

A LIGHT IN THE TWILIGHT. JUAN BAUTISTA CARRILLO GUERRA'S CONTRIBUTION TO PUBLIC EDUCATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY VENEZUELA

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Summary

The article examines the trajectory of Juan Bautista Carrillo Guerra, a key figure in Venezuelan education in the 19th century. In spite of the educational precariousness of the time, Carrillo Guerra promoted initiatives that improved access to public instruction. His contribution to the formation of schools and his commitment to education as a tool for social development are highlighted.

Keywords: Education, history of Venezuela, Juan Bautista Carrillo Guerra, public instruction, 19th century, academic formation.

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RECEIVED: 12-03-2024 / ACCEPTED: 15-05-2024 / PUBLISHED: 15-06-2024

How to cite: Olivar, J. A., (2024). A light in the twilight. Juan Bautista Carrillo Guerra's contribution to public education in nineteenth-century Venezuela. *Cuaderno Unimetano*, 2024-1, 33 - 46.

<https://doi.org/10.58479/cu.2024.143>



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Introito

At the beginning of the third decade of the 19th century, the territory comprising the State of Venezuela was made up of thirteen provinces, eighty-eight cantons and five hundred and thirty-six parishes. That spatial plane in which the nascent republic was beginning to live, was inhabited by an estimated population of 945,348 inhabitants, according to the data collected by Codazzi in his Summary of the geography of Venezuela published for the first time in 1841.

For our purposes, we will only take into consideration the detailed description formulated by the famous chorographer regarding the situation of public education. Codazzi points out:

The Indians, slaves, laborers and artisans, that is, four-fifths of the population, did not learn to read because primary schools were rare and could only be found in a few populous towns and cities (...) The primary schools that did exist were endowed by the town councils or by foundations (...). The government of Colombia

had already designated the property of the convents for the education of the youth and the government of Venezuela has made every effort to spread education among the mass of the population, and has already established eleven schools in Cumana, Valencia, Guanare, Barquisimeto, Tocuyo, Trujillo, Coro, Maracaibo, Guayana, Margarita, and Calabozo.¹

The colonial heritage had left two universities, one in Caracas and the other in Mérida. And the new Republic laid the foundations for an Academy of Mathematics in Caracas. The recently created General Directorate of Public Instruction (1838), under the direction of the wise José María Vargas, was dedicated, in the midst of the shortages, to watch over the progress of public education. However, there was little it could do and in fact it stated in its 1842 report "...that of the 539 parishes into which the territory is divided, only 152 have public schools"², in which 9523 students were enrolled between the ages of 5 and 14.³

This dramatic picture led the members of the General Directorate to an unflattering conclusion regarding the totality of the inhabitants of the republic: it was calculated that for every 100, only one person attended school⁴.

The aftermath of the war had left deep scars in almost all the young republic, in the particular case of the province of Trujillo, this is one of those that accompanied from its beginnings the cry of emancipation against the crown. Many patriots of the first hour, saw their goods sacrificed either to pay for the insurgent enterprise or because of the felony of the royalist kidnapping junta. Once the struggle for independence was over, Trujillo did not become the same as before, on the contrary, it was submerged in the most opprobrious of backwardness and its inhabitants were condemned to the ostracism of poverty.

The Carrillo Guerra family was one of the many that had fallen into decline in the province of Trujillo after the Independence, to the point of not being able to pay for their children's education. The eldest of the offspring, Juan Bautista, born on February 7, 1832, began working as a clerk in a grocery and merchandise importing establishment located in the city of Trujillo. Thus, that young boy was one of the 15,032 youngsters between the ages of 2 and 14 reported in the statistics collected by Codazzi in the province of Trujillo⁵, many of whom for different circumstances were not enrolled in any public or private school.

1 Agustín Codazzi, *Resumen de la geografía de Venezuela*, pp. 93-95.

2 "Exposición de la Dirección General de Instrucción Pública de 24 de diciembre de 1842," in *Actas de la Dirección General de Instrucción Pública. Years 1840 to 1843*, p. 408.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 407, 408.

4 *Idem.*

5 Agustín Codazzi, *Ob. Cit.*, p. 98.

Deprivation turned into incentive

The Carrillo Guerra family managed to get ahead, thanks to the efforts of Don Juan Bautista Carrillo Quevedo, a very intellectually cultivated man who gave private classes in Latin, Grammar and Philosophy. In 1820, he had had the privilege of being the secretary of General Antonio José de Sucre, and in that capacity he was responsible for transcribing the contents of the Armistice of Santa Ana and the Treaty of Regularization of the War. Then in 1831 he was appointed administrator of the charity hospital of the city of Trujillo and in 1846 he became a member of the respective municipality.

Even so, the young Juan Bautista Carrillo Guerra, continued helping his parents in maintenance of the home, learning the trade of merchant in the house of commerce of Don Pedro Pou and later under the direction of Mr. Bartolomé and Antonio Braschi.

From the latter he received the example of the exercise of philanthropy, given his inclination for the promotion of culture and the progress of the locality. Precisely, as proof of his good will, in 1854, Carrillo Guerra received several letters of introduction from Don Antonio Braschi in order to facilitate his insertion in the commercial network that made life in the port city of Maracaibo. So, at only twenty-two years of age, but with a strong added value of sobriety, discipline and responsibility, Juan Bautista Carrillo Guerra, alone, set out on the road to the great mecca of mercantile operations in western Venezuela.

His daring decision in a country of limited opportunities, such was Venezuela at that time, earned him, by dint of tenacity and , his first great success, returning to his home country not as a defeated, but as a well-received businessman prospect. Thus, a few months later, he founded in Trujillo the commercial firm of the same name, J. Carrillo Guerra, in one of the corners adjacent to the main square of the city.

According to his main biographer, Mario Briceño Perozo, Carrillo Guerra's business was on the rise, to the point of having branches in other localities of Trujillo. Already in 1862, he and his family had moved to the main house of the mercantile business, thus sealing a long parenthesis of material privations.⁶

From then on, one of the young merchant's concerns would be the need to improve his education and refine his manners. To this end, "... he dedicated the rest breaks left by his mercantile tasks to study and receive private lessons from the erudite Colombian scholar Mr. Felix Cifuentes. And during the early hours of the night he would punctually visit the illustrious colonel of engineers of Gran Colombia, Mr. Sebastián de Osse, a native of Cartagena, from whom he received oral teachings"(7).

That desire for self-improvement and his keen interest in knowledge made him become a true promoter of the virtues of republican civilization. He instilled in the nine children he fathered

6 Mario Briceño Perozo, Don Juan de Trujillo, p. 38.

7 Amílcar Fonseca, Trujillo Origins, p. 680.

with his , Doña María del Rosario Márquez, strict principles of conduct and took great care to guarantee them the best possible education.

“Educate, educate, educate.”

It can be affirmed that the greatest obsession in Carrillo Guerra's life was Education. It is no coincidence that one of the merits considered by the Senate of the Republic in 1991, in order to give him the honors of the National Pantheon, was precisely his gigantic work in the cultural, political, economic and social fields.⁸

He deplored seeing children and young people wandering the streets or doing adult work instead of going to school. In this regard, he noted the following:

Another not lesser inconvenience comes from the abandonment of , some of whom are so blind that they do not understand the advantages of school; so greedy that they do not want to lose even for a moment the material support of their children; so mean that they do not cut their bread to educate them; and the others put them in school, and do not hear from again, nor find out if they attend, nor ask for what they need and are content to know that they are enrolled, and most of them fester because they are corrected.⁹

In an effort to help correct the terrible evils derived from ignorance, Carrillo Guerra did not hesitate to with the problem of education, most of the time with his own resources. He had already demonstrated his philanthropic vocation on the occasion of the smallpox epidemic that struck the Trujillo region in 1854, when he presided over the province's Board of Health, and his efforts to save the lives of the affected families or to alleviate the grief of the bereaved were unstinting.

During the devastating long war from 1859 to 1863, little could be done in favor of progress in many parts of the burning national territory. Even though the Andes as a whole did not register any major war events, everything seemed to have been detained in the most astounding monotony, only interrupted by rumors and the arrival of families from the plains in search of refuge.

It was not until 1864 that some official and private initiatives began to take place in order to heal the wounds and the backwardness caused by the war. Among the latter was the arrival of the first printing press in the state of Trujillo. Carrillo Guerra was responsible for the acquisition and transfer of Gutenberg's famous invention. Following the example of the Precursor Francisco de Miranda, who undertook the enterprise of bringing the first printing press the first printing press to Venezuela, Carrillo Guerra was also a precursor of freedom of the press in his native Venezuela.

8 Vid: Official Gazette of the Republic of Venezuela, No. 34841, Caracas, Thursday, November 14, 1991; Official Gazette of the Republic of Venezuela, No. 35691, Caracas, Tuesday, April 11, 1995.

9 Juan Bautista Carrillo Guerra, "Informe de la Junta Superior de Instrucción Pública 1872", in Amílcar Figueroa, Ob. Cit., p. 684.

Thanks to that apparatus of civilization, the first letters from Trujillo saw the light of day in “types and periodicals”, twenty-two newspapers were printed in Don Juan’s printing house, first of which was a weekly newspaper supported by his own money.¹⁰

A notable local event, reached greater scope when the constitution of the Board of Primary and Superior Instruction of the state of Trujillo was announced, and among those called to integrate it was Carrillo Guerra. The task was not at all flattering; of the twelve schools reported in the report of the General Directorate of Public Instruction in 1842, only four were still standing.¹¹ The members of the Board tried to get down to work, but their will was overshadowed by the recurrent political instability and the limited budgetary resources.

How to provide resources, if parents, as the most interested in the welfare of their children, contributed nothing or very little to the care of primary education? It was up to the government to pay for the life of the schools and colleges, but the flow from the public treasury was derisory.

In view of the calamitous situation, Carrillo Guerra contributed what was within his reach. As a merchant of imported products from other latitudes, he not only supplied his store with utilitarian consumer goods, but also opened a small section that functioned as a sort of bookstore, where it was possible to buy and even better to consult at cost, “...the works of pedagogues of recognized authority, which served to guide teachers and students”⁽¹²⁾.

His printing press was available for the propagation of ideas and pedagogical doctrines in the new local newspapers and even encouraged the gathering of weekly gatherings to comment on classics and literary novelties, “...where the wise and high, varied and fruitful conversation made those places true gardens of Academos”⁽¹³⁾.

Thus, with modest results, the management of that original Board was carried out, but its true hour would come in 1870, when the famous Decree of Free and Compulsory Public Instruction was published. Its content of inflated liberal principles, tried to compensate for the meager functions of the former Boards of Primary and Higher Education, now called Superior Boards of Public Instruction.

Carrillo Guerra lends his name to give a new twist to the Board, he is accompanied by Rafael Enriquez, Melpúmene Isea, Máximo Briceño, Andrés María Iragorry and Francisco de Paula Martínez.

One of the provisions contained in the Decree of Instruction, with the purpose of achieving results in the shortest possible time, was to order the creation of “itinerant” schools in villages and hamlets, as well as adult schools that could be Sunday and night schools. “Where ten children can gather, the teacher must teach them (...) so that there is no Venezuelan who cannot read the Constitution of the Republic”, General Antonio Guzmán Blanco went so far as to

10 Ibid, p. 682.

11 Arturo Cardozo, Sobre el cauce de un pueblo. Un siglo de historia trujillana 1830-1930, p. 139.

12 Mario Briceño Perozo, Ob. Cit. p. 142.

13 Ibid, p. 135.

affirm.¹⁴ This effective measure generated, for the vainglory of the Guzman regime, figures that were not insignificant for its political purposes. “Less than twenty months after the Decree of 1870, the enrollment was 15,226 students in these schools. In 1873, the country had a high number of 325 primary schools.”¹⁵

The state of Trujillo did not escape the “regenerative” wave imbued from Caracas. The Board of Public Instruction, presided by Carrillo Guerra, obtained from the local authorities the issuance of a Decree on compulsory public instruction, in accordance with the national provision, but with a complementary feature of great value. It was the establishment of a tax regime destined exclusively to cover the expenses of public instruction in the entity, through the creation of a tax on the distillation and sale of aguardiente, another tax for the dispatch of livestock and a tax on salt introduced into the state.¹⁶

In this way, it became feasible to establish new primary education schools, amounting to 45, of which 35 were for boys and 10 for girls. And as if that were not enough, a special school was opened in the public jail of the city of Trujillo, for common prisoners and the guards of the precinct.

In addition to contributing to the improvement of the school premises, the members of Board were dedicated to tacitly regulate the activities of each of the components that made life in the schools. To this end, they proceeded to draft and publish in the “Trujillo printing press” an Internal Regulation for all schools, whose prescriptions later served as a model for other states of the republic.

Don Juan conceived the school not as a static center, strangling the child’s restlessness and demolishing his initiatives, but as a nucleus that generates experiences, a dynamic whole, inspiring and channeling the activities of the learner. In many ways, he was ahead of those who in the course of the present century [XX] have devised the active school, with new systems and revolutionary methods, through which the aim is to educate better and instruct more.¹⁷

The National Girls’ College

On November 17, 1883, within the framework of the commemoration of the centenary of the birth of the Liberator Simón Bolívar, the solemn beginning of activities of the Trujillo State School for Girls took place in the city of Trujillo. A year before, Carrillo Guerra had echoed the request of several families of the Trujillo society and particularly of Father Miguel Ignacio Urdaneta, who considered necessary the establishment of a school especially for the fair sex.

14 Miguel Ángel Mudarra, *Historia de la legislación escolar contemporánea en Venezuela*, p. 54.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

16 Felipe S. Colmener, *Economy and politics in Trujillo during the guzmancismo (1870-1877)*.

17 Mario Briceño Perozo, *Ob. Cit.*, pp. 78,79.

This initiative was supported by the excellent performance shown by the girls enrolled in the main schools of the state. In this regard, Carrillo Guerra was very meticulous when it came to preparing the reports and tables reflecting the partial and general results of the exams applied to the students, who received the appropriate incentive in the respective promotion and awarding of prizes for good performance.

It was the habit of the dour Trujillo native to attend and preside punctually over the examinations of first letters, the meetings with the preceptors, to supervise the hygiene of the school premises and the quality of the teaching texts. Under this criterion, he did not hesitate to endorse the favorable conditions to achieve the opening of a national school for girls. , he personally took charge of the initiative and went to Caracas to ask the permission of the Illustrious American, who finally granted the request and promulgated the Decree of creation on September 28, 1883.

In his inaugural speech, Carrillo Guerra highlighted the superb role of women in the formation of useful citizens for society:

The woman, gentlemen, as the cornerstone of the home, is the axis of the family and the support of society; and to educate her, instruct her and form her heart in the healthy maxims of morality and work, is to ensure the happiness of the former and to tend to the aggrandizement of the latter. Whenever and wherever the woman has been respected and respected and has occupied a place of honor in the sanctuary of the home, the man has been worthy, virtuous and honorable, as it is she who forms the heart of the children and inspires them, with the ideas of duty, the feeling of the great and the beautiful.¹⁸

From that moment on, Carrillo Guerra became the protector par excellence of this institution that would mark a fruitful work in the decades to come.

A long-lasting work without petulance

For almost forty years, Mr. Juan Bautista Carrillo Guerra, directly and indirectly occupied the presidency of the Board of Public Instruction of Trujillo State, later known as the “Junta de Instrucción Pública del Estado Trujillo”.

in 1905 Council of Public Instruction. Although there were times when his name did not appear on the official list, due to the political unrest that affected public business in the Andes during the last decade of the 19th century, it is no less certain that Carrillo Guerra continued to offer his support to initiatives related to education.

Unlike other fellow countrymen, Don Juan did not cultivate a greater ambition to exercise positions of political power; he always limited himself to serve ad honorem in the work of pro-

18 Amílcar Figueroa, Ob. Cit, p. 688.

moting public instruction. He did not seek gifts or rewards for it, and if in 1882 and 1908, he received decorations awarded by the federal government for his services, he did so with the humility of one who knows he has fulfilled a civic duty.

Only on three occasions, the vicissitudes of the Andean political dynamics forced him to leave his private activity. First as a deputy to the Constituent Assembly of the Great State of the Andes in 1881, then as a Senator to Congress in 1898 and a year later as provisional President of the State of Trujillo.

He could do little in those matters so far from his circumspect character. During his brief tenure as Senator, he only succeeded in getting the Federal Executive to restore the First Category to the National Male College of Trujillo, thus being assimilated in hierarchy to the existing universities of the time, allowing the youth of Trujillo to pursue higher studies without the need to move to Merida or Caracas.

However, he saw with regret how the barbarism of the rulers of the day made education the necessary victim of their high-flown outbursts. In 1900, by decree, the national colleges were stripped of the faculty to train bachelors in Philosophy and Political Sciences, university graduates in Political Sciences, pedagogues or teachers, alleging lack of funds to cover their expenses, among them the National College of Boys of Trujillo.

On the other hand, the expectations raised around his accession to the throne of Trujillo's presidents in 1899 were dashed when he was deposed in a matter of months by one of the many revolutions that devastated nineteenth-century Venezuela like a biblical plague. As was the case at the national level, the caudillaje and other chieftains raised their angry monarchs to assert the force of their machetes and stone poplars. The target could be the Federal Capitol in Caracas or the local government house, but the effects were analogous: the failure of an authentic republican institutionality.¹⁹

Accustomed as he was to knowing the luster of a job well done and the acridness of disaster, Carrillo Guerra never faltered in his philanthropic enterprise. And although he was never able to make one of his aspirations to see the doors of an Agricultural School open in his entity come true, his entrepreneurial spirit led him to encourage the completion of important works such as the Great Railway of La Ceiba, the Ateneo de Trujillo, the beautification of the main Church of Trujillo, the installation of the first public clock, the national telegraph office, the road from Motatán to Trujillo, the Lázaros hospital, the public lighting of the square Bolívar de Trujillo and other initiatives.

19 Domingo Irwin and Ingrid Micett, *Caudillos, militares y poder. A History of Praetorianism in Venezuela*, p. 105.

His last memory

At the of 77, Carrillo Guerra took up his pen to write the report of the Council of Public Instruction of the state of Trujillo for the year 1909, in which he advocates:

...for the reinstatement of the faculty to confer the degree of Bachelor in Philosophy to the Colegio Nacional de Varones; for the reestablishment of the music class in the Colegio Federal de Niñas; for the annual diplomas and prizes, of official origin and the distribution of them in a public and solemn act, to promote the encouragement of the students; for the extinction of the empleomania with the foundation of schools of arts and trades; for the creation of Normal Schools to train preceptors; for the retirement of teachers in primary, secondary and higher education in the state of Trujillo; for the foundation of a School of Commerce in the state; for the increase of the budget of all the National Schools; for the most liberal subsidy for the Vargas School of Valera, and a monthly endowment for the private schools San Luis, of Escuque, and Santo Tomás de Aquino, of Valera.²⁰

This would be his last public writing, and in his words he fully reveals the balance of a vast work that, without a hint of boastfulness, he deemed it appropriate to outline. He states bluntly:

We have not written the above lines out of vanity, but rather out of a desire to make the governing classes aware of the indispensable need to enlighten the people so that they may exercise all their rights more wisely and discover, like the most civilized human groups on the planet, the great secret of their future prosperity.⁽²¹⁾

Thus the Patron of Trujillo's letters, as he was called by Don Aristides Rojas, died on February 17, 1911, in the same city where he was born, surrounded by his closest relatives. During his funeral, the most important members of the living forces of the entity were present to pay their last farewell to his mortal remains, the representatives of the different guilds, cultural associations and above all, the teachers and students of the schools and colleges that in life he contributed to raise.

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20 Amílcar Figueroa, Ob. Cit., pp. 694,695.

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