

Celebrating Virgin Islands–Puerto Rico Friendship Day

# Ramón Emeterio Betances and His Connection to the Virgin Islands



Ramón Emeterio Betances was a great leader of Puerto Rico's struggle for independence against Spain, and he has been labeled "**El Padre de la Patria.**" During the most important period of his life, **Betances lived in exile in St. Thomas, part of the now Virgin Islands of the United States but formerly the Danish West Indies.**

It was during this time, in the late 1860s in St. Thomas that Betances produced "**Los Diez Mandamientos de los Hombres Libres**" or "**The Ten Commandments of Free Men**". This became a cornerstone for all those seeking additional rights and freedoms for Puerto Rico. His writing advocated the equal treatment of all individuals, as well as self-government for the people of Puerto Rico apart from Spain or any other foreign nation.

**In a Land where Big Ideas Could Grow**

With Betances growing his ideologies out on St. Thomas, it begs the question: Have the Virgin Islands been a place where visionaries could think freely, to flesh out revolutionary ideas? Throughout history, our islands provided a safe space for individuals at the heart of change, such as Betances. For Betances, St. Thomas was where he could truly write and plan to continue pushing for the betterment of the future.

Home to people such as Betances, the Virgin Islands created an enabling environment that helped nurture key ideas on the future of the Caribbean. During the 19th century, St. Thomas-the capital port city of the Danish West Indies, then known as the U.S. Virgin Islands-presented a haven for most revolutionaries from the Caribbean. Still being a neutral Danish colony in the 1860s, it gave shelter to leaders who were fighting the colonial powers in their home country. St. Thomas was used as a meeting point by revolutionaries like Ramón Emeterio Betances of Puerto Rico, José Martí of Cuba, and Gregorio Luperón of the Dominican Republic to convene meetings, plot strategies, and spread their ideas pertaining to the independence movement..

The island's strategic location made it an ideal spot for these leaders to connect with others, organize their movements, and publish works that were banned in their own countries. St. Thomas became known as a safe place where big ideas could grow, playing an important role in the independence movements that shaped the future of the Caribbean.

## Antillean Liberation Group

While in **exile**, Betances did not limit himself to the cause of Puerto Rico alone. He dreamed of the Caribbean as an independent entity free from the servitude of colonial rule. So, he helped create an organization called the **Antillean Liberation Group**. This grouping aimed at bringing together the Caribbean islands of which Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic were the main parts themselves against the vanguards of their common enemy: colonial power. The independence and strength that Betances envisioned would be inherent to the Caribbean because he fundamentally believed in a united region of one culture and one politics.

Also referred to as the **Antillean Confederation**, the group was the brainchild of Betances for the united and independent Caribbean whereby nations supported their respective paths towards freedom and independence. That dream, though it never saw its full realization in his times, helped plant the seeds of Caribbean unity and solidarity.



## **What did Betances want for Puerto Rico?**

Betances felt that "Puerto Rico had to be for Puerto Ricans and not depend on any other foreign power". When in 1898, the U.S. intervened in the Spanish-American War, Betances was apprehensive that Puerto Rico would be transferred from the hands of Spain into the hands of the United States. He once said, "I don't want Puerto Rico to be a colony of Spain or the United States," which means he was after a self-determination status for Puerto Rico.

## **Los Diez Mandamientos de los Hombres Libres (The Ten Commandments of Free Men)**

**Printed while in St. Thomas, Betances wrote "Los Diez Mandamientos de los Hombres Libres", a list of important rights he believed everyone should have. These include:**

1. The end of slavery
2. The right of all men to vote
3. Freedom of Choice of Religion
4. Freedom of speech
5. Freedom to print your thoughts
6. The right to peaceful assembly
7. The right to school attendance
8. The right to land ownership
9. Equal treatment for everyone

## 10. Puerto Rico's ability to make its own decisions

What Betances wanted was that people would be given equal rights, a chance to raise their voices in decision-making, and a place where people could work, learn, and speak freely. All these ideas were not only for Puerto Rico but also for every other place where people suffered from injustice, especially in the Caribbean.

The vision of Betances went beyond Puerto Rico to include unity and self-determination for all the Caribbean countries. His time spent in the Virgin Islands underlines that these islands have been a space throughout history for voices of revolutionary thinkers to proclaim their belief in a better future.

That spirit of activism lives on today amongst contemporary artists such as Bad Bunny. Like Betances, Bad Bunny has taken his platform to fight for the rights of Puerto Rico. Bad Bunny's landing on TIME Magazine is seldom about fashion, but, rather a reflection of his concern for the ordeals facing the island, from government corruption and inequality to long-lasting ramifications of colonialism.



In TIME Magazine's March 2021 editorial, Bad Bunny appeared on the cover, using his platform to address important issues affecting Puerto Rico. Although he never explicitly stated that his appearance was inspired by Ramón Emeterio Betances, many critics believe it was his artistic way of speaking out against the problems he sees on the island, such as government corruption and inequality. Through this cover, Bad Bunny continues to advocate for Puerto Rican rights, much like Betances did in his time.

## What are these issues?

-**Government corruption:** In addition to economic challenges and natural disasters, a host of several scandals related to the mismanagement of public funds is also subject to focus in Puerto Rico. This was especially true with Hurricane Maria, since much of the island was devastated due to that hurricane, when afterward a wide array of reports highlighted many funds and aids mishandled by the government resulting in further delaying their recovery process. One of those more controversial decisions was the creation of PRIMISO - Puerto Rico Institute of Management and Strategic Operations-established to oversee the management of disaster recovery funds. PRIMISO was criticized for its lack of transparency and the slowness in the pace at which aid reached indirectly affected individuals.

The other factor is that, since 2016, the **PROMESA** law created "La Junta," better known as the Financial Oversight and Management Board, a body completely in control of Puerto Rico's finances whose members are appointed by the government of the United States. It has been criticized for proposing harsh austerity measures, cutting off public services, and making financial decisions concerning the island without the involvement of Puerto Ricans. Bad Bunny has expressed himself quite often about these failures and has looked for a responsible administration that has in mind the welfare of the Puerto Rican people.



- **Colonialism:** Puerto Rico has been a colony of the United States since 1898, which means Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens to this day but they still don't have full rights. They can't vote for president, for example, and the representatives they send to Congress can't vote. Bad Bunny is

very vocal about wanting more autonomy for the island and the ability of people to make their own decisions without outside forces ruling over them.

**-Inequality:** Most Puerto Ricans are faced with issues of poverty, health disparities, and lack of opportunities. Bad Bunny is almost always frustrated in his songs about how Puerto Ricans will always be treated as second-class citizens compared to those living in the U.S. mainland.

The actions of Bad Bunny in raising such issues follow the trail left by Ramón Emeterio Betances, one of the earliest fighters for Puerto Rico's freedom and equality. Betances was a revolutionary leader who wanted Puerto Rico to be independent, and free from Spanish rule, in much the same way Bad Bunny fights for equal treatment and respect afforded to Puerto Rico today.

**"El Apagón"** from Bad Bunny's 2022 album *Un Verano Sin Ti*. The song and its accompanying **music video** address Puerto Rico's political issues, including government corruption, power outages, displacement due to gentrification. It is a powerful protest against the ongoing struggles Puerto Ricans face, especially following Hurricane Maria and the controversial presence of wealthy investors on the island.

## **El Apagón (The Blackout)**

**Me encanta el alma de Puerto Rico.**

**Me encanta el alma de Puerto Rico.**

**Yo no me quiero ir de aquí, que se vayan ellos**

**Esta es mi playa, este es mi sol**

**Esta es mi tierra, esta soy yo**

**Translation:**

**I adore the heart of Puerto Rico.**

**I adore the heart of Puerto Rico.**

**I don't want to leave, they should go**

**This is my beach, this is my sun**

**This is my land, this is me**

click link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TCX\\_Aqzoo4&t=723s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TCX_Aqzoo4&t=723s)



In Puerto Rico, several statues have been built to honor **Ramón Emeterio Betances**, a key leader in the fight for Puerto Rican independence and the abolition of slavery. These statues are placed in important locations, like **Cabo Rojo**, his birthplace, and **Lares**, where he helped lead the famous **Grito de Lares** uprising against Spanish rule. The statues show Betances in thoughtful poses, reminding people of his role as a leader who fought for justice and freedom.



Since Betances did important work while in St. Thomas, do you think we should have a statue of him here, too? It could serve as a reminder of how the Virgin Islands have also been part of the story of the development of Puerto Rico's fight for freedom and equity as well as other island spaces in the Caribbean.

# Vocabulary

1. **Exile** – Forced to live away from one's home country, typically for political reasons.
2. **Advocate** – To publicly support or recommend a cause or policy.
3. **Self-government** – The ability of a country or group of people to rule themselves without outside control.
4. **Colonialism** – The practice of acquiring control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.
5. **Servitude** – The state of being a slave or completely subject to someone more powerful.
6. **Confederation** – An organization or group of countries or states that join together for a common purpose, while retaining individual independence.
7. **Autonomy** – The right or condition of self-government, especially in a particular territory.
8. **Inequality** – An unfair situation in which some people have more rights or better opportunities than others.
9. **Corruption** – Dishonest or illegal behavior, especially by powerful people, such as government officials.
10. **Transparency** – The quality of being open, clear, and easy to understand, especially when discussing government or organization decisions.
11. **Austerity** – Strict financial policies that reduce spending, often leading to cuts in public services and benefits.
12. **Ordeal** – A difficult or painful experience, often lasting a long time.
13. **Ramifications** – Consequences or outcomes of an action, especially when they are complex or far-reaching.
14. **Self-determination** – The process by which a country or group of people controls its future and makes its own decisions.
15. **Equality** – The state of being equal, especially in rights, status, and opportunities.
16. **Gentrification** – The process by which wealthier people move into, renovate, and improve a neighborhood, often displacing the current, usually poorer, residents.

## Sources:

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