

A Brief History of Puerto Ricans in Rochester

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Introduction

Thousands of Puerto Ricans have traveled over 1,838 miles to make Rochester, NY, their home. Since the migration movement in the 1890's, many Puerto Ricans have started organizations, businesses, and *barrios*. What many Americans consider neighborhoods; *barrios* are unique in that they are considered communities with deep roots in Puerto Rican culture. The information in this paper was primarily informed by two publications: *Rochester's Latino Community: Bilingual Edition* (Saenz , 2011) and *Building the Barrio: A story of Rochester's Puerto Rican Pioneers* (McCally, 2007).

Timeline

Latin-Americans have resided in Rochester for long over a century. Latinos and their residence in America can be traced back as far as the 1890's. In 1946, the first large numbers of Puerto Ricans arrived in Rochester as migrant workers on seasonal contracts to pick fruit (McCally, 2007). This led to what is known as the "Great Migration" of Puerto Ricans in Rochester (Saenz, 2011). During this time, Puerto Rico's first popularly elected Mayor made it a priority to reduce the island's population in order to increase islanders' incomes (McCally, 2007). This resulted in 20% of the island's population resettling in the mainland United States, and over 8,000 Puerto Ricans migrating to Rochester by 1970 (McCally, 2007).

While many migrant workers originally intended on returning to Puerto Rico after their seasonal contracts expired, many ended up making Rochester their permanent place of residence because of job opportunities. As a result of this change in plans, migrant workers would bring their wives, children, and extended families by sending them money to come to the mainland. When the seasonal contracts ended, Puerto Ricans moved from the agricultural business to

factory jobs. Some of the factories that employed Puerto Ricans included Ragu, French's Mustard, Gerber, and Hickey Freeman.

However, it was very difficult for Puerto Ricans to obtain employment in some factories, such as Kodak and Xerox, due to various requirements that they could not meet (e.g. fluency in English). One exception to this was a man named Domingo Delgado, who was a top executive at Kodak during the 1890's. Delgado was the first to break this trend within the Latino community, and is considered the first Puerto Rican "business man" within Rochester's Latino community.

During to the "Great Migration," many Puerto Ricans settled in the Northeast Quadrant of Rochester. Historically, the Northeast Quadrant was the area where most immigrants settled. As many Puerto Ricans' practice Catholic faith, the Northeast Quadrant neighborhood became popular due to the two large Catholic churches residing in the area. These two churches, St. Bridget's Church and Mount Carmel Church, were attended by many Puerto Ricans weekly. These churches delivered communal services in Spanish dialect, and provided a sense of community for the Latinos residing in the area. The churches created organizations like "*Los Caballeros de San Juan*" which provided young Puerto Rican men with resources such as workshops to assist them during work.

In 1968, the Rochester Catholic Diocese's Spanish Apostolate wanted to create an organization to help individuals in poverty including families and individuals with developmental disabilities. Because churches are religious organizations, they were unable to request funding from the state to support these individuals. As a response to this ineligibility, the Ibero-American Action League was founded. The Ibero-American Action League focused primarily on the development of Latino families in Rochester. One large event that is hosted by Ibero-American Action League includes the Puerto Rican festival. Other events and projects

include the Puerto Rican Arts and Culture Center, *Los Flamboyanes* which provided housing for those living in poverty, and the Ibero-American Credit Union formed in 1974.

Notwithstanding major obstacles such as discrimination, there were two major milestones that changed the outlook for many Latinos in Rochester. In 1969, the Midtown Plaza, which was the first urban indoor mall in the United States, opened its doors. However, there were many issues present involving physical altercations in the Latin-American community. In February of 1969, there were 17 Puerto Ricans arrested and reported by the Midtown Plaza. There were also reports of police officers beating the young civilians due to the assumption of loitering on the same day. This sparked a protest, led by Ibero, which resulted in a meeting with the Chief of Police to discuss the incidents.

This milestone was only the first to confront the discrimination occurring in the city of Rochester against Puerto Ricans. In that same year, the Rochester City School District made attempts to cut funding for bilingual schools. As a result, protesters conducted a sit-in at the Board of Education meeting. This would go on until the Rochester City School District would agree to keep funding for these schools. These protests taught younger generations new ways of overcoming such discrimination.

As the Latino community continued to grow, many events around Rochester were created to celebrate the culture. As aforementioned, one example of this is the Puerto Rican Festival. The first Puerto Rican Festival was held in 1970 at the Brown Square area. The festival was originally free to all and consisted of local musicians, carnival rides, and various activities intended for Latino families. This event rapidly became known as a supportive environment for the Puerto Rican community to join and celebrate. This soon changed when the committee for

the Puerto Rican festival shifted their focus to more renowned music artists, which forced businesses at the event as well as patrons to pay to gain entry.

In the late 1990's the Puerto Rican festival and parade location was moved to Manhattan Square Park, which was across from the Monroe County Jail. Many people in the community found this to be extremely disrespectful and decided to protest the parade through refusal of attendance. This changed in the 2000's when the parade committee moved the festival and parade to Frontier Field due to the decrease in attendees at the Puerto Rican Festival. Orlando Ortiz, an RIT alumni and committee member, decided to extend these festivities all year long. Some of these events include parades, Vino Con Sabor, Latino Film Festival, and Noche de Comedia. These events are held in order to celebrate Puerto Rican culture.

Since the Great Migration in the 1940s and 50s, Puerto Ricans have moved from the Northeast Quadrant to the surrounding communities of Greece and Irondequoit, which continues today. Some of this movement was due to increases in violence in Rochester during the 90s (Saenz, 2011).

It is expected that Rochester will be experience a new dynamic within the next year due to the anticipated "Great Migration." On September 20th, 2017, hurricane Maria stripped the entire island of food, gasoline, power, and many resources. Thousands of Puerto Ricans are expected to make a home in Rochester because of the lack of resources in Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans that find their way to Rochester will have resources available to them through organizations like Ibero- American Action League, which recently raised more than \$100,000 for the Puerto Rican people. Hurricane Maria may increase the already strong Puerto Rican presence in Rochester.

Conclusion

Puerto Rican culture has been imbedded in Rochester's history, mainly because of contributions Puerto Ricans have been brought to Rochester. For over a century, Puerto Ricans have been able to prosper and overcome challenges in Rochester. One of the main ways that this has been done is through keeping their culture alive. In the years to come, the Puerto Rican community will continue to impact and change Rochester's history. Future working papers will focus on different components of Puerto Rican culture and how can its history help revive the community.

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