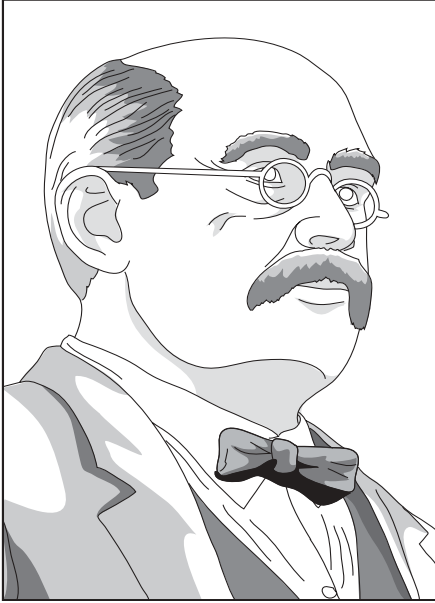


## Florida's Historic Places: Ybor City



**Don Vicente Martínez Ybor.**

It started out as 40 acres of swamp and scrub northeast of Tampa. Don Gavino Gutiérrez, a Spanish civil engineer from New York, arrived in 1884. He came looking for guavas (a kind of fruit). He hoped to establish a tropical fruit preserving plant. He found that not enough guavas were available, so he abandoned the project. He decided to visit friends in Key West before returning to New York. The friends were Don Vicente Martínez Ybor (EE-bore) and Don Ignacio Haya, who were Cuban exiles. They were two of the most prominent cigar makers of the time.

Gutiérrez found that Ybor and Haya had constant labor problems and were considering relocating their factories. Gutiérrez described the Tampa Bay area and encouraged them to check it out. They were pleased with what they found—a railroad, a port, and a warm climate that was good for the tobacco leaf. The Tampa Board of Trade offered them cash and land. They decided to move.

Thousands of acres of land were bought and plans made for “Mr. Ybor’s City” two miles east of Tampa. Eventually it became just Ybor City. The factory they built was, at the time, the world’s largest cigar factory in history.

The first Cuban cigar makers arrived in 1886. Ybor City and Tampa were separated by thick palmetto scrub. Ybor established a railway connecting Ybor City with Tampa. “El tren urbano” ran on a schedule of “once in a while.”

Other cigar manufacturers from Havana, Key West, and the northern United States moved their plants to Ybor City. Ybor City became noted for the finest Cuban cigars. It became known as the “Cigar Capital of the World.” Eventually there were 200 cigar factories, employing 12,000 tabaqueros (cigar makers) and producing 700-million cigars a year.

However, there were challenges for the early residents. They battled mosquitoes, alligators, and unsanitary conditions. They had to carry buckets of water from the Old Government Spring. Otherwise, water from crudely dug wells or cisterns that collected rainwater was, according to old-timers, “too thick to drink and too thin to plow.” A yellow fever epidemic, which may have been caused by mosquitoes packed along with imported Cuban fruit, claimed a number of lives.

Ybor City’s population by now was five times larger than Tampa’s population. Ybor City had become a melting pot of Cuban, Spanish, and Italian residents. This cultural diversity produced a thriving community. The community built opera houses, hotels, and ballrooms. Ybor City was alive and kicking with Latin culture and language. It became known as “Little Havana.”

In 1887, Ybor City was incorporated into the city of Tampa. However, its name and identity were not lost. The Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians brought with them traditions of volunteer associations and mutual aid. Residents depended on clubs such as the Centro Espanol, Centro Asturiano, and Unione Italiana for all their medical and social needs. These immigrants' medical services are among the earliest known examples of cooperative social medicine in the United States.

Out on La Septima Avenida (Seventh Avenue), trolley cars carried residents across town and boys sold deviled crabs on the corner. Everyone was reading the latest edition of *La Gaceta*, Ybor's tri-lingual newspaper that's still in print today.

In the closing years of the 1800s, Ybor City became a support center for the Cuban Revolution. When war broke out between the United States and Spain in 1898, the Army stationed thousands of men in Ybor City. This included Teddy Roosevelt and his "Rough Riders." At the end of the war, Cuba won its independence.

Ybor City's leadership of the cigar industry and prosperity lasted for over 50 years. The introduction of modern cigar manufacturing, however, signaled the end of many of Ybor City's cigar factories. Competition by machines, popularity of cigarettes, and the Depression combined to bring about the decline of the cigar industry in Ybor City.

The Ybor of today is much different from the Ybor City of yesterday. It is now known for being a district of nightclubs, dining, shopping, and great people watching. You know you've entered Ybor City when the streets turn from asphalt to brick and the lampposts from concrete to ornate wrought iron. Ybor City's buildings show quality workmanship. There are elements of Victorian and Mediterranean architecture.

History lives on at the Tampa Rico Cigar Company where tabaqueros demonstrate old-fashioned cigar making. The Ybor City State Museum located in the renovated Ferlita Baker building tells the history of Ybor City. There are also three restored cigar workers' houses and a garden.

Founding family descendants still run The Columbiaa Restaurant, Florida's oldest restaurant. It is believed to be the largest Spanish restaurant in the world. Black beans, Cuban bread, and café con leche are part of the area's heritage. One of the city's renovated cigar factories is home to Ybor Square, a mall. The 113-year-old building retains its original brick walls and wood beams.

Ybor City is one of three historic Landmark Districts in the state of Florida. The city's past is still very much a part of the present.



**Ornate wrought iron is a distinct feature of Ybor City.**