern cultural and business presence that would soon sweep a good deal of Florida’s lower east coast. In retrospect, Key West actually preceded the Miami of recent decades as the Cuban “gateway” to South Florida.

El Veinte de Mayo in 1902 marked the formal end of the American military rule stemming from the short-lived 1898 war between Spain and the United States and the over thirty-years’ independence movement. That led to the creation of the Cuban Republic, but not the end of Cuban migration to South Florida. Cuban islanders continued to migrate to South Florida through the early 1950s in search of economic opportunity and cultural amalgamation. Moreover, investors in Havana eyed South Florida as a land of nearby opportunity, as often reflected in the articles in the Spanish-language newspapers of the region. The same papers noted an extensive traveler, business, and postal exchange between South Florida and Havana, expedited by regular ferry and flight service and other businesses that touted *Aquí se Habla Español*. In the same period, South Florida became noted as a destination for Cuban exiles, as exemplified by the fleeing deposed Cuban presidents Gerardo Machado in 1933 and Carlos Prío Socarrás in 1952 and

their Cuban compatriots. This pattern continued into the late 1950s, at which time the Castro Revolution once again created a tidal wave of exiles from Cuba to South Florida.

In 1959, yet another profound Cuban influence on Florida occurred as a result of the appearance of Fidel Castro. Shortly after his rise as the revolutionary hero and new “president” of modern Cuba, Castro pronounced his Marxist beliefs. In short order, thousands of Cubans migrated to the United States, the vast majority to South Florida. When Washington labeled them refugees from Communism and extended special migrant status to them as pawns in the U.S. Cold War with Moscow, the number of Cubans seeking exile in the land just north of the island exploded. As the United States extended even more resettlement aid and civic privileges (e.g., paths to citizenship and voting rights) to the exiles from Communism, their numbers in South Florida swelled phenomenally and steadily. While more than a million Cubans fled Castro for New York and nearby New Jersey, the vast majority of exiles and refugees sought the “Magic City,” once known in colonial times as *Pueblo de Santa María de Loreto*, as their destination of choice.

Historians often cite the proximity of Miami to Havana along the short Florida-Cuban saltwater highway as the major impetus for this phenomenon. The historical record suggests otherwise. Viewed from the lens of history, the deep-rooted historical and generational interchanges between Cuba and Florida might well have led Castro émigrés to instinctively choose South Florida as their new haven. Conversely, their heritage in South Florida also resulted in a local population by 1960 that not only tolerated the new refugees, but even welcomed them as simply a new stream of past saltwater migration flows.

That historical intersection between Cuba and South Florida dates back hundreds of years. The historical record discloses a profound Cuban influences, as Cuban-centered missions resulted in the first transformation of *La Florida* from a Native American land to a Spanish-Hispanic land, to an American state with deep ties to its closest foreign island neighbor, Cuba. The historical odyssey of South Florida thus provided a cultural base for the post-1959 Cuban exiles to seek new beginnings and, in the process,

further assimilate into and modify the American culture of South Florida, particularly the Spanish customs and language whose origins dated so deeply to their homeland. Contemporary pundits are fond of characterizing *Pequeña Habana*, U.S.A. as a Castro-caused phenomenon. The historical record demonstrates otherwise. Indeed, the post-Castro resurgence of Cuban-heritage influence over South Florida and the metroplex of Miami simply represent the most recent phase of Cuban-Florida interchanges of cross-water contact, settlement, and acculturation that have prevailed from the earliest colonial days of both Cuba and its territory, La Florida.

Notes

1. In a recent article published in the Journal of Southern History, Irvin D. S. Winsboro and Joe Knetsch developed the theme of how creative Florida slaves transformed this historical saltwater highway into a new “Saltwater Railroad” escape route to freedom. The proximity of Florida to the island-nations off its coast offered in the Deep South an unusual mode of self-liberation for the enslaved of Florida, particularly those on the east coast of Florida (Winsboro and Knetsch, 2013).
2. There are various spellings of the early Cuban-Florida territories in the various maps, narratives, and published accounts of the early Spanish explorations into these lands. There are also differing spellings of the territories in the English translations of these subjects. This work generally follows the spelling in the original Spanish sources cited. Translations of the original Spanish are by the author.
3. There are many print and versions of Martyr’s map in international and U.S. works. This version from the Florida Memory, State Archives of Florida web site is one of the frequent ones cited by scholars of Florida and Cuban history (Florida Memory, n.d.)

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