

# A Relic Celebrating 155 Years of Dominican Independence: The Don Sebastian Pichardo Contreras Bell

By Dalton Whiteside<sup>1</sup>

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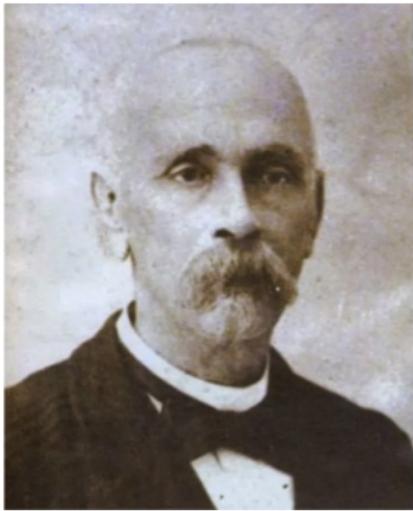
*The Bell on the South Campus of CCNY*

Students at the City College of New York (CCNY) were recently presented with a mysterious bell that was installed on the South Campus in the afternoon of September 11, 2019. The bronze bell is riddled in bullet holes and a rusty support bar rests slanted atop its crown and cannons. A Spanish inscription around the bell reads “DEL LISENCIADO DON SEBASTIAN PICHARDO - AÑO DE 1829” and a cross surmounted by a decorative motif is prominently featured at the front, all in relief. The inscription translates to “From Lisenciado Don Sebastian Pichardo - Year of 1829”. It should be noted that the term “Lisenciado” might be translated to “graduate” but its use in the 19th century refers to a terminal degree associated with lawyers, though there is no comparable degree or translation that can otherwise represent this title in English so it will be left in its original context. The bell measures about 3 feet in diameter at the base and weighs about 400 pounds. No descriptive plaque had yet been installed, leaving these clues to the imagination of students and faculty. Upon encountering this bell as you approach the College’s Advanced Science Research Center & Center for Discovery and Innovation (ASRC & CDI), it appears foreign to the starkly contemporary space around it. However, the cross on the bell serendipitously calls to the history of its new home on the grounds of the former Convent of the Sacred Heart that resided there from 1847-1952.

This bell’s new home at City College was made possible by a joint effort on behalf of Dr. Marcus Burke, Senior Curator at the Hispanic Society of America, Dr. Ramona Hernandez, Director of the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute at the City College of New York, and Dee Dee Mozeleski, Senior Advisor to the President and Executive Director of the Office of Institutional Advancement and Communications at the College. The bell had been donated to the Hispanic Society by the Barneo family of Oyster Bay, Long Island. They had kept the bell in their home’s yard in Long Island for many years, until deciding to donate it to the Hispanic Society so it might become an educational resource for the public. Joseph Barneo (1931-2012) had purchased it from an estate sale in Oyster Bay years earlier, leaving us with the enduring questions: where and when did this bell originate? Who was Don Sebastian Pichardo? and why was it shot up with bullets? Our only knowledge was that the bell was Dominican in origin and that the name and date on the bell could only be referring to one man specifically.

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*Don Sebastian Pichardo Contreras, 1895, Photo courtesy of Mr. Edwin Espinal Hernández*

Don Sebastian Pichardo Contreras was born in 1829 in the city of Santiago de Cuba to Dominican father, José Cayetano Pichardo Tejada (or Texada) and mother, María Dolores Contreras Mestre. His cousin, Domingo Daniel Pichardo Pro (1815-1884) moved to the Dominican Republic, to the city of Santiago de los Caballeros, encouraging Don Sebastian to join him which he did in 1854. The Pichardo family had a long and prosperous history living between the Dominican Republic and Cuba up to that point. He would later marry his cousin's daughter, Generosa Pichardo Roman (1838-1916), having nine children.

When the Dominican Republic was annexed by Spain in 1861, the Dominican people were outraged. Don Sebastian Pichardo worked as a notary in the Dominican Republic and was one of the signers of the Act of Independence of 1863 that began the Restoration War (or War of Restoration) from 1863- 1865, led by General Gregorio Luperón, ultimately winning the Dominican Republic independence from Spain once and for all. It is for this significant contribution to the War that we believe the bell honors Don Sebastian Pichardo Contreras. However, the inscription reading “Del” rather than “Para Lisenciado” suggests the bell belonged to Don Sebastian Pichardo rather than it having been given to him. This is a question that we still need to elucidate.

In as early as 1790, the Pichardo family were recorded as sponsors of the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament inside what is today the Saint James the Apostle Cathedral or simply the Santiago de los Caballeros Cathedral. There were three churches on this site: the first was reduced to rubble in the earthquake of March 7, 1842; the second was a reconstruction of the first by Father Don Domingo An. Solano in 1851 which was later converted to barracks and an armory by Spanish troops in the War of Restoration in September 1863. Gunfire was exchanged between the Spanish and the revolutionaries at this second church. The current structure was built from 1868-1894 under the direction of architect Don Onofre de Lora. It was blessed in 1895 but was damaged just two years later in an 1897 earthquake. The Diocese of Santiago de los Caballeros was created in 1953 by Pope Pius XII and the church was officially consecrated as a Cathedral in 1994 by Pope John Paul II. Due to the Pichardo family's ties to this church and given the religious iconography of the cross on the bell, we believe the bell was made after the war for the construction of the new Cathedral around 1868. The bell was likely paid for by the Pichardo family themselves, or as previously suggested, by Don Sebastian Pichardo Contreras himself.

When researching the bells that are currently at the Cathedral, we found that a set of eight bells, ordered from Europe, were gifted to the Cathedral by President Heureaux in 1895. However, the inscriptions on these bells honored the President, so this determines the Don Sebastian bell was not from this set. A newspaper in Santiago, *El Diario* (The Daily) in March 12, 1913 published that a bell weighing 564 lbs. was donated to the Cathedral by Mr. Domingo Garris (1893-1957) dedicated to the Blessed Sacrament. The bell was made in Palencia, Spain. This is the same Chapel that was paid for and maintained by the Pichardo family, but could this be the bell at CCNY? In 1914, troops loyal to President José Bordas Valdez were targeted by rebels led by General Desiderio Arias Álvarez in a coup d'état. Loyalists positioned themselves in the San Luís Fort and in the Cathedral, where they were surrounded and crossfire ensued until their supply of artillery and provisions were exhausted. The besieged were forced to sacrifice their transport donkeys for food in an event that has come to be known as “El sitio de los comeburros” or “The site of the donkey eaters.” The armed civil unrest ended with the election of Juan Isidro Jimenes as President of the Dominican



*Saint James the Apostle Cathedral, Santiago de los Caballeros. Photo courtesy of Professor Alejandro Paulino*

Republic under the watchful eye of the U.S. government, whose presence had been growing exponentially in Latin America and the Caribbean since the Spanish-American War.

It is during this armed confrontation that the Cathedral was heavily damaged by artillery fire on March 30, 1914. Was this the moment when the bell became riddled in bullets holes? Another mystery research still needs to unravel. The church was ultimately repaired under the direction of Father Bornia Ariza. During this restoration, a powerful commercial firm acquired a bell from the tower of the church. At the time of writing this article, it is unclear what firm this was or if this is the bell in question. By August 6, 1946 an earthquake severely cracked the church, requiring another reconstruction. The Cathedral continues to serve as the heart of the Catholic Diocese in Santiago de los Caballeros and an architectural landmark of the city. While we are certain that this bell belonged to Don Sebastian Pichardo Contreras, we can only theorize that it originated at the Cathedral given our findings.

This bell honors a celebrated revolutionary and prominent family. It survived countless battles in its home country, World Wars and rehabilitation. The history of the Dominican Republic parallels the history of the United States in many ways. Its Restoration War, fought from 1863-1865, occurred simultaneously as the U.S. Civil War, both achieving independence for a subjugated people. Upon receiving an offer from the Hispanic Society of America for CCNY to host the bell, Dr. Hernandez first sought the approval of the Dominican government and leaders in the Dominican community for us to be stewards of this artifact. With their permission and the dedicated coordination of Dee Dee Mozeleski, the work of the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, administrators and many passionate scholars has come to fruition. Its location is fortuitous for it now resides in the heart of Manhattanville in a college that celebrates the diversity of its students, representing 166 countries of the World, the largest demographic being Latin American.

As we celebrate the 155th anniversary of the end of the Dominican War of Restoration in 1865, we are reminded of the challenges of the past and the shared desire for independence that both our countries achieved. We hope this bell will serve as a point of pride for the Dominican students at City College and to show how our history makes us more alike than different. In a time of such division, both politically and physically, we believe it is through these tangible relics of history, with scars of a troubled past, that we can be reminded that better days are ahead.

### **Fun Fact:**

One of the wonderful traditions in New York City is the annual Dominican Day Parade, held on the second Saturday of August. The parade begins at 38th Street and moves north to 52nd Street along Sixth Avenue. The parade honors the beginning of the Restoration War in 1863 that won the Dominican people independence from Spain. Sharing this history, the Gregorio Luperón High School for Math & Science at West 165th Street, named after the famous General that led the War of Restoration, offers a transitional program for newly arrived Spanish-speaking immigrants.

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