



A national pastime, shared

Tracing the roots of Cuban baseball to Mobile's Spring Hill College

By Phillip Jordan

The tale sounds apocryphal. Four Cuban boys sail to Mobile from their native Havana just before the American Civil War. They earn an education amid the hardships of war, all while falling in love with a fledgling game called “base ball.” Eventually, they slip through a Yankee blockade to return home — bringing with them the first bat and ball ever seen in Cuba.

Yes, the story lends itself to embellishment. But amid the myths are these truths: Nemesio and Ernesto Guilló, along with their friends Enrique Porto and Lorenzo Bridat, did attend Mobile's Spring Hill College from around 1858 to 1864. They learned to play baseball there. And they became evangelists for the sport back home, teaching other boys the game in Havana and founding the country's first baseball club.

Nemesio, in fact, was widely regarded as a founding father of the sport — a sport that helped shape an emerging Cuba's national identity. He is enshrined in the Cuban Baseball Hall of Fame. Since the 1959 revolution, however, Nemesio and the other “Spring Hill boys” have largely faded from Cuban memory.

“We cannot talk about the history of Cuban baseball, about the greatness of Cuban baseball, without

highlighting the role of the Guilló brothers and Enrique Porto, of the City of Mobile and Spring Hill College,” says the writer Reynaldo Cruz Díaz, founder of *Universo Béisbol* and a member of the Society for American Baseball Research. “It would not only be unfair, it would be a huge mistake.”

From Havana to Mobile

Six hundred miles apart, Mobile and Havana have traded goods and culture for more than three centuries under multiple flags. By the mid-1800s, Mobile was one of several American cities where wealthier Cuban families commonly sent their sons to be educated — most often in a Catholic college.

According to a 1924 Havana newspaper story, the Guilló brothers and Enrique Porto traveled to Mobile in 1858 “in a fragile sailing boat.” However, as sons of a prosperous sugarcane merchant, the Guillós are just as likely to have come via the *Black Warrior*. The black-hulled sidewheel steamer docked in Mobile twice a week, dropping off and picking up passengers and mail midway on its Havana-New York route.

The city the boys discovered on arrival was one of the country's busiest ports, Mobile Bay a revolving door of



steamboats, sloops, brigs, and rowboats. “The docks would have been teeming with activity,” says John Sledge, an author and architectural historian for the city of Mobile. “You would have had stevedores of all colors speaking multiple languages, loading and unloading cargo. Cotton piled high. Barrels, cordage, coal.”

Once on dry land, the Cubans would have taken a horse and cart six miles inland to Spring Hill College. The all-male Jesuit college was not yet 30 years old, and its campus was still overrun by deer and brush. But its hilltop location was considered a safe haven from yellow fever and malaria outbreaks. Here, the young Cubans’ academic and baseball education would begin.

Spring Hill in session

In 1858, going by Spring Hill’s records, Ernesto and Nemesio would have been around 13 and 11. The Guillós and their friends were enrolled in Spring Hill’s preparatory “commercial” course instead of a traditional college baccalaureate program.

We don’t know for certain how the boys first learned to play baseball. One guess is that they picked it up from soldiers stationed in town. The Civil War spread the sport nationwide as both Union and Confederate soldiers played it in their camps.

But Father Christopher Viscardi, who has written about Spring Hill’s history, says students were already playing baseball on campus by then. While no college documents from the time confirm the sport’s presence (an 1869 fire at Spring Hill led to a loss of many records), students were clearly familiar with — and proficient at — baseball before 1870. Early that year, a Spring Hill vice president wrote about how “a base ball club comes from Mobile to challenge our boys.” The visitors, he notes, bear a resemblance to “wharf rats.” Ultimately, “victory decides for the college and it is decided that no match will ever take place [again] on Sunday — and that [here] forward a club must be known before it is admitted to our play ground.”

The Guillós and their friends would have played on campus in areas known as the Small Yard and the Big Yard. The Big Yard was reserved for older boys. In 1889, it would be converted into a proper baseball field for the school’s official league team. Today, Stan Galle Field, affectionately known as “The Pit,” claims to be the oldest continually operating baseball diamond in the United States.

The boys bore witness to a changing city during their time at Spring Hill. The *Clotilda*, the last known slave

ship to arrive in the U.S., snuck up the Mobile River in 1860s. The Civil War brought fear and deprivation, along with yellow fever outbreaks and food riots. And an omnipresent U.S. Navy blockade delayed the boys’ return home.

College documents suggest both Guilló brothers joined the Spring Hill Lancers, becoming cadets in the 89th Alabama State Militia Home Guard.

On April 9, 1862, Ernesto Guilló wrote to his “dear brother” Edward, lamenting the Union fleet’s presence: “Every day I pray to Him that he may give power to the Southerners that they may [end] the blockade...so that I may go home, and give a kiss to my dear father, to you and to my dear sisters.”

Ernesto finally got his wish in 1864. Records show the brothers left Spring Hill that year, almost surely before the Battle of Mobile Bay in August that presaged the city’s fall. They likely slipped out via a blockade-running schooner, perhaps sharing space with a load of Confederate cotton the ship’s owner intended to sell in Havana. And a bat and ball tucked into Nemesio’s steamer trunk.

Another national pastime

Within a day of returning home, the young Spring Hill alumni were already practicing their newfound sport, according to a 1924 recounting in *Diario de la Marina*. In their drills, three balls caught in the air, or on the first bounce, counted as three outs — the bat then changed hands to another boy. By 1868, the boys — now young men — formed the Habana Base Ball Club. On the roster of Cuba’s first official baseball team: Ernesto Guilló,



Nemesio Guilló.



Above: *Black Warrior at Sea* (1852), by James Bard. Courtesy of Vallejo Gallery (CA). Opposite page: Turn-of-the-century baseball game at Spring Hill College. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



At left: Late 1860s Cuban tobacco package label. Courtesy of the Library of Congress. Above: Spring Hill's "Junior" baseball team, circa 1901. Courtesy of Spring Hill College.

Nemesio Guilló, and Lorenzo Bridat, along with Esteban Bellán, who would later become the first Latin American professional baseball player in the United States.

Havana's first opponent, according to Major League Baseball (MLB) historian John Thorn, consisted of sailors from a schooner anchored in the Bay of Matanzas who challenged the Cubans to a game. The 1924 *Diario* article asserts this outcome: "The Cubans from Havana gave a sovereign beating to the American sailors and returned to the capital proud of their feat, thus spreading enthusiasm for [baseball]."

As the Guilló brothers' new game spread in popularity, the Spanish regime in Havana increasingly viewed the "American invention as vaguely secessionist and dangerously violent because of the use of sticks," notes Cuban American scholar Roberto González Echevarría in *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball*.

Spanish suppression of baseball during *Guerra Grande*, the Ten Years' War, delayed the creation of a formal, professional baseball league until 1878. But the sport wasn't at a standstill. A December 31, 1874, article in Havana's *El Artista* chronicles what's remembered as the country's first official game — a contest between the Guilló brothers' Havana club and a Matanzas team at the historic Palmar de Junco.

Ernesto had retired by this time, but Nemesio, batting leadoff, led Havana to a 51-9 win before the game was called due to darkness. This surely wasn't the first baseball game contested in Cuba. But because it took place during the *Guerra Grande* war for independence, Echevarría explains, it captured Cubans' imagination and stoked an enduring love for the sport.

When hostilities ceased, Cuba hosted its first national championship in December 1878, a round-robin tournament among Havana, Matanzas, and Almendares. Nemesio Guilló and the Habana Base Ball Club won, 14 years after the famed Guilló bat and ball journeyed from Mobile to Havana.

Twin baseball legacies

Cuba's 19th-century Spring Hill contingent left an imprint on two nations. In Mobile, the boys joined many across the city to help popularize the game. Today, five Mobilians — Hank Aaron, Willie McCovey, Satchel Paige, Ozzie Smith, and Billy Williams — are in the National Baseball Hall of Fame. That's more, per capita, than from any other city in the United States.

Six Cuban-born players are in Cooperstown — Martín Dihigo, José de la Caridad Méndez, Minnie Miñoso, Tony Oliva, Tony Pérez, and Cristóbal Torriente. And until the 1959 revolution, Cuba sent more players to the Major Leagues and Negro Leagues than any other country outside the United States.

Baseball remains a defining symbol of Cuba, and a force that has withstood communism. Fidel Castro may have eliminated Cuba's professional baseball league, but he could not bear to shutter the "Yankee" sport altogether. He loved it too much.

Baseball also remains a touchstone of the Cuba-U.S. relationship. "Today, even after decades of diplomatic hostility — never shared by the two peoples — the game older than either nation continues to be the tie that binds," says MLB historian John Thorn.



As for Spring Hill’s pioneering baseball alumni: Enrique Porto never played competitively but became Cuba’s health secretary. Ernesto was one of the most important umpires in Cuban baseball history. And Nemesio carved out time beyond the playing field to serve as captain of Havana’s fire department, a municipal works administrator, a banker — all in all “an immaculate citizen,” wrote Carlos Ayala in a 1918 profile on Nemesio in Havana’s *El Imparcial*.

He also was beloved in his time. Here’s Ayala’s closing paragraph from his 1918 story: “Vigorous and sober, Nemesio has reached 71 years of age, strong and agile, capable of [still] hitting the ball accurately and roughly with his bat. Of a cheerful and kind character...all those who have dealt with him are his friends. And when we see him in the morning crossing, newspaper in hand, down Calle del Opispo toward his office...we are delighted to see how the Sun still sends its kisses to the old sportsman who we all love as a brother.”

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From mound to marker

This fall, baseball fans and representatives from Mobile and Havana will gather where the “Spring Hill boys” first played the sport in their Vedado neighborhood in 1864. A historical plaque will mark the spot’s baseball history and the connection between the two cities.

The marker was commissioned by the Society Mobile-La Habana, the sister city organization established in 1993. It reads, in part: “From these humble beginnings at Spring Hill College and the efforts of these young men, baseball has now come to be a part of Cuba’s popular culture and the national pastime.”

In 2019, the society also sponsored a short documentary by filmmakers Reynaldo Cruz Díaz and Yasel Porto.

Next up, the society will publish

a book about the intertwining histories of the two cities. Written in English and Spanish, *Mobile and Havana: Sisters Across the Gulf* will be authored by John Sledge (Mobile) and Alicia García Santana (Havana), with photographs by Chip Cooper and Julio Larramendi.



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