

The history of Puerto Rico, an island of the West Indies, is part of United States history too. The island, though a Spanish colony for hundreds of years, is today an independent commonwealth whose inhabitants are United States citizens. Many Puerto Ricans live in the United States and contribute to the country's economy, politics, and culture. This selection describes Puerto Rico's early efforts to gain independence from Spain.

Some members of the *Cortes*—the Spanish parliament which made the laws for Spain and its colonies—might have been shocked when they first spoke to Ramón Power Giralt. Ramón was well-educated and articulate. He had served in the Spanish navy and had fought bravely against the French. He was a young man of whom the best Spanish families would be proud—indeed, both his parents came from families with a long noble history. The shocking thing about Ramón was that he did not come from Spain but from the little island of Puerto Rico, which was then a Spanish colony.

Most members of the *Cortes* probably were surprised at having a deputy from Puerto Rico sit among them at all, for not until that year, 1810, had such a thing been allowed. Before that, it had been assumed that Spain knew what was best for its colonies, and the colonies did not need to have anything to say about it.

Many Spaniards probably still felt that way, but the Spanish government was nervous because there had been far too many revolutions lately. There had been one in the French colony of Haiti, and there might be another in Venezuela at any minute. At home, the Spanish government was under attack

because the French leader Napoleon had invaded Spain and put a puppet king on the throne. If the Spanish were to drive Napoleon out, they must have the support of everyone—even those formerly unimportant colonies.

If the Puerto Ricans were not given some rights soon, they might refuse to fight the rebellious Venezuelans, and they might even help the French. So the Spanish government gave Puerto Rico the right to send one deputy to the *Cortes*. They didn't expect that to mean much, after all; one deputy among so many—what could one person do?

The *Cortes* had not expected the deputy to be a man like Ramón Power Giralt.

The fact that Ramón was every bit as polished and well-educated as they was only the first shock that the members of the *Cortes* had to contend with. The second was that Giralt thought of himself as Puerto Rican, not Spanish. "I'm proud to be Puerto Rican," he insisted. "Puerto Rico is my home, and its people are my people. I came here to try to make their lives better, because, as things are now, the Spanish governors and officials hardly treat them as human beings. Why, did you know that a poor farmer has to give the governor one out of every four cattle he owns—and the farmer must even bring the animal to the capital himself?"

"But why should you care about poor people?" one of the *Cortes* members interrupted. He was the son of a wealthy family, as most members of the *Cortes* were. "You're not poor, anybody can see that. What do poor farmers have to do with people like you or me?"

"I am here to represent my people,"

Ramón answered quietly. “All of my people.”

Even though Ramón was not a Spanish nobleman, there is evidence that most of the members of the Cortes liked this surprising young man, for he was elected vice-president of the Cortes during his first term.

Now Ramón Power Giralt was not just one deputy among many. He had a real chance to make his voice heard. And he used it.

“My people need so many things,” he told the Cortes. “They need fairer taxes, and governors and other officials who will not cheat them. They need a chance to own the lands and hold the jobs which the Spanish now keep to themselves; and if change does not come soon, there will be revolt.”

At this, some members of the Cortes stirred uneasily in their seats, for they knew that what Ramón was saying was true of all the Spanish colonies.

“We need decent roads and bridges, schools and hospitals—a university so that people can get an advanced education without coming all the way to Spain. As things are now, only the rich can get a good education. And we want other schools that can train people for jobs,” Ramón continued.

One startling idea after another came from the mouth of this persuasive young man. The Cortes listened—and it acted. It ordered the governor to stop his unfair practices. It eased taxes on bread and other foods, and it cracked down on smugglers who had gotten rich from their illegal trading while not having to

pay taxes. It established a new government position, called the *intendente*, which was independent of the governor. The *intendente* controlled all the business and trade on the island. The first person to be *intendente* in Puerto Rico was Don Alejandro Ramirez. He was honest and worked hard to improve the conditions for the people on the island, and Ramón was glad to see Ramirez get the position.

On March 19, 1812, Ramón Power Giralt gained his most important victory, for on that day the Cortes gave Puerto Rico the first constitution ever granted to a Spanish colony. The constitution said that Puerto Ricans had all the same rights that Spanish citizens enjoyed—and it made Puerto Rico a province of Spain, not just a colony.

The constitution took effect on July 14, and on that day there were celebrations from one end of the island to another.

Perhaps the celebrations would not have been so great if the people had been able to see into the future. Ramón Power Giralt died a year later in a epidemic of yellow fever that swept over Cadiz, Spain. And a later Spanish government, no longer concerned about public opinion on a faraway island, took away the hard-won Puerto Rican constitution. But it did not repeal most of Ramón Power Giralt's other reform laws; and those laws, along with a lasting taste for freedom and a belief that freedom could be gained, were his legacy to the people he loved so much.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. **Puerto Rico was originally a colony of**
 - A Spain
 - B Portugal
 - C Algeria

2. **Ramón Giralt was the first Puerto Rican sent to the *Cortes*, or**
 - A parliament
 - B university
 - C federal prison

3. **He was sent there in order to**
 - A foment revolution
 - B be rehabilitated for political crimes
 - C represent the Puerto Rican people

4. **If Puerto Ricans were not given more rights, they might**
 - A help the French
 - B refuse to fight the Venezuelans
 - C Both A and B

5. **When Giralt was elected vice-president of the *Cortes*, he had a real chance to**
 - A control all the colonies
 - B punish his enemies
 - C gain rights for his people

6. **Though very rich himself, Giralt took particular interest in the problems of**
 - A Puerto Rican industrialists
 - B Puerto Rican farmers
 - C Venezuelan landowners

7. **Giralt told the *Cortes* that Puerto Rico needed**
 - A decent roads and bridges
 - B schools and hospitals
 - C Both A and B

8. **As a result of Giralt's convincing arguments, the *Cortes* decided to**
 - A ease taxes and crack down on smugglers
 - B send young Puerto Ricans to Spain
 - C establish elementary schools

9. **A new government position, the *intendente*, was formed in Puerto Rico to**
 - A coordinate business with the governor
 - B control the island's business and trade
 - C Neither A nor B

10. **On March 19, 1812, the *Cortes* granted Puerto Rico**
 - A its first constitution
 - B its independence
 - C exemption from taxation

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