

*The Development of Puerto Rican Communities in  
Springfield, Holyoke, and Westfield, 1947–2010*

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Soon after the conclusion of the Spanish–American War, western Massachusetts communities became fascinated with the newly acquired territory of Puerto Rico (or “Porto Rico” as it was referred to in those years). Contemporary sources reveal a genuine interest in the island’s people, culture, and products.

With the congressional passage of the Organic Act of 1900, known as the “Foraker Act” for the bill’s sponsor, Senator Joseph B. Foraker of Ohio, free trade was established between the island and the continental United States in July of 1901. Soon after, a Puerto Rican government and business delegation was sent to the United States to explore linkages to the mainland market. Springfield leaders were thrilled that this delegation of prominent business and civic leaders from Puerto Rico selected Springfield as one of their first destinations in their tour of major American cities. The front-page headline of the *Springfield Republican* announced: “Banquet to Porto Ricans—Mayor Welcomes City’s Guests—visitors will be shown the Industries and Sights of the City Today.” The article went on to describe the event in minute detail, including a reception and dinner held by the Springfield Board of Trade at one of the region’s premier hotels, the Cooley. There were speeches by Springfield Mayor W. P. Hayes and by U.S. Congressman Frederick H. Gillett of Westfield, welcoming the delegation.<sup>1</sup>

By 1910, a number of local stores boasted a wide range of exotic produce from Puerto Rico, as well as prized embroidered linens, gowns, and “Porto Rican hand-drawn” women’s handkerchiefs. Interrupted during World War I due to Germany’s unrestricted submarine-warfare, the trade in goods from the new American territory once again became popular as stores restocked their shelves with Puerto Rican products for the holiday seasons of 1919 and 1920. Yet, the people of Puerto Rico remained largely a mystery to these eager New England customers.<sup>2</sup>

A few individuals made their way to western Massachusetts from the island in the 1920s. One of the most remarkable individuals

was Manuel O. Lloveras, the region's only Puerto Rican Spanish-American War veteran. Born in 1881 in Isabella, Puerto Rico, Lloveras joined the U.S. Army on April 19, 1899. Stationed in Puerto Rico, he served four years in the infantry and three in the cavalry, eventually achieving the rank of Sergeant. After his honorable discharge from the service in 1909, Lloveras moved to Plattsburg, New York, where, in 1911, he met and married Bertha Cross, who was originally from Michigan. They began their family in Plattsburg, but by 1920 had moved to Westfield, where Lloveras established his own barber shop, on Elm Street. He was to live out the rest of his life in Westfield. When he died, on 16 June 1970, Manuel Lloveras had lived in Western Massachusetts longer than any other person of Puerto Rican descent.<sup>3</sup>

However, it wasn't until after World War II, with the growing need for agricultural labor in the tobacco and vegetable farms of the Connecticut Valley, that seasonal laborers from Puerto Rico began to arrive in significant numbers to the Greater Springfield/Pioneer Valley region of western Massachusetts.<sup>4</sup> Hired as seasonal workers, many eventually settled in Connecticut Valley cities, bringing their families with them. The city of Westfield was so pleased with the new arrivals to the area's farms that it held an "International Festival" on September 22 and 23 of 1952, "a program never before staged in this city," with the purpose of "highlighting the many ethnic groups of the city, including Polish, Italian, Irish, Greek, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Puerto Rican." This was the area's very first cultural event in which local Puerto Ricans numbered among the performers, the exhibitors, and the audience. Later, in 1956, Reverend Ladeslaw Pykosz of Holy Trinity Church, in Westfield, helped convene the first Puerto Rican/Latino organization in that city. Over 150 Puerto Ricans attended the first gathering at Westfield's Holy Trinity Hall. The president of the club was Dietrina Christiana; Antonio Mirando was elected vice-president, and José Ocassio served as the group's secretary. "At their own suggestion," Catholic Puerto Ricans in Westfield soon organized their own parish society, *Borínquen* (the ancient name for the island of Puerto Rico), with Victor Franco serving as its first president.<sup>5</sup>

Years later, in a 1978 Spanish-American Union demographic study of the Puerto Rican community, the compilers offered further insight into the earliest migrants to the area: "The first Puerto Ricans to arrive in the Springfield area did so as seasonal farmworkers over twenty years ago. Many of these persons stayed in the area after obtaining

permanent employment and thus provided a network for friends and relatives from Puerto Rico.”<sup>6</sup> Despite all the early recruitment efforts, the Hampshire County tobacco growers announced in 1953 that there was still a shortage of farm labor to harvest their crop. Farmers estimated that they would need about 500 more laborers that season. Westfield historians Edward Janes and Roscoe Scott reported that “planeloads of Puerto Ricans were imported each year as tobacco-field workers. . . . A few were induced to brave the cold winters by promises of work in factories. The large tobacco farms in [Westfield] had erected crude barracks-style housing for the men, but as they brought in their wives and children, more substantial houses were needed.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, during the 1950s an increasing number of seasonal workers made the decision to bring their families with them and set down roots in western Massachusetts.

Although farm work in the Connecticut Valley initially attracted Puerto Ricans to rural western Massachusetts, their homes and their religious and social lives soon became centered in the major cities of Hampden County. Many agricultural workers left seasonal farm work entirely, and found year-round work in city factories. Springfield and Westfield were first to develop Puerto Rican communities, in the 1950s, with Holyoke’s Puerto Rican community growing in size and importance in the mid-1960s.

Because many of the mid-century migrants were young, unskilled, rural laborers, with little education or knowledge of the English language, historians have equated the experience of first-generation Puerto Ricans to the experiences of earlier immigrant groups arriving under similar conditions. Often excluded from jobs and housing, they all had struggled at the lower end of the U.S. economy. However, two major differences separate the experience of Puerto Rican migrants to mainland United States from that of immigrants from the rest of the world. Firstly, the relative ease of travel between Puerto Rico and the mainland created a unique, “revolving-door” migration pattern, as Puerto Ricans moved back and forth depending on the deterioration or improvement of living conditions and employment opportunities. Secondly, after 1917 Puerto Ricans were United States citizens, and did not have to deal with immigration and naturalization processes.

For many years, this “revolving door” was necessitated by the seasonal nature of agricultural employment, with laborers returning

to their families after the growing and harvesting seasons. Once these families settled into the emerging Puerto Rican communities of Springfield, Holyoke, and Westfield, they maintained their strong connections to the island, often acting as sponsors and hosts to new generations of relatives and friends from Puerto Rico. Though no longer a “revolving door,” heavy travel to and from the island continues to this day—for family, social, and cultural reasons.

From the very beginning, one constant has been the Spanish-language heritage of the Puerto Rican community, which was and remains a key component of Puerto Rican pride and identity. At the same time, for many years *La Lengua Bonita* (“the pretty language,” as it is known) constituted a major social, economic, and political barrier for Puerto Ricans and all other Spanish-speaking residents of western Massachusetts. The “revolving door” enabled many individuals to get by without having to learn enough English to effectively compete in New England society. This severely limited educational and employment opportunities for these citizens. The language barrier also led to unfortunate and sometimes tragic misunderstandings between Anglo and Latino residents.

By 1956, the Puerto Rican population of Springfield had grown to the point where the School Committee had to act. At the close of the school year on 29 June 1956, heeding Superintendent of Schools Dr. William J. Sanders, the Springfield School Committee authorized him to establish a summer adult-education program aimed at teaching English to the city’s Puerto Rican population. Dr. Sanders had alerted the Mayor and members of the School Committee of the growing divide between the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking communities: “This is a problem that will become serious if we do not meet it head-on.” He developed the program after conducting several “informal discussions with representatives of Springfield’s newest [Puerto Rican] community.” North End resident Pasqual Figueroa brought his family to Springfield in 1952 from Comerio, Puerto Rico. By the end of 1956, he and his ten-year-old son, Efrain, had mastered English through the evening courses at Chestnut Street Junior High School well enough to be “effectively bilingual.” The Figueras were celebrated as one of the School Department’s success stories. However, these examples were rare.<sup>8</sup>

Nicholas Vasquez came to the continental United States in 1930, and lived in New York before moving to Springfield in 1953. At

a 13 December 1956 meeting at the Springfield YMCA, he was elected President of the newly formed Puerto Rican Social Club, with Wilfred Velez, a Sergeant in the Air Force stationed at Westover Air Force Base, as vice-president. Vasquez criticized the School Department's unilateral relocation of evening English classes from the Hooker School, within walking distance from the community, to the more distant Chestnut Street Junior High School. The move "proved an obstacle, because of the lack of transportation from the North End residences of most Puerto Ricans" in the city, who had the "greatest need of that service."<sup>9</sup> In 1960, the School Department reported that it was very difficult to get adults from the Puerto Rican community to attend English classes at night, finally acknowledging that Chestnut Street Junior High School was too far from the community. To address that longstanding problem, they would now re-locate the classes to the Memorial Square branch library, operated by the private non-profit Springfield Library and Museums Association. Soon after, urban renewal and the city's demolition of the old North End would make this arrangement less viable.

In his role as Puerto Rican Social Club President, Vasquez also criticized the local press, asserting that "where one of his countrymen is arrested in Springfield, newspapers make it a point to designate the arrested man as Puerto Rican," while "no nationalities were mentioned in newspaper accounts when other arrests are made." The lack of Spanish-speaking reporters and editors left much of the Puerto Rican side of the story untold or misrepresented.<sup>10</sup>

Benny Rivera, owner of a popular North End restaurant at 2204 Main Street in Springfield, specializing in "Spanish food," expressed his frustration to a *Springfield Union* reporter on 25 June 1956. "Puerto Ricans here are misunderstood" Rivera said, emphasizing the fact that "residents from Puerto Rico are American citizens." He and his family had lived in New York City for eight years before coming to Springfield in 1955. When they arrived, they "encountered discrimination in getting living quarters in Springfield." Rivera observed that since that time, Puerto Ricans in Springfield often were "treated more like animals than human beings." Because of this, he stated, he was contemplating returning with his family to New York City.<sup>11</sup>

By January 1957, it was estimated by Springfield city officials that there were approximately 1,400 Puerto Ricans living in the city's North End. Noting the generally meager economic circumstances of

the majority of the Puerto Rican population, social workers declared that the community was “alone in their need,” as Puerto Rican residents of the North End were “untouched by churches, social-services agencies, or the [wider] community.” At a meeting at the Springfield School Department’s central office, on State Street, Nicholas Vasquez met with a wide range of civic leaders to discuss ways this problem could be alleviated. Meetings continued through the auspices of the non-profit Community Council of Springfield, which would “set policy” for the schools, city departments, and civic agencies to follow. The Schools were particularly concerned about high absenteeism among Puerto Rican students.<sup>12</sup>

The language barrier also quickly became an issue in Westfield. In 1956, there were over 350 Puerto Ricans living in Westfield. The city’s Board of Registrars reported that only about 10% were registered to vote. They also reported that 25% of those who had tried to register were “rejected because of inability to read English.” Further, all of those who had been rejected for this reason had lived in the state for at least three to five years prior. Westfield officials hoped that “special adult-education classes in English-language instruction would correct some of this problem.” That same year in Springfield, fifteen Puerto Rican residents went to City Hall on August 18 to register to vote. Only one out of the group was able to pass the reading and writing test administered by the City Clerk.<sup>13</sup>

To help the situation, Reverend Ladeslaw Pykosz of Holy Trinity Church in Westfield helped convene the first Puerto Rican/Latino organization in that city. Father Pykosz was on leave-of-absence from his pastoral duties in Spain, and felt the need to help his Spanish-speaking parishioners become more integrated into the Westfield community. Over 150 Puerto Ricans attended the first social gathering at Westfield’s Holy Trinity Hall. The club’s president was Dietrina Christiana, Antonio Mirando was vice-president, and Jose Ocassio served as the group’s secretary. Domingo Cruz also helped Father Pykosz organize the event. In Springfield’s Puerto Rican community, response to the voting issue was the formation of the Puerto Rican Social Club, which put voting rights on its lengthy social-justice agenda.<sup>14</sup>

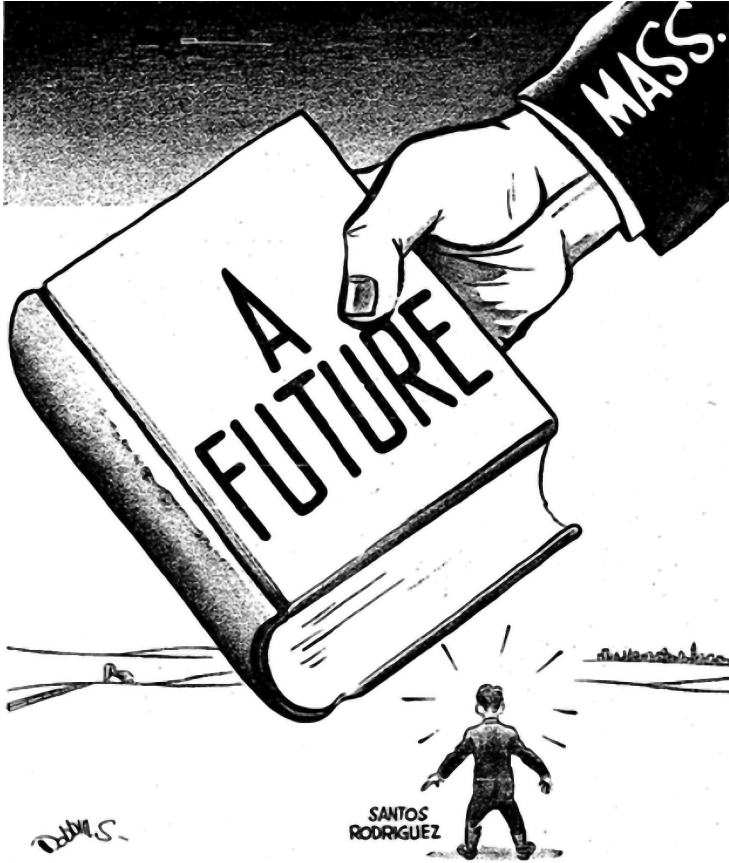
The obstacle of language was starkly displayed by the wrongful arrest of Santos Rodriquez of Springfield’s North End in January 1954.

His conviction for the murder of Mildred Hosmer, and his sentencing and imprisonment, shocked the community and elicited unfortunate comments and perceptions based on unfavorable stereotypes harbored by the non-Spanish speaking residents of the city. Three years later, the actual murderer confessed and Rodriguez was released from jail. He vowed never to return to Springfield: "They have to drag me back if they want me." While in jail he learned enough English to speak freely with reporters upon his release. With members of the Boston, Springfield, and Puerto Rican press in attendance, Rodriguez recounted his harrowing experience:

When the police picked me up, I didn't understand a word of English. They thought I could. They thought I was pretending. So they kicked me, punched me in the stomach, knocked me against a radiator, and hit me in the face. I was scared and confused. Then they brought in a Spanish interpreter and he dictated what they wanted me to say 'I did it.' I signed. I didn't know. I just didn't know what was happening.<sup>15</sup>

On 11 April 1957, the *Boston Traveler* newspaper ran a large political cartoon about Rodriguez's plight entitled, "A Future?" Governor Foster Furcolo, of Longmeadow, and his governor's council ignored the legal red-tape that would have kept Rodriguez in prison for two weeks before his appeal could be acted upon by state law, and pardoned him "with amazing dispatch," releasing him from Norfolk Prison immediately after his innocence became clear. Waiting for his pardon, Rodriguez stayed with a Puerto Rican Labor Department field representative, Antonio Del Rios, at his family home in Framingham after his release from Norfolk State Prison before flying back to Puerto Rico upon receiving the governor's pardon.

Still not fully comprehending their mistake in failing to afford Rodriguez an interpreter right away, the Hampden County District Attorney tried to excuse this injustice by stating that "if Rodriguez had told the whole truth from the very beginning, he never would have been in trouble." Neither Rodriguez nor the Puerto Rican community were reassured by this attitude that something like this would not happen again under the current policies and practices of the local authorities.<sup>16</sup>



11 April, 1957, Boston Traveler (Boston, Massachusetts)  
Page 22. © NewsBank

Lawrence A. Varela, a Mexican American originally from Los Angeles, was appointed to the Springfield Police Department on 5 August 1957 by Chief Raymond P. Gallagher, to help the “misunderstanding between the city police and the 1500 Puerto Ricans who call Springfield home.” Chief Gallagher had begun a Spanish-language course for fifty patrolmen in 1956, without appreciable success. Varela was the first Spanish-speaking patrolman in western Massachusetts. A veteran of the Air Force, he had served a tour of duty in the Korean



War. He initially worked in the Traffic Bureau, but within two years was promoted to detective. Varela served as the Spanish interpreter for the department until his untimely death, on 12 December 1973, at the age of forty-two. Springfield's Fire Department would not hire its first Puerto Rican firefighter, Jose A. Gonzalez, until January of 1975, almost twenty years after.<sup>17</sup>

Community leaders hoped that having a Spanish-language interpreter would lead to fairer treatment for Spanish-speaking citizens dealing with law enforcement officials. But Patrolman Varela's good efforts could only go so far. He was just one man in a huge police department, in which only English was spoken proficiently. When hopes faded that things would change, the Puerto Rican Defense Committee was organized, in March 1962, "to give assistance to Puerto Rican residents involved in arrests in Springfield." John Del Rio served as the President, and Reverend Alan F. Sawyer was the Secretary, with Roberto Fuente serving as Treasurer. One of its first actions was to distribute Spanish-language pamphlets published by the American Civil Liberties Union to the community, in order "to acquaint them with their rights in the event of arrest."<sup>18</sup>

On top of all of these challenges, the Puerto Rican community continued to be underserved in terms of social services to families, and language continued to present an almost impenetrable wall between those in need and city and state services. In December of 1957, Massachusetts Welfare Department agent Thomas McElhone bristled at complaints from the Puerto Rican community: "We've had language barriers for thirty years but somehow we've always managed." McElhone stated that he "didn't believe in setting up caseloads on racial or religious bases. [Puerto Ricans] are integrated with people of all nationalities on the welfare rolls and there is no special setup." When asked whether he felt that Puerto Ricans in the Springfield area had been neglected by his agency he replied, testily, "Not a bit!"<sup>19</sup>

Puerto Rican community leaders vehemently disagreed. Stubbornly, city and state government Departments "serving" the community did not change their policies for another decade. The Department of Public Welfare in Springfield had no Spanish-speaking staff from 1960 to 1965. The Division of Employment Security in Springfield "could not boast of one Spanish-speaking aide" until 1969, according to Professor Argelia Hermetet of Springfield Technical

Community College, in her 1973 study *The Puerto Rican Situation in Springfield*.

In these very early years of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, other groups in the city of Springfield who felt the sting of discrimination and segregation reached out to the Puerto Rican Community. The Anti-Defamation League of B’Nai B’rith committees of western Massachusetts held a conference on “Social Discrimination against Jews, Negroes, and Puerto Ricans” at the Jewish Community Center in Springfield on October 27, 1957. One of the messages from the proceedings was that “leadership at the local level” was needed “to rid communities of pockets of discrimination, which exist in nearly every metropolitan area.” It was pointed out by the panelists that examples of discrimination usually exist “where minorities are crowded into one area of a city,” as it was with the Puerto Ricans in Springfield.<sup>20</sup>

A year later, Dr. Raphael Reyes Garcia of the Puerto Rican Social Club spoke before the United Synagogue Youth Chapter of Beth El Temple, with the theme “Puerto Ricans Seek Equality.” His appeal to the gathering: “We want to be integrated, not segregated. We want better living standards, equal working conditions, and better opportunities—to raise our families and earn an honest living.” He concluded his remarks by saying, “right now we are rolling with the punch, but all the time we are hoping for better times, when we will receive equal recognition.” In March of 1958, Reverend George Lee of the North End Christian Ministry expressed concern for those living in the North End, stating that, “I don’t see how many Puerto Ricans here now get along [financially] at all. Many have not had work since the tobacco harvest last fall. An outsized segment of Puerto Rican workers [were] single. They don’t get welfare aid, which only goes to families.” Reverend Lee also noted that Puerto Rican migration to the area had dropped off since the 1953 recession.<sup>21</sup>

On 7 October 1958, under the headline “Problems of Puerto Ricans are noted by Dr. Garcia”, the *Springfield Union* ran an extensive interview with Garcia. “Too many factories refuse to hire my people,” said Dr. Garcia, acting as spokesman for the North End’s “Puerto Rican Colony.” He added, “Fear is a guiding force” for the thousands of Puerto Ricans living in that neighborhood. Dr. Garcia posed the question: “Do you wonder they’re scared?”, adding, “They’re afraid of what people think of them, frightened of losing their jobs, cowed

by the treatment they're getting in a place they heard was 'full of opportunity.'" Garcia opined that "Puerto Ricans are out of place here, people haven't gotten used to them yet. . . . Preceded by adverse publicity, . . . they work doubly hard to be examples of good citizens." But the general populace, he lamented, judged the entire Puerto Rican community from the actions of a small number of "bad" people who "spoil it for the rest of us." He also felt that it was a big problem that Puerto Rican youth had little to do in their spare time in the neighborhood. "Don't the city officials have a moral obligation to provide some kind of recreational facilities?" he asked.<sup>22</sup>

That year, Dr. Garcia constantly challenged Springfield's city government in the press. In July, Garcia and Mayor O'Connor sparred publicly over the urban redevelopment plan (to be discussed in detail later), with the mayor responding to Garcia's criticism by declaring that implementation of the plan "will provide decent, cleaner housing for those citizens now living in substandard housing." He rejected Garcia's criticism of the city's plan replying, "Your comments are unjustifiable, unnecessary, untenable, and unfortunate." The Mayor pledged, "Nothing will deter me in the desire to bring equal education, equal opportunity, decent housing, and good lives to the new Puerto Ricans in our midst."<sup>23</sup>

Once Connecticut Valley Puerto Rican farm workers attempted to move into other employment, the language barrier grew higher, particularly in Springfield. In July of 1959, Antonio Del Rios, the New England field representative for the Migration Division of the Puerto Rican Department of Labor, charged that Springfield industry "won't give Puerto Ricans a chance." Del Rios announced that he would be meeting with "personnel managers and other representatives to talk over the situation." He also stated to the *Springfield Union* that "In Springfield, the attitude of industry seems to be that they don't want to bother with men who don't speak English. . . . We don't have that trouble in Boston and we don't have that problem in the cities around Springfield." According to Del Rios, the neighboring cities of Westfield, Holyoke, and Chicopee took "a more welcoming approach" to Puerto Rican laborers.

Del Rios also noted that many farm workers employed in the state in October and November were then unemployed until the spring planting season. He stated that he planned "personal contact

with representatives of industry in Springfield to discuss this, so we won't have the problem of unemployment among Puerto Ricans in the wintertime." Del Rios praised two Westfield industries for "the chance they have given Puerto Ricans." According to Del Rios, ninety-eight of H.B. Smith's 104 employees were Puerto Rican, as were over 60% of Westfield Manufacturing Company's employees. It is unclear whether this employment pattern in Westfield was a general trend or idiosyncratic to these specific manufacturers.<sup>24</sup>

Acting on behalf of the local Puerto Rican Community, Del Rios met with Mayor Thomas O'Connor to have a frank discussion about these problems. On April 11, 1958, Mayor Thomas O'Connor announced his plan for a conference between city Department heads and Del Rios in order to develop strategies and policies to alleviate some of the most pressing problems facing the Puerto Rican community in the city. O'Connor stated, "I intend to recognize the problem and to meet it." Despite several highly publicized public-relations efforts—such as the partnership between O'Connor's administration, Father Santiago Nunez of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield, and the Puerto Rican Social Club in launching what was to become the annual San Juan Day "fiesta" in Springfield—the next few years saw very little progress on the major issues.<sup>25</sup>

For all the good intentions of Del Rios, his efforts were on behalf of Puerto Rican workers and families New England-wide; he could accomplish only so much within the context of those overwhelming responsibilities. What was needed was social engagement and constant political pressure from local leadership to achieve positive goals. The biggest threat to the Puerto Rican community in Springfield became the rallying point of local Puerto Rican leaders and organizations: the Springfield Urban Renewal Plan.

On August 27, 1958, Dr. Garcia, predicted that the Puerto Rican population of Springfield would grow from 2,000 to 20,000 by 1970. He expressed urgent concern about the proposed urban renewal plans, which called for the demolition of the old North End where almost all of the city's Puerto Rican population resided. Springfield Housing Authority Chairman, Harry P. Hogan pledged that "every family displaced by the urban renewal program will be relocated." Dr. Garcia responded to Hogan by asking, "Have you considered the physical impossibility of such a task? Have you planned or do you have a

solution for the social problems that will arise? Have you considered the emotional stress to all concerned? Where in the city are you planning to relocate all of these people?" the exasperated Garcia somewhat facetiously asked, "Are you planning to pitch up a tent city in Pynchon Park?"<sup>26</sup>

When the Springfield Redevelopment Authority (S.R.A.) released its "Summary of the Final Plan" for the North End Urban Renewal Area, a small pamphlet in English was distributed to the public. It recounted the history of the process from the authority's perspective: "In 1958, the city of Springfield initiated studies in the North End "in hopes of arresting deterioration of the neighborhood." The practical and political challenge of establishing "a definite right-of-way" for the future Route. 91 and Route. 291 highways caused plans to be "modified on several occasions." The final plan's key feature, as described by city officials, was "an expanded and revitalized commercial area." The S.R.A.'s printed report stated that "by clearing and redeveloping the parcels west of Chestnut Street and south of Carew Street with new commercial or light industrial uses, the area will provide for the orderly expansion of general commercial and light industrial uses supporting the central business district." Other goals of the plan were the "development of better residential areas; the provision of needed community facilities; better traffic flow; and relocation."

The S.R.A. was given the authority and responsibility of "carrying out the relocation program for the North End Urban Renewal area." The report stated that: "In order to divide the relocation of the 1,139 families in the project area into manageable proportion, the relocation will take place in four stages, over a four-year period." The S.R.A. also stated that it was "well aware that the success of a relocation program of this size will depend on and require close cooperation among community leaders, civic associations, church leaders, business interests, area residents and the public in general."<sup>27</sup>

Despite continuing concerns among the Puerto Rican community, the urban renewal plan went ahead under the Administration of Mayor Charles Ryan. Highway construction (of Route. 91) through the Old North End accelerated the displacement. Later, in July of 1964, demolition and relocation resumed, with an additional 200 families displaced, "including seventy-five low income Puerto Rican and twenty-five Negro families." Ultimately, the Old North End was essentially

depopulated and residential areas were replaced with commercial and service industry uses.<sup>28</sup>

During this same period, the city of Holyoke's Puerto Rican community was rapidly transforming through swift demographic changes. Holyoke's earliest immigrants, arriving in the mid-nineteenth century, were Irish. Then came large numbers of French Canadians. Later waves of immigration and migration led to significant communities of Germans, Poles, and Jews. Starting in the 1950s, Puerto Ricans came in relatively small numbers, but by 1960 the population began increasing at a rapid pace. The largest wave of Puerto Ricans arrived in the late 1960s, after workers discovered that there was little if any housing available in either Westfield or Southwick. In Holyoke, there was "an infinite amount ready to be had," with the closing of several of the paper mills leaving a surplus of "mill-housing," formerly occupied by millworkers and their families.<sup>29</sup>

Springfield's 1960s redevelopment efforts also affected neighboring cities like Holyoke. On October 9, 1969, the *Boston Herald* reported that in Holyoke, "plagued recently by a flood of out-of-state welfare recipients, primarily from Puerto Rico, a dire shortage of housing exists, forcing many of the new arrivals into decrepit flats that exist in the city's Ward One section." The newspaper quoted Louis Falcetti, director of the Holyoke Housing Authority, who claimed that the situation was created in part by "the need for additional housing by those displaced by urban renewal" in Springfield. The director of Holyoke's Welfare Department, John J. Moynihan, also shared his view: "This is an old mill city," he explained, "and we've just recently started to catch up with the times. But we still have plenty of substandard, decrepit housing," he lamented. "Unfortunately, that's where the vast majority of our new Puerto Rican population is living."<sup>30</sup> From such small beginnings in the 1950s, by the time of the 2010 U.S. census, Holyoke's Puerto Rican and Latino community had grown to 19,313 individuals, 48% of that city's population.

In 1959, Reverend Felix Chevere, pastor of the Iglesia Asamblea de Dios in the North End, spoke to the Springfield press explaining that "the local Puerto Rican population has a rapid turnover because the work always runs out." "We are like nomads," he declared, "we move where there is work." Chevere identified the three major social and economic barriers to Springfield Puerto Ricans as "race, language,

and education.” The result, Chevere claimed, was that “Spanish speaking people are the last to be hired and the first to be fired.” He went on to say that “If a [Puerto Rican] man cannot speak English, I would tell him not to come to the United States, it will be too hard for him,” However, “if he does come, you can be sure of this, he is coming because he wants a better future . . . a better job and a good education for his children.” He noted that the church community was doing its part to sustain the culture and spirit of the North End Puerto Rican community and should continue to partner with secular efforts to provide the people with a better future.<sup>31</sup>

In the early years of Puerto Rican Social Club, its biggest supporter and one of its most vocal leaders was Dr. Raphael Reyes Garcia. Dr. Garcia not only defended the social and political rights of Latinos in Springfield, he also provided for some Spanish-language cultural events and programs, was active in the establishment of San Juan Day in the city, and ran Spanish-language films at the Jefferson Theater. The club even reached out to the regional Boy Scouts council to encourage the inclusion of Puerto Rican youth in scouting. With the sponsorship of the Springfield Junior Chamber of Commerce, Troop 68 was formed in Springfield in 1961, becoming the first Puerto Rican Boy Scout Troop in New England.<sup>32</sup>

Garcia was born on 19 November 1898 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, during the Spanish–American War. Garcia migrated to the mainland U.S. in 1917, entering the High School of Temple University, and two months later enlisting in the Pennsylvania National Guard. During the outbreak of the deadly Spanish influenza, his company volunteered as orderlies at the Philadelphia General Hospital, “where they had 5,000 patients at all times during the epidemic.” After WWI, he entered Middlesex University, graduating in 1927 and serving his internships at St. Barnabas Hospital in Newark, New Jersey. As a physician, Dr. Garcia advocated “a natural medical approach,” claiming that this method “simulates nature in the maintenance and restoration of health.” About his work and theories, Reyes stated that “Notwithstanding the persecution, professional and social ostracism, the many anxieties and heartaches, I was not dissuaded.” He began his practice in Springfield in 1941. In 1946, he published a booklet entitled *Dr. Here is Your Answer* in which he shared his theories and clinical experiences. In 1948, he had his medical license revoked for one year for performing an abortion. During the late 1950s, he became a

spokesperson for the Puerto Rican community in Springfield, advocating for better treatment and services. For a time, in the late 1950s until 1961, Dr. Garcia operated the Jefferson movie theater in the North End on weekends, and featured Spanish language films for the Puerto Rican and Latino community.

In 1959, Dr. Garcia sought the position of Director of the Springfield Municipal Hospital, but was not chosen by Mayor O'Connor. Garcia publicly protested this rejection, charging that the Mayor had already chosen a candidate even before the official "search" began for that post. "I challenged the Board of Trustees to grant the job on a competitive basis," Dr. Garcia claimed, "I was rebuffed, however, in a very unpleasant manner. . . . The job was earmarked for Dr. John Ayres . . . you never meant to appoint anyone else." Dr. Howard Kennedy of the Board of Trustees strongly disagreed with Dr. Garcia's assessment of the process. Near the end of his life, Dr. Garcia lived in Crescent Lake, Thompsonville, Connecticut, but continued to maintain his medical office in Springfield.

Soon after his failed bid to run the Municipal Hospital, Dr. Garcia and another doctor were accused of performing an abortion that resulted in the patient's death, a charge Dr. Reyes vehemently denied. He was convicted and sentenced to the Hampden County Jail for eighteen months. Dr. Garcia died in the jail infirmary, from a heart condition, on 10 September 1961. Father Santiago Nunez, a Catholic diocesan priest representing Bishop Christopher J. Weldon of the Springfield Roman Catholic Diocese, presided over the funeral service, without hesitation.<sup>33</sup>

Dr. Garcia's untimely death left the Puerto Rican Social Club leaderless, and it became essentially dormant. Unfortunately, this happened just as the need for strong organizational leadership was heightened, with the displacement and relocation faced by Springfield's North End neighborhood.

Soon, the strongest voice of advocacy for the Puerto Rican Community became that of Father Santiago Nunez. Bishop Weldon brought Reverend Nunez from Costa Rica to Springfield "to assist and cooperate with priests of local parishes that have Puerto Rican and Spanish-speaking parishioners. Arriving in Springfield on 8 May 1961, he joined the good efforts of two bilingual priests: Father Thomas



McCarthy of the Sacred Heart parish, working with the Spanish-speaking parishioners of the North End,; and Father John MacDonald of St. Mary's parish in Westfield, who was providing religious guidance for that city's growing Spanish-speaking Catholic population.

Familiarizing himself with these communities was a priority for Father Nunez. After a few months of service, during which he would even visit farms to meet with Puerto Rican laborers, Nunez determined that personal observations and anecdotal evidence were not adequate to accurately assess the needs of the community he was to serve. Still, Father Nunez noted that when he visited Puerto Rican farm laborers, "it was impossible to ignore some of the living conditions, which were violating the 1960 Massachusetts Health Code as well as the modern standard of decent living."<sup>34</sup>

It was then that Father Nunez decided to conduct the region's first comprehensive survey of a Puerto Rican community. His 1962 study, the *Parochial Census of the Puerto Rican Population in the North End of Springfield* was published by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield. Wanting to be as inclusive as possible, he included input from Reverend Hug Wire of the North End Area Ministry (NEAM), sponsored by the protestant Springfield Council of Churches, and employed the talents of Mrs. Argelia Maria Buitrago Hermenet a social worker formerly of Panama, who was also associated with NEAM, to compile the survey results.

The following points were the most important findings in the study:

1. "Many Puerto Ricans are overcrowded in small apartments for which they pay up to 50% of their income, and which are kept up neither inside nor outside by landlord or tenant to the health and esthetic standards of the general community."

2. "Some of the housing problems of Puerto Ricans here are caused by 'ghetto living' conditions in the North End," which would be eased if they "were welcome to move freely, when they can afford to, or so desire, to other parts of the city."

3. "Puerto Rican workers who live on western Massachusetts farms during the growing and harvesting season have been living under conditions that represent violations of the state health code."

4. “Generally, Puerto Ricans work in the lower-paying jobs [and] do not have economic security and lack information and education in order to be more aggressive and successful in their job hunting.”

5. “The language barrier” was also cited as “one of the everyday difficulties faced by Puerto Ricans.” The report also noted that many local “Puerto Ricans are not interested in taking advantage of opportunities to learn English.”

6. The report claimed that “only 10% of the islanders living in Springfield participate in church life.”

7. The report recommended that the “creation of a citizens’ committee on Puerto Rican affairs may be a step toward a solution to the adjustment problems of the islanders.”<sup>35</sup>

Viewing the compiled data from the *Parochial Census* provided detailed insight into the makeup of the community. There were 1,228 individuals identified in this census; 1189 were Catholic and fifty-four non-Catholic, with 861 people under the age of twenty. The 252 Puerto Rican families in the North End parochial district had an average household size of 4.8 individuals. With 157 families having lived in the continental United States for at least five years, the parochial census revealed that 126 of these families had been living in Springfield for at least five years with twenty-seven families having been in the continental United States for ten years or more, and eight of those families had lived in Springfield for that entire time. The language barrier was highlighted by the fact that 447 out of 1,228 “could speak English only with difficulty” with the remainder speaking only Spanish.

The survey also pinpointed the educational challenge in the community with the fact that only 2.3% of the people who entered grammar school “went to the end of high school.” The Nunez study compiled charts showing how the migration of Puerto Ricans to Springfield grew at its fastest rate after 1956. At the same time, the transition from “migrant” or temporary-resident status to “Valley-born” was revealed by the fact that 239 respondents were born in Springfield, Holyoke, or Westfield. The challenges of transportation for local workers and families were highlighted by the finding that only sixty-five people in the neighborhood owned a car.

Lastly, the study provided details on the neighborhoods' workforce, of which 20% were unemployed at the time. Of 503 working men and women, 176 worked on Tobacco or Tomato farms; ninety-six worked in factories or foundries; fifteen were "machine operators"; nine worked in restaurants; two worked as drivers; one served as a minister; and six worked at miscellaneous unskilled labor.<sup>36</sup> The next significant study of the Puerto Rican population by the Latino community would come fifteen years later, when the Spanish-American Union compiled and published the *Demographic Survey of Hispanic Households in Springfield, Mass.* in 1978.

In September of 1962, Father Nunez revealed the disparity between the living conditions in the Puerto Rican communities in Springfield and in Holyoke. He reported to the *Springfield Republican* newspaper that "unrestricted housing and cheaper rents are helping to draw residents from Springfield to Holyoke." in 1960 there were 300 Puerto Ricans living in Holyoke, he reported, but over one-hundred moved from Springfield to Holyoke in 1961 and 1962. He also observed that the Puerto Rican population of Holyoke was increasing by about "three families a week." He also noted that many were coming in from New York City as well. "Lower rents, sometimes as low as one-half that charged in [Springfield], are one of the major attractions to the Paper City."<sup>37</sup> Springfield urban renewal would soon accelerate that process.

Meanwhile, language was still a major debating point. The replacement for Antonio De Rios at the New England Field Office of the Migration Division of Puerto Rico's Labor Department, Gilberto Camacho, responded to the 1963 Massachusetts Public Welfare Department's proposal for compulsory English-language education program with a cautionary note, "As far as the language is concerned, it has been demonstrated over and over again in this country that where there is good will and good relations between employers and employees, language is no obstacle in finding a good job." Camacho went on to cite examples of Cuban laborers, who seemed to have no problem finding work despite their lack of English. He concluded his statements by saying that "the United States has demonstrated its goodwill toward the unfortunate peoples from other countries," Camacho asked, "Shouldn't they show at least as much towards Puerto Ricans, who are American citizens?"<sup>38</sup>

Locally, Father Nunez did his best to help bridge the language gap while also serving his community in its own native Spanish. Father Nunez and Argelia Hermenet, with support from the Catholic Diocese of Springfield, created the first weekly Spanish-language radio program for the community, which ran from 1962 to 1963. When it lapsed, the community lamented its loss. By 1966, continued community interest had encouraged the establishment of two Spanish-language commercial radio programs, including one produced by Eugenio Melendez of Springfield. Following up his radio effort, Father Nunez published a "Spanish newsletter" from 1963 to 1965, with the assistance of Mary Powers of the city authority.

New community services began to be implemented. The North End Community Center began serving the Spanish-speaking community in 1963 with summer school programs serving "one-hundred Spanish-speaking youngsters a week, . . . sixty-five Spanish-speaking youngsters per day" in their after-school program; and "250 Spanish-speaking people a year" in their day program. The Pentecostal Church in the North End was established that year. Reverend Juan Carde, one of that church's early leaders, noted the lack of recreational opportunities for Puerto Rican youth. He went on to found the Royal Rangers recreational program for boys and the *Misioneritas* vocational and recreational program for girls.<sup>39</sup>

Father Nunez also addressed the void created by the lapse of the Puerto Rican Social Club. In 1963, Nunez helped merge the new but small Springfield Puerto Rican Affairs Committee with former members of the defunct Puerto Rican Social Club to form the new *Casa Hispanoamericana*, "involving peoples from Puerto Rico and from several Hispanic-American countries." This is one of the first acknowledgements by the Puerto Rican community that it was part of a large and diverse Spanish-speaking population emerging in western Massachusetts. Indeed, Father Nunez was Costa Rican, and his community-organizing associates Argelia Hermenet and Larry Varela were Panamanian and Mexican-American, respectively. The Springfield Symphony had, since 1956, boasted the talents of the flautist Gerardo Levy, a native of Argentina. By the mid-1960s, individuals and families from Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, Venezuela, Panama, Cost Rica, and Mexico found their way to the Greater Springfield area.

During the dictatorial rule of the Dominican Republic's Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo (aka "El Jefe") from 1930 to 1961, large numbers of Dominicans immigrated to Puerto Rico to escape the regime's brutality. A number of these Dominicans eventually made their way to the continental United States, making their homes within the larger Puerto Rican communities of the northeast, including those of Springfield, Holyoke, and Westfield. On an interesting side note, after Trujillo's ouster, the link between Dominican Tobacco growers and the "wrapper leaf" tobacco farms of the Connecticut Valley grew stronger. In 2004, there were still over 1,275 acres of shade tobacco being grown in the northern Connecticut and western Massachusetts sections of the Connecticut Valley. Dominican Tobacco companies like Tabacalera A. Fuente y Compania, run by Dominican executive Carlos Fuente Jr.; Culbro Corporation, and General Cigar Holding, Inc., continue their use of Connecticut Valley tobacco farms to produce their premium cigars.

These Dominicans and other immigrants from Latin America were essentially "hiding in plain sight" in the Spanish-speaking neighborhoods of western Massachusetts. Recently, Ramon Delgado, president of the Springfield Ecuadorean Civic Club, revealed that Ecuadoreans were in Springfield as early as 1960—a trend unknown by the wider community at that time. The celebrated Holyoke Latino-community leader Carlos Vega emigrated from Ecuador to Holyoke with his parents at the age of five, in 1956. Vega would eventually be considered "an honorary Puerto Rican" by the local community he served. In a career that spanned more than forty years, Vega, a social worker by training, worked as a volunteer or staff member at a number of organizations, including the Holyoke Human Service Network, *Enlace de Familia* ("Family Link"), *Nueva Esperanza* ("New Hope"), the Holyoke Land Trust, the Massachusetts Office of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Children and Families. He served as Holyoke's Nueva Esperanza's executive director until 2007.<sup>40</sup>

Ecuadorean immigration may have been encouraged by the efforts of several area educators who taught in Ecuador during the 1950s and 1960s. Among them were Douglas C. Mackenzie of West Springfield, a University of Massachusetts graduate, who taught English at the University of Guayaquil and the Colegio Americano in Ecuador in 1954 (and, in 1959, at the University of Valencia in Venezuela); and Springfield's Ruth Cignoni, a graduate of Westfield

State Teachers College, who taught in a mission school in Ecuador operated by the Evangelical Covenant Mission Church of America, starting in 1954. Cignoni eventually became director of a primary school in Quito, before returning to the United States in August of 1960. One of their contemporaries, Mount Holyoke College-graduate Lee Post, of West Springfield, taught English in Cali, Colombia, in the late 1950s, and apparently influenced a few Colombians to immigrate to the Valley.<sup>41</sup>

This mirrors a trend shared in numerous anecdotes about the earliest, unheralded arrivals to western Massachusetts from many Latin American countries. Some came as refugees seeking political asylum from dictatorial home governments. Many ultimately became citizens through the traditional U.S. immigration and naturalization system. But most blended-in to the welcoming, resident Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican communities of Westfield, Holyoke, and Springfield. Identifying oneself as Puerto Rican in those circumstances came with the advantage of access to benefits accruing to U.S. citizens—benefits that Dominicans used successfully to escape from Trujillo’s murderous regime, as early as the 1950s.

The new Casa Hispanoamericana was intended by Father Nunez and its other founders to embrace all Spanish-speaking people of the region. Although Puerto Ricans would compose the vast majority of both membership and the community it served, this signaled the beginning of a “Hispanic” initiative, (later referred to as “Latino,” that being the most inclusive term). In 1964, Peter Picknelly provided space for Casa Hispanoamericana at his Peter Pan bus company offices at Memorial Square in the North End. It soon became one of the centers of “Puerto Rican social and civic activity in Greater Springfield.” With Nunez serving as President, the organization sought to bring Puerto Ricans closer to other Spanish-speaking people in the region. One of their roles was as the new organizers of the annual San Juan Day celebrations in the city, which had lapsed in 1963.<sup>42</sup>

In 1964, Casa Hispanoamericana established a credit union for the benefit of the local Spanish-speaking community. The organization had 170 family-members representing over 700 individuals, including many from Latin-American backgrounds other than Puerto Rican. Beginning on 31 October 1964, with a meager \$1,000 in capital, the Casa Credit Union accrued assets totaling \$90,000 by 1971, “especially

due to the untiring efforts of their long-term Treasurer, Luis Escobar.” North End residents interviewed by the *Springfield Union* in 1965 agreed that “Father Santiago [Nunez] has become one of the most popular figures in the North End.”<sup>43</sup>

During the late 1960s, the Puerto Rican/Latino community continued to organize into groups, each focused on a specific social, political, or economic challenge facing the community. In January of 1968, the Spanish-American Union (SAU) began its initial mission to “combat poor housing conditions.” Dorothy Nunalli and Ildefonso Figueroa served as co-chairs of the organization. On July 29 that year, Spanish-American Union officers and members numbering about one-hundred people picketed Springfield City Hall to protest housing conditions. The SAU spokesman at the picketing, Juan Martinez, called for rent control in the city “to stop the slumlords from gouging the tenants in the North End.” On 4 June 1969, they opened a community center at 1210 Dwight Street in Springfield, with over 250 people in attendance.<sup>44</sup>

Viola Camunas, Executive Director of the SAU, led a voter registration drive in the community, but found few individuals willing to go to city hall and exercise that right. The City Clerk’s records at that time showed only 140 out of the city’s 5,000 eligible voters registered to vote in the November 1969 election.<sup>45</sup> This despite the provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (upheld in June 1966 by the U.S. Supreme Court after a challenge by New York City), which finally afforded citizens who spoke only Spanish the right to register to vote without having to pass English-language tests. This law opened the door for Puerto Ricans in western Massachusetts to register in larger numbers than in the past. However, the vast majority of the Springfield Puerto Rican community felt disenfranchised by the local political system, and unwelcome at the polls, and voter registration never reached its full potential during that period.

By the end of the decade, frustration in the Puerto Rican/Latino community was reaching boiling point. In April 1969, *Boricuas en Accion* (“Puerto Rican People in Action”) was formed, with approximately 500 members at its founding. With German Gerena serving as its first president, the group’s mission was to “take direct action in the solution of social problems in the Spanish-speaking community.” One of their first actions was pressuring the School Department to develop

more effective programs for the Spanish-speaking community. In early 1970, they advocated for a “Hispanic” to be appointed to the Springfield Action Commission. More recently, Boricuas en Accion faced the more difficult challenge of protesting a case of police brutality in the arrest of a North End Puerto Rican.<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile, Casa Hispanoamericana operated independently until June 1970, when it combined with the Spanish-American Union and Boricuas en Accion to form the Hispanic Federation of Springfield. With Ishmael Vargas as president, the organization was “to promote the welfare of the Hispanic American community in the areas of health, education, social welfare, housing, employment, human relations, and all other matters effecting the community.” Operating from 1969 to 1971, the Hispanic Federation of Springfield “was a strictly volunteer effort that ended abruptly after no workable scheme was achieved to preserve the autonomy and identity of each member organization as desired.” However, as Dr. Argelia Hermenet of Springfield Technical Community College observed, “The first Hispanic Federation also served to rally the human resources that were needed at the time to spearhead the birth of the New England Farm Workers Council.” This Springfield-based group would grow to become one of the most influential Puerto Rican-led organizations in the region, under the leadership of Heriberto “Herbie” Flores.<sup>47</sup>

Over the next few years, Springfield implemented a system of “neighborhood councils” throughout the city. Most important to the Puerto Rican community were the creation of the Brightwood Neighborhood Council, in August of 1971, and the Memorial Square Neighborhood Council, in December of 1972—which years later merged into the New North Citizens Council, established in 1986 under the direction of the dynamic neighborhood leader, Barbara Rivera.

By 1973, the community seemed finally to have a sympathetic ear in Springfield City Hall. with the Administration of Mayor William Sullivan. In her author’s preface to *The Puerto Rican Situation of Springfield, Mass.: A Report to Mayor William Sullivan*, Dr. Hermenet wrote, “This work . . . has been written at the request of a concerned group of Puerto Rican residents who are deeply aware of the ignominies experienced by their people, and are personally committed to improving these circumstances. Their initiative and the willingness of Mayor William Sullivan to listen to them constitute a major step in the



history of this city.”<sup>48</sup> The struggle for respect and equality continued, but these institutions and organizations, led by a new generation of politically active Puerto Ricans, gave the communities hope for a brighter future, with expanded educational, economic, and social opportunities.

But it would not be easy. The 1970s would witness unrest, including a riot over a controversial police shooting of a Puerto Rican “suspect” in Springfield’s North End, in 1975. In stark contrast to the weak political position of the community in 1954, when Santos Rodriguez was wrongly arrested and imprisoned, the Latino community now had robust and active organizations with strong leaders to step forward and challenge social injustices. Galvanized by that moment, the community organizations confronted a number of other important issues, including:

- Bilingual education
- Discrimination in city and school department hiring practices
- Tenants’ rights
- Access to health care
- Labor conditions and opportunities
- Tenants’ rights

The Latino organizations of the 1970s challenged the status quo, ultimately winning many a long-fought battle. However, it would take almost another generation before Puerto Rican candidates ran successfully for political offices in Springfield, Westfield, and Holyoke.

Over the succeeding decades, Puerto Ricans began to take leading roles in Latino social, religious, and business-related organizations. The Massachusetts Latino Chamber of Commerce, led in Springfield by Carlos Gonzales, made inroads into the wider regional business and political environment, and represented the growing economic influence of the Puerto Rican and Latino community. Overcoming lingual, racial, economic, and cultural barriers, second- and third-generation western-Massachusetts-born Puerto Ricans began to find leadership roles outside of Latino-specific institutions. One example is Edgar Alejandro, who as Director of Education for the Private Industry Council of Hampden County, oversaw \$6 million in federal funding for county-wide employment training.<sup>49</sup>

However, local political success was limited by low Latino turnout at the polls. Other than the popular State Representative Cheryl A. Rivera and Springfield City Councilman Jose F. Tostado, Latinos rarely won elections. As late as 1994, former Holyoke City Ward 2 Councilman Wilfredo Echevarria sadly observed, “people say it’s not so, but not voting is a decision and the Latino people just didn’t go out to vote.” When no Hispanic candidates sought the seat that Echevarria left open in the previous year’s election, only 223 of the 6,793 eligible Hispanic voters in Holyoke cast ballots. Springfield school committee member Carmen Rosa opined, “It’s a phenomenon that happens here, a phenomenon that perhaps is associated with the lack of power—just feeling not connected, that their vote doesn’t matter.”<sup>50</sup>

In 1999, Carlos Gonzalez, co-chairman of the newly created non-partisan Western Massachusetts Hispanic Political Action Committee worked hard to encourage both Latino voter-turnout and more Latino candidates for elected offices. That year, the Campaign for Fair Politics began a major voter registration drive in Springfield and Holyoke. Political and social activist Gumersindo Gomez, executive director of the Springfield Bilingual Veteran’s Outreach Center, is well-known as a fighter for Puerto Rican political clout. The son of migrant farm workers from Puerto Rico, Gomez had distinguished himself in the Army, climbing to the rank of first sergeant and receiving nineteen medals during a twenty-year career. “We must demand respect from our politicians,” Gomez declared in front of a crowd of 350 attendees at the first-ever Latino Legislative and Lobby Day, at the Massachusetts State House, “We are citizens of this country.”<sup>51</sup> After years of lobbying, their efforts were rewarded in Springfield, with a successful referendum vote supporting reinstatement of the ward system. In 2010, Springfield dramatically increased ward representation, which, as opposed to proscriptively costly, citywide “at-large” campaigns, enabled minority candidates to emerge from neighborhood communities throughout the city.<sup>52</sup>

Today, these and other efforts have led to Puerto Ricans and other Latinos running for office and being elected (though in numbers not even approximating their demographic proportion of the voting-age population) in most of the major cities of Connecticut River Valley.<sup>53</sup> Their success has been in the development of collaborations, coalitions,

and integrations with other institutions outside the Latino community. Latino politicians in the Connecticut Valley now place particular emphasis on forging alliances and seeking voter support beyond the traditional Puerto Rican/Latino precincts.

Though no longer the “revolving door,” of yesteryear, the strong connection between the region’s Puerto Rican residents and their island relatives, and thereby to Puerto Rican culture, nevertheless continues to this day. New Spanish-speaking American citizens still arrive each year to the region. The difference today is that there are many more bilingual social service and public service personnel to help new arrivals transition into the community. Just as importantly, there are now fellow Puerto Ricans in positions of social and political leadership, in government and public-service positions, including police and firefighters. There are also significant numbers in the legal and medical professions, and a growing number of business leaders. This “mainstreaming effect” has only recently begun to mirror the experiences of earlier non-English-speaking immigrant populations—despite the Puerto Ricans’ distinction of already being American citizens. The delay in mainstreaming can be seen as a relic of the Spanish–American War: the United States annexed of an island with its own language and culture, which then struggled to assimilate into a country already deeply divided over issues of race and diversity.

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[For more information about the earliest Puerto Rican residents in Western Massachusetts see Joseph Carvalho III, "The Puerto Rican Community of Western Massachusetts, 1898–1960," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* (summer 2015), 34–62.]