

## Dimock describes Slavery in Cuba(1859)

Source: Pérez, L. ed. (1998). *Impressions of Cuba in the Nineteenth Century* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources).

**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 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.

### Tuesday, February 2, 1859

“A pleasant morning but toward noon the weather becomes uncomfortable and blustering. On board steamer, *Empire City*, at twelve o’clock with Cousin Anita. Several friends come down to see us off, but I was in ‘a state of mind’ in consequence of not getting my trunk and carpet bag in which I had laid in a store of conveniences for the voyage such as books, cigars, seidlitz powders etc. The stupid porter at the Metropolitan (though repeatedly directed) took my baggage on board a steamer for Savannah, instead of Havana. All the baggage with me consisted of a bottle of good brandy which Warren Leland placed in my hands on leaving the hotel. At two o’clock promptly the steamer left the wharf and I started for the tropics without a change of linen” (1).

### Wednesday, February 9, 1859

“Off the entrance to harbor of Havana at four o’clock, and going in at sunrise. Warm day and thermometer at 84°. Customhouse officers on board, and after inspection, allowed us to go ashore. Arrived at Madame Almy’s Hotel d’ Luz at eight o’clock. Met the Misses Fales, and Ed Wilson. Mr. Fales met us at the customhouse. After breakfast, Wilson and self went on a shopping expedition, and the result of two hours labor was two pair of *pantalones*, two *camisas*, two pair *calzones*, a *chaleco*, a *vestido*, *colleras* and a *sombrero*. After which, feeling more comfortable, went into the Cafe Dominica, and indulged in a smile and smoke. Met here Captain Griffin and the medico from the *Empire City* and other friends. We dined at three o’clock and at the hotel met friend, Doringh, just came down from the country. He was somewhat surprised to find us here but pleased nevertheless. In the evening walked up to the Plaza d’ Armas, to hear the band play. Bought a few cigars at *cabarjos* and looked about the city. Mr. Doringh has had our passport *vised*, and took out a landing permit, and a *domicilio*, giving us leaves to reside two months on the island etc. Busy day and pretty tired. Wilson and myself are fortunate to secure a good room at Mrs. Almy’s” (4-5).

### Friday, February 11, 1859

“The laboring people of Havana, (draymen, porters, etc.) are generally of the very lowest class, and as degraded as is possible for human beings. The negroes are most of them pictures of ugliness, frightful to behold, of the true baboon class, projecting muzzle and retreating chin and forehead. They are rarely more than half clothed and their general appearance is very repulsive. They are of inky blackness and would probably rejoice the heart of any true amalgamationist” (12).

### **Sunday, February 13, 1859**

“As we come up the harbor and glance up the beautiful hills which surround it, I began to get an idea of the Cuban country scenery. Large fields of the light green sugarcane which can be easily distinguished on account of its color, the tall palm trees towering high over all others and having a marked character which is easy to be known as a tree of tropical growth, the waving coconut and the trim looking orange trees with dark green leaves and golden fruit, the patches of plaintain and banana, all pointed out to me, and almost near enough to be touched, begin to make me realize, I am in this enchanted land, this ‘*La siempre fidelissima Isla d’Cuba*’” (28).

### **Monday, February 14, 1859**

“We pass large fields of sugarcane with the negroes at work cutting it and occasionally, see the tall chimneys of the sugarhouses whitewashed, and the red-tiled roofs of the buildings. We see along the road patches of plaintain and banana trees and everywhere around the towering palm, the *royal palm*, with its beautiful crowning head of waving green. I notice the cars and locomotives are all of American manufacture and the engineers are Yankees, but for firemen, brakemen, I see Chinese coolies” (32).

### **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. Those employed here get good wages, a competent and capable engineer gets \$120 a month during the grinding season lasting about six months, and carpenters \$60 to \$75 per month through the year, and for both board and lodging included” (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-cha candala e bla-eb-la 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. The 'Georgia Colonel' whose uniform consisted of a *shirt collar and spurs*, would be totally eclipsed here" (50).

#### **Thursday, February 24, 1859**

"From here we rode over to Santa Catalina some three or four miles where we proposed to dine with our friend *Bittun*. We visited his sugarhouse, inspected his engine and he showed me personally much attention. I was also personally indebted to his slave *Victoria* (a fine plump mulatto) for a delicious basket of fruit. *Brittun* is a good administrator but they say a *perfect* brute among the niggers. I saw him knock down a girl with his cane for some trifling matter about his horse's bridle. We stayed all night and retired early as we had become somewhat fatigued with our afternoon's work" (58).

#### **Sunday, March 13, 1859**

This morning the *correo* (postman) brought me several letters from home and files of New York papers, etc. I finished several letters myself from home and fourteenth letter for the *Times*. Tomorrow noon Captain Bonanz, Señorita Ellenor and the wife of the Captain of Partido with niggers and children came to dine and spend the day.

We exerted ourselves to please and passed the day very agreeably. The principal feature was dinner which was fully discussed by all hands. The savannahs north of the house took fire this afternoon and for a little time all was confusion. Don Ricardo had gone to Cardenas, so John was off, and with our Ricardo, negroes, and a gang from Teneria, the fire was fought back, and no serious damage done though the distillery came near going. Great care is exercised to prevent fires for if a cane field takes fire, it spreads with great rapidity and a short time would suffice to burn an entire estate and the loss would be very heavy. Especially at this dry season must great care be exercised for a fire once started it is almost impossible to check it except by fighting it back with fire-burning toward the fire the same way as our western people do the high grass on the prairies.

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 majority of negroes are addicted to vice and but few evince a virtuous disposition. A very few amass even a moderate competence as they commonly waste their earnings and first earnings, and no considerable amount of money ever falls into their hands, unless they draw a prize in the Havana lottery, in which nearly all buy tickets. Their wants are few, and they consider themselves happy if they can barely subsist, drink *aquadiante*, [aguardiente] smoke and dance on Sundays and feast days. The native or creole negroes are less economical than those brought from Africa, who are generally very avaricious, and sometimes die from want of nourishment by the side of their *botigas*, or jars full of money. Free negroes and mulattoes in the country are generally just the contrary of those of the same class in town for they are hard working, honorable, and honest – some take farms on a lease, which they cultivate with care and good judgement; and though a wealthy negro is seldom seen in the country, yet many live in comparative comfort, despite the exactions they receive from officials, who plunder them to the utmost extent by pretexts and infamous exactions. 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 90° – as during a norther and mercury at 60°. Clothing here is one of the least of the wants of the negro, for they would in most cases go entirely naked if allowed to do so.

Cuba has been called the hot-bed of slavery, and it is in a certain sense true, but I claim as a general thing, the slaves have more privileges than in the States. The slave trade still flourishes (and if reports may be believed it does also in the United States in 1859!) though a much less number are imported than in former years. The effect of this is to raise the price of slaves and procure for them better treatment. An able bodied male slave is now valued at an average of \$1,200 to \$1,500 and some good house servants are held at over \$2,000. A slave when first landed, is worth if sound from three to five hundred dollars, and as he becomes more acclimated and instructed, for their dull natures require a vast deal of training before they can be brought to any position of usefulness, in doing which the overseers have found kindness to go much farther than harshness. Trifling rewards, for services soon establish a good understanding, and they soon grow very tractable though it is a long time before they understand a work of Spanish. The various African tribes are so strongly marked that there is no difficulty in knowing their nationality. The Congoes and those from the Gold Coast are the most numerous. The former are small, but quick and make good laborers. The Santees, Ashantees, and Carrobalees are larger races, more uneasy and powerful at home, and are more rarely conquered in battle or taken prisoner by the shore tribes in Africa, who sell them to slave factories on the coast. There is a mulatto tribe called Ebroes who make excellent domestic servants. The negroes fresh from Africa called *bozales*, are almost pitiful to look upon, and one cannot but feel that however hard their future life may be, it cannot but be an improvement upon their previous life. They are the most filthy, ignorant and degraded of the human species. In fact they are animal in their natures and nothing else, and it seems almost an impossibility that such beings should possess a mind. There is one class known as dirt-eaters, who will if allowed, eat the soil of the island in such quantities as to produce death. These are supposed to be cannibals or maneaters; and the resident slaves always keep their children away from newly imported slaves. One nigger mother told me, they would eat her *picaninies* if they could catch them. Of clothing and its uses they have no conception, and as for any feeling of humanity towards each other, they have none at all, for they sometimes die for want of nourishment or medicine, while sick and the one near them, would not raise his hand to help his dying fellow creature, but will steal his blanket, or anything he has on, before the breath has left his body.

Sometimes an epidemic gets among the slaves and sweeps them off by hundreds. There are many reasons for this – their carelessness and imprudence in eating and drinking, their extreme filth, and above all, the fact that medicine sometimes seems to have no visible effect. It takes more than twice as much medicine to affect a negro as it does [a] white man here, but the reason is a mystery to me. The prevailing sickness among the negroes is diseases of the bowels, and for this reason their food is regularly rationed out to them, but they eat fruit immoderately where it grows in such profusion, and the consequence is, there are always more or less in the hospital.

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 Remedios (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.

The importation of Chinese or coolies, is getting to be quite an important item, and there are a great many of them scattered all over the island. Probably from 60-75,000 and by some have been estimated as high as 300,000. However, less than 50,000 have been entered at Havana and probably of 75,000 will be a larger estimate. The planter pays the importers about \$300, and takes the coolie for *apprenticeship* of eight years, paying him four dollars a month (and his board and clothing same as negroes) for his services. At the end of that term the Chinaman goes back to the celestial country at his own expense, or is obliged to hire himself out for another eight years. Consequently they are in reality slaves earning about \$50 a year. They are all fatalists, and have not the least regard for human life, and prefer to sacrifice their life at any time to allowing a finger or joint to be amputated. For any fancied injury or slight the remedy is suicide. They are not as robust as the negroes, and cannot do as much work, and they are of the very lowest class of their countrymen, and their habits are the most vicious, and by amalgamating with the negroes as they necessarily must (as no females are brought over), they introduce a worse system of morals, if possible, than that already tolerated among the blacks. The coolie system is the worst species of slavery and will prove a greater curse to the island than negro slavery. Why do not the abolition *philanthropists*

and the *black republicans* of our country show sympathy etc., for these unfortunate children of the “flowery land.” Is it because their skins are *not black*?” (94-101).

**Monday March 28, 1859**

“Cold and Cloudy – overcoats needed and the little Spanish boy in the next stateroom to mine goes about the deck wrapped up in a blanket whining ‘*mucho frio.*’ Poor little fellow, he has not suitable clothing for a March day here, and will need attending too as soon as he gets ashore. We are progressing finely, making over two hundred eighty miles every twenty-four hours and if a storm does not come on we intend to be at the dock in New York before morning. We passed Barnegat light at three o’clk and bpy eight o’clk made Sandy Hook light. A pilot came aboard about nine and was of course besieged for late papers and news by the passengers. We find we have outstripped all the other steamers about due, and all hands on board are feeling merry, at the prospect of our voyage being ended so soon – a thick haze and fog is setting in and rain coming on, and we are fortunate for two hours later off the Hook we should have to put out to sea again. Our pilot however pushed along and at just twelve o’clock, we were made fast to the dock at the foot of Warren Street in New York. It was too late to go ashore tonight, and I willingly retired to my berth to sleep a few hours more on board [the] steamer and dream over the incidents of my trip to Cuba” (144).