



THE
MASSACHUSETTS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Force of Food: Life on the Atkins Family Sugar Plantation in Cienfuegos, Cuba, 1884-1900

Author(s): Rebekah E. Pite

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Massachusetts Historical Review*, Vol. 5 (2003), pp. 58-93

Published by: [Massachusetts Historical Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25081180>

Accessed: 01/10/2012 15:02

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Massachusetts Historical Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Massachusetts Historical Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



Edwin F. Atkins at Soledad Plantation.

Atkins family photographs, Massachusetts Historical Society. Photo #37.3.

All photographs in this essay are from the Atkins family photographs unless otherwise noted. Other images from this collection also appear on the Society's website at www.masshist.org/atkins/.

The Force of Food

Life on the Atkins Family Sugar Plantation in Cienfuegos, Cuba, 1884–1900

REBEKAH E. PITE



FEW PEOPLE THINK of nineteenth-century Boston as a crucial hub of the sugar trade. And yet, in his 1925 narration of the growth of the Boston-based sugar interest E. Atkins & Co., Benjamin Allen asserts that Boston became a “great sugar market” as a result of “the enterprise of the few Boston merchants of that day who were in the trade.”¹ Among those merchants, the Atkins family stands out both for its predominance in the U.S.-Cuban sugar market and for the rich documentary record that it has left behind. From 1843 onwards, Elisha Atkins (1813–1888) established his firm E. Atkins & Co. as a key sugar trader, dispatching his sugar vessels from Boston harbor to Cuban ports throughout the nineteenth century.² In 1866 he incorporated his sixteen-year-old son, Edwin F. Atkins (1850–1926), into the family enterprise, taking him to Cuba to learn about the sugar business first hand. Edwin Atkins proved to be a capable and enthusiastic study. He became a junior partner within two years and a full partner within eight years, and he took responsibility for contact with Cuban merchants and creditors. As a result, it was Edwin Atkins who led E. Atkins & Co. from commerce into sugar production in 1884 when he acquired through foreclosure the Soledad Plantation near the port city of Cienfuegos on the southern coast of Cuba.³

Although Atkins was not among the most powerful plantation owners on the island when he assumed control over Soledad, which figured as a midsized

REBEKAH E. PITE is a doctoral candidate in the history and women's studies program at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on Latin American, especially Argentine, food history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

plantation in Cuba at the time, the first two decades of his tenure bear close study.⁴ Atkins led the enterprise through the tumultuous period that witnessed slave emancipation (1886), a war for independence from Spanish colonial rule (1895–1898), and U.S. occupation (1899–1902). His management choices made him an increasingly important owner and a key figure in the U.S.-Cuban sugar market and in U.S.-Cuban political relations. An examination of Soledad from 1884 to 1900 illuminates the daily practices of U.S.-Cuban relations on a U.S.-owned plantation in Cuba. Edwin Atkins became, in a sense, an international businessman, managing the estate sometimes in Cuba and sometimes from his home in Boston. His route from Massachusetts to Cienfuegos, as well as the many letters that carried news from one to the other, attests to the transnational dynamics of this family business born and nurtured in Massachusetts but dependent on slave and free labor in Cuba.

The Atkins family business figured in a larger and long-standing interest in Cuba on the part of New Englanders. Streams of visitors from the northeastern United States went to Cuba in search of profits, warm weather, and exotic places and people. One such traveler, civic leader and businessman Charles Francis Adams, Jr., visited Soledad in January and February of 1890. His letters home to his wife, Mary Ogden Adams, and his brother John Quincy Adams II detail his quest for exoticism and provide careful reconstructions of his encounters with the island and its residents. In addition to revealing what historian Rebecca J. Scott has dubbed Adams's "fascination and his stark racialism" towards the people of Cuba, these letters also capture the changing landscape of postemancipation labor relations.⁵ Writing in 1890, Adams asserted that the end of slavery "left the African free to move off of the land, and made open the way for the white man, the superior race, to move on it."⁶ In other words, Adams believed that elite white men's dominance in Cuba would proceed naturally and directly from the emancipation of slaves.

The rich documentary records of events on the Soledad plantation during the late nineteenth century suggest that this dominance was neither natural nor a foregone conclusion for those working on or around this estate. Because Edwin Atkins maintained a system of careful accounting, precise record keeping, and close supervision, the Massachusetts Historical Society's collection of the Atkins papers provides an opportunity to test the accuracy of Adams's prediction. Taken together, these documents both reveal the persistence of racial anxieties among Soledad owners and administrators and depict the daily, sometimes contentious, negotiations of rights among different groups on this plantation during the transition from bound labor to wage labor and from Spanish rule to U.S. occupation.⁷

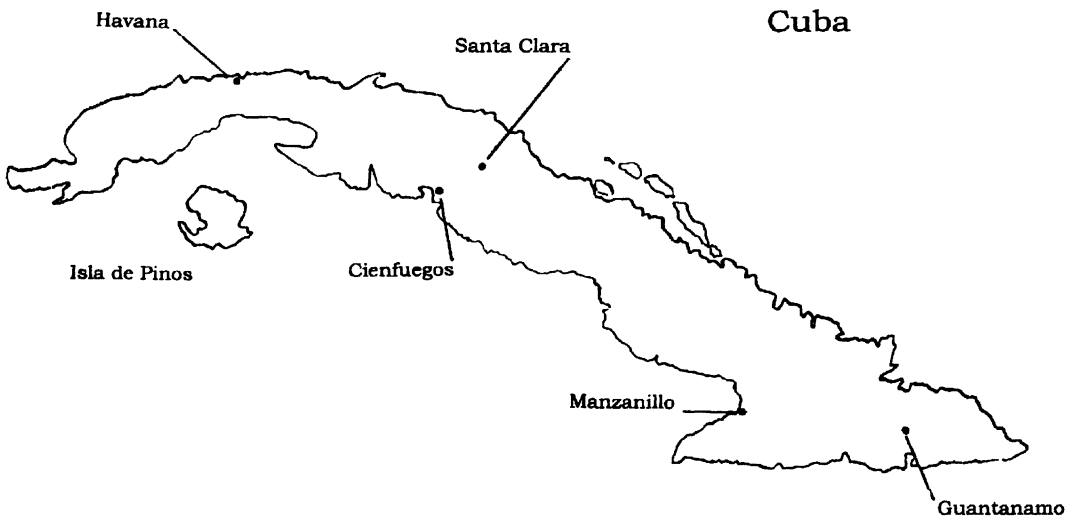
The Force of Food

The tug-of-war between managers and laborers on the plantation played out in an array of phenomena, all of which deserve careful analysis. None of these, however, could be so fundamental as food, at once an element of daily survival and a purveyor of complex social meanings. Disputes over food on Soledad reflected the political, social, and economic changes that drastically affected the amount of food on the plantation and in the country as a whole during the late nineteenth century. Edwin Atkins made influential, though often ethically troubling, decisions about how to use the plantation's food resources in order to manage Soledad's labor supply and financial status and to protect his plantation from Cuban and Spanish forces during the war. In addition, at key moments, Atkins recognized and capitalized on the capacity of food to deepen bonds with both potential allies and enemies. In fact, his strategic provisioning did much to help Soledad survive the nineteenth century, while many other plantations failed.⁸ The story of that survival demonstrates how those who control the food supply wield significant social and political power.



*View of Soledad, Cuba.
Photographer unknown. Undated. Photo #37.192.*

Key incidents in food management on Soledad appear in three distinct guises during the three major historical periods that intersect with Atkins's early ownership of Soledad. During the emancipation and postemancipation process from 1884 to 1894, plantation management and former slaves on Soledad struggled over the extent and form of former slaves' rights and privileges. As former slaves gained their legal freedom, they asserted what they understood to be their *rights* to food and livestock as one way of claiming and marking their social freedom in their everyday lives. Simultaneously, the plantation owner and administrators sought to sustain certain social hierarchies and save money by revoking what they understood to be *privileges* they had granted slaves to food and livestock ownership and by giving this group they termed "negroes" smaller quantities and different types of food from other laborers.⁹ During the War of Independence from 1895 to 1898, the plantation management at Soledad used the provisioning of food as a tool to protect itself by appeasing both Cuban and Spanish armed forces. At the same time, the Spanish armed forces destroyed the Cuban food supply in an attempt to starve out the Cuban rebellion. In 1899 and 1900, the island and the plantation endured the lingering effects of that conflict as well as the immediate impact of U.S. occupation. With its occupation, the U.S. took control over food sources and distribution, thereby cementing its claims to political control over Cubans.



Emancipation and Postemancipation (1884–1894)

When Edwin Atkins first visited his future plantation in 1882, he described being greeted with gifts of food by the appreciative “negro” community, which made up approximately 40 percent of the laboring population on Soledad.¹⁰ Atkins wrote home, “After breakfast all the Negroes of the estate came to welcome me with presents of chickens, eggs, etc. I had to . . . give them a small present.”¹¹ According to Atkins, this exchange was repeated throughout the 1880s. He described arriving with his wife, Katharine Atkins, in January 1885. “We, the owners, sat upon a kind of throne . . . [and] the negroes brought us little presents of chickens, eggs, bananas, and so on.”¹² In his rendering of these vignettes Atkins clearly understood that food represented goodwill between the plantation owner and the slaves and former slaves on his plantation. Atkins’s depictions also underline the key point of ownership—his and the laborers. Specifically, his remarks indicate the continuing existence of *conucos*, or small slave provision plots, on Soledad during the transition away from slavery in the 1880s. The ability of slaves and former slaves to maintain *conucos* gave them greater independence and a potential for economic gain; they could both feed themselves and sell extra goods for freedom or for profit.¹³

In contrast to Atkins’s exchange with the “negroes,” other members of the plantation community chose to acknowledge his acquisition of Soledad by damaging food crops and supplies prior to his arrival. While workers of African descent formed the largest group, the second largest bloc of plantation laborers hailed from Spain (32 percent). White Cubans (18 percent) and



Katharine and Edwin F. Atkins. U.S. passport photographs, July 1917. Photo #37.1–2.

Chinese immigrants (10 percent) rounded out the total.¹⁴ Some of these workers, most likely a group of Spaniards, destroyed food resources at Soledad to express their dissatisfaction with the change in ownership.¹⁵ Through these acts, they decreased the plantation's self-sufficiency and increased the need to purchase food supplies from outside. When fellow American J. S. Murray (1834–1907), a long-time acquaintance of Atkins and former supervising engineer for a Cuban railway, took charge as general manager at Soledad in May 1884, he wrote to Atkins that the laborers had abandoned the vegetable garden after news of the transfer of ownership became public.¹⁶ Murray lamented, "There is nothing but plantains, no sweet potatoes, no yuca and no vegetables of any kind."¹⁷ Murray also reported that previous overseer Don Pedro García, known for his audacity, had deliberately depleted food supplies after he learned of the change in ownership. "For a number of days," Murray wrote, "he maintained all the workmen on mutton and fowl of all kinds—of over 20 doz. there only remains about 2 doz.—he also furnished them—nearly finishing in a very few days—a quater pipe of good table wine."¹⁸ Neither Murray nor the former Soledad administrators considered large quantities of mutton, fowl, and wine appropriate rations for laborers. As one might expect, the owner and managers reserved the best, most expensive provisions for their own tables.

When Atkins first assumed full ownership of Soledad in May 1884, he initiated his management from Boston, communicating his desires by letter to Murray. The two men concentrated on the plantation's economic viability and most often discussed feeding the plantation community in terms of economizing. Due to the estate's meager food supplies in 1884, their first goal was to reestablish Soledad's productivity to reduce food-related expenses and make the estate more self-sufficient. In June, Atkins encouraged Murray to start "small plantings" of corn, sweet potatoes, yuca, and plantains. Atkins advised him to focus on this and reiterated the economic benefits of growing food on the estate. He instructed Murray to "make liberal plantings of vegetables," assuring him that "if properly taken care of they will save many dollars expense next winter." By January of 1885, plantation administrator P. M. Beal proudly reported that the "vegetable farm" at Soledad was equal to Belmont Gardens (Atkins's property in Massachusetts) and would soon become a "valuable auxiliary" to the estate.¹⁹

This success brought with it certain ramifications for estate life. Murray placed a great deal of importance on limiting the laborers' access to the vegetable garden and other food resources by situating them on remote areas of the plantation. Since he perceived the gardens as part of his employer's prop-

erty, he apparently felt the need to protect that commodity from the rest of the population at Soledad. He advised Atkins that plantation dwellers, specifically the “negroes” and “laborers,” would steal vegetables if they were planted too close to the *batey* (the central plaza near the mill and the quarters of slaves and other laborers).²⁰ Consequently, Murray located the vegetable gardens and other food resources on outlying areas of the estate to limit any access the “negroes” or “laborers” might have.

Murray’s semantic distinction between “negroes” and “laborers” illuminates the fact that Murray understood and treated the “negro” community at Soledad as a separate group during the transition from slavery. Like Adams, both Murray and Atkins believed that former Cuban slaves should retain their position at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy despite their newly won legal status. Unlike Adams, they did not want former slaves to move off the land but rather to continue to work it and thereby supply them with a cheap and efficient labor source. Further, as plantation owner and manager, Atkins and Murray were in a position of power that enabled them to attempt to sustain former slaves’ low status on Soledad.

Murray and Atkins strove to maintain this inequity during the 1880s, an especially tumultuous time in Cuba, characterized by economic woes, unemployment, rising food prices, and fundamental legal changes. In the wake of the Ten Years’ War (1868–1878), the future of many plantations seemed uncertain and the institution of slavery was “doomed,” as historian Louis A. Pérez has argued. Rebecca J. Scott has described 1880 as a “pivot point” in

*Edwin and Katharine
Atkins on the grounds
of the Soledad estate.
Photographer
unknown. Undated.
Photo #37.4.*



the process of emancipation because in this year the Spanish government eliminated the juridical category of slave and replaced it with a law establishing the *patronato*.²¹ This legal construct bound former slaves to work for their former owners as “apprentices” (*patrocinados*) for a stipend until they bought their way out of this “apprenticeship” or otherwise won their freedom.

With the establishment of the *patronato*, the Cuban government promised slaves their eventual freedom. In the face of these legal changes, the *patrocinados* and the plantation management bargained over the *patrocinados*’ socioeconomic status. On Soledad these struggles pertained to their ability to own livestock and to receive rations equal to those of other laborers on the estate. From 1884, when Atkins bought the plantation, until 1886, when the Spanish government formally abolished slavery in Cuba, the plantation administrators whittled away at the *patrocinados*’ capacity to raise and sell livestock. Although slaves in Cuba had, by custom, the opportunity to earn money this way, Soledad administrators revoked what they understood to be an outdated *privilege*. They attacked this internal “slave” economy with a vehemence that illuminates the importance it played on both a practical and symbolic level during the transition from bound to unbound labor.²²

By restricting access to commerce, plantation owners restricted access to full legal freedom.²³ *Patrocinados* could sell their livestock, usually pigs, to buy their way out of slavery. This practice cost the plantation money because free laborers were more expensive than *patrocinados*. In 1884, six *patrocinados* at Soledad purchased their freedom. Murray fully understood how this happened: “The cause of so many being able to buy their freedom is the practice here of permitting the negros to raise or breed hogs. This year they have sold about \$800.00 worth.” Furthermore, Murray suspected that the practice flourished at Soledad’s expense. He implied that the *patrocinados* had been using the food it provided them not for their own sustenance but to fatten their hogs for market. He commented to Atkins that, when he reduced the rations the *patrocinados* received, “of course they said at first that I wanted to starve them, but soon found out they had as much as they could eat but nothing to feed the pigs with.”²⁴

Not satisfied with merely decreasing the amount of food available for the hogs, Murray demanded in May 1885 that the “negroes” sell their hogs. He reported to Atkins, “I have given orders to negros to sell all their hogs, prohibiting in future the raising of hogs, in recompense I offered those that were worthy of it 50 cents increase of salary per month—patrocinados alone—this will stop a greate deal of stealing.” Murray wrote that the immediate reaction of the “negroes” was a work stoppage on Sunday; however by Sunday

evening, Murray gloated, they all “came to ask pardon.”²⁵ Atkins apparently supported Murray’s restriction of what the *patrocinados* had clearly understood to be their right to own hogs. Atkins assured Murray, “You are proceeding perfectly right with the . . . hog question. . . . I hope to be rid of the annoyance before the next crop.”²⁶

Nonetheless, the “negroes” continued to challenge Murray’s ability to take their hogs and refused to accept the deal offered to them. In August 1885, they requested that he pay them at a rate of \$3.50 per month in exchange for forcing them to sell their hogs. Murray responded with an illegal use of force, locking some of the *patrocinados* into the stocks. Apparently losing his authority with the *patrocinados*, Murray sought to reassert his control through force, as he must have felt threatened by the former slaves’ assertion of what they understood to be their economic rights. Murray even recommended to Atkins that it might be easier to control this group by giving the remaining fifty-five *patrocinados* their liberty. Forty *patrocinados* had already bought their liberty by May 1885, and Murray believed more would do so as soon as the hogs were all sold. Atkins, however, favored economics over both Murray’s longing for “control” and the remaining *patrocinados*’ desires for freedom. “Regarding the negroes I shall be glad when they are all free,” he responded, “but we do not want to lose the bal[ance] of Patrocinado a/c [account] as it stands in your ledger. . . . I much prefer to finish entirely with the old system as soon as we can safely do so without loss.”²⁷ Thus, Atkins prioritized the profitability of the plantation and sought to maintain the *patronato* on Soledad as long as possible.

During the next couple of years, the decision to take away the “negroes” hogs had important ramifications on the plantation. To Atkins’s benefit, during the rest of 1885 and 1886, it did decrease *patrocinados*’ access to the revenue that could buy their freedom. At the same time, however, Murray noticed that the absence of hogs wasted resources on the estate. By the fall of 1886, he remarked, with “things that we now throw away we could fatten a number of hogs for lard, the meat could be eaten while fresh and some of it could be made into what is called here *tasajo* [jerked meat].” Of course, Murray did not recommend giving the hogs back to the “negro” population; he instead proposed raising them at the distant house of the mayoral of the *potrero* (enclosed livestock farm).²⁸ He thus transferred the ownership of the hogs from the former slaves to the plantation owner and put these animals, like the vegetable gardens, at a distance from all laborers.

During the transition period of the *patronato*, administrators both rescinded pre-emancipation customs, such as slaves’ rights to own hogs, and

denied them other food-related privileges, such as the ability to eat with their fellow laborers. In 1885, Atkins described his conception for the Soledad eating house: "My idea is to have one room where you can set a couple of tables for the engineers, sugar boilers, guards, weighers, watchmen say 15–20 men, one table for Americans, the other Spaniards and give these men a good clean out fit and head of wine, the others can be fed at a long pine table in another apartment."²⁹ In addition to seating and feeding people by trade and nationality, Atkins specified that the Americans and the Spaniards should enjoy greater benefits in the eating house than the other laborers, reinforcing their position at the top of the labor social strata. By failing even to mention the "negro" population, he underscored their position at the bottom of this hierarchy.

Even after emancipation, Atkins and the plantation administrators maintained social norms and hierarchies by excluding "negroes" from the eating house and thus requiring them to cook their own rations. This was a practice that also likely saved the plantation money. Nonetheless, in September 1886, the former slaves claimed their right to join fellow laborers in the eating house, challenging the distinct boundaries Soledad's owner and administrators had set on their daily lives. While Murray did not grant them access to the eating house, he did increase their rations, although not to a level of parity. One week later, the former slaves, still unsatisfied, repeated their request. Murray again refused. He wrote to Atkins that "The negroes have been exacting the same rations as the eating house and a number have gone off as I would not accede to their demands."³⁰ With the abolition of slavery in Cuba, former slaves could choose to leave the plantations on which they worked, and in this case the choice they made establishes that these individuals saw themselves as free laborers, equal to their fellow free laborers on the plantation, and thus deserving an equal access to food and the respect represented by the eating house.

The former slaves employed a gendered rationale to justify further their claims to join the eating house. Murray explained to Atkins in 1886, "Some of the negroes give as an excuse that they have no body to cook for them as I have sent off a number of negro women that would not work nor pay rent for their rooms."³¹ Even as Murray brushed aside this problem, his comment alluded to the position of women on Soledad. During the period of emancipation, plantation administrators had sent off and continued to send off many of the "negro" women who were formerly enslaved on the estate. The male "negroes'" argument—that they did not have anyone to cook for them—indicates that the female slaves had previously been responsible for cooking

their rations. Murray clearly did not regard these women's cooking for their male counterparts as estate-supported work that should continue after emancipation.

Further, the general silence about women in the daily communication between Atkins and the plantation administrators suggests their lack of respect for women as contributors to the prosperity of the plantation after emancipation. The few mentions of women after 1886 reiterate the owner and administrators' shared desire to remove women from the estate. In 1887, plantation administrator W. G. Beal noted the presence of a large female population that was "supported directly and indirectly both from the dwelling house and eating house." He ordered a raid to scare them off, confident that both Murray and Atkins would support his decision. He noted his disappointment that the last of these women would not be able to leave until the river went down.³² As in this case, administrators at Soledad consistently sought to cut off food and lodging from people who did not work directly for the estate.

This commitment to economizing also manifested itself in the copious amounts of attention that Murray and Atkins dedicated to minimizing food expenses and maximizing profits. From the outset, they focused on making the plantation as self-sufficient as possible. In 1885, both Atkins and Murray expressed their desire to reduce the cost of feeding "hands" during the next season by producing more on the farm and *potrero* in proportion to expenses each year.³³ In 1886, however, feeding costs on the plantation actually increased; Murray blamed the laborers, the *mayordomo*, and the market. He provided Atkins with four explanations for the increase in cost: the men's requests for more lard in their food (to which he acceded), the carelessness of the *mayordomo* with rations, the high price of groceries, and the capacity of people to eat when they had not worked. Murray's purely economic solution to this problem was to hire a new *mayordomo*, stop those people from eating who did not work (such as the aforementioned women), and decrease the ration of bread.³⁴

Atkins and his administrators economized most when it came to the rations they provided the former slaves. On the plantation, the effects of the accepted social stratification were immediate and fundamental—and they played out in the very sustenance that former slaves had to live on every day. Moreover, this effect arose from the considered and deliberate concerns of individuals who wholly accepted the meaning of this hierarchy. For example, all laborers received bread, except for the former slaves. In 1886, however, the former slaves demanded bread with their rations. On relaying this request

to Atkins, Murray even seemed a bit sympathetic: "They say what is true that they get less than other laborers and cook it themselves." Still, this inequity did not concern Atkins as much as economics. He responded, "I object to giving the negroes bread until we get a further reduction in the cost of flour duties" and recommended that Murray consider serving them corn bread.³⁵ In this decision, Atkins reiterated his view of the "negroes" as social inferiors. Unlike other laborers on the estate, "negroes," who made up the largest bloc of the workforce, would receive neither wheat bread nor the status and privilege associated with it. This distinction made the former slaves' lived experience—what they were given to eat every day—reflective of their low socioeconomic standing on the plantation.

The cost of feeding Soledad's workers continued to worry Murray in 1887 and 1888. While Murray managed to decrease feeding costs for the month of September, he noted in October that many people were complaining about the food and that some had left, among them carpenters and masons. Atkins responded that while he wanted Murray to spend less on food he did not want him to reduce the quantity of food and risk losing skilled workers to insufficient rations. Throughout 1888, Murray continued to compare Soledad's feeding costs to those of other estates to make sure he was not overspending. By 1889, however, in the wake of legal emancipation, Soledad administrators apparently had realized the benefits of feeding the plantation laborers well. Murray asserted that Soledad successfully attracted laborers because "we give them better food than in other places." He avowed that "good workmen" valued this amenity over an increase in wages.³⁶

Perhaps to this end, in 1893 J. S. Murray requested American provisions for himself and for the laborers who resided in the dwelling house at Soledad. His order included evaporated apples, assorted soups, canned beef, canned sweet corn, canned Boston beans, and canned Boston bread.³⁷ It also reflected a larger trend: between 1889 and 1893 the U.S. doubled the value of its exports to Cuba with notable increases in provisions. During this period many Cubans, especially those in cities, began eating the same canned meats (Libby) and drinking the same milk (Borden) as North Americans.³⁸ Murray's recommendation that the dwelling house also receive the American supplies reveals that some employees on Soledad, like urban Cubans, had the opportunity to incorporate American canned and boxed products into their diet by 1893.³⁹

Food played a different role in the life of the man who owned it. With ownership, of course, came the choicest provisions in great quantities. The Atkinses consistently provided more expensive and varied food for their own

The Force of Food

Please send by the next
sailing vessel the following:

- 25 lbs. Evaporated apples
- 2 Cans Assorted sorps
- 1 do. Tomato do.
- 4 do. canned Chicago family luf.
- 4 do. do. Sweet corn
- 2 do. do. Boston brand
- 4 do. do. Brown bread
- 4 Pkgs. Honey fine and coarse.

Soledad Nov. 5/93.

J. S. Murray

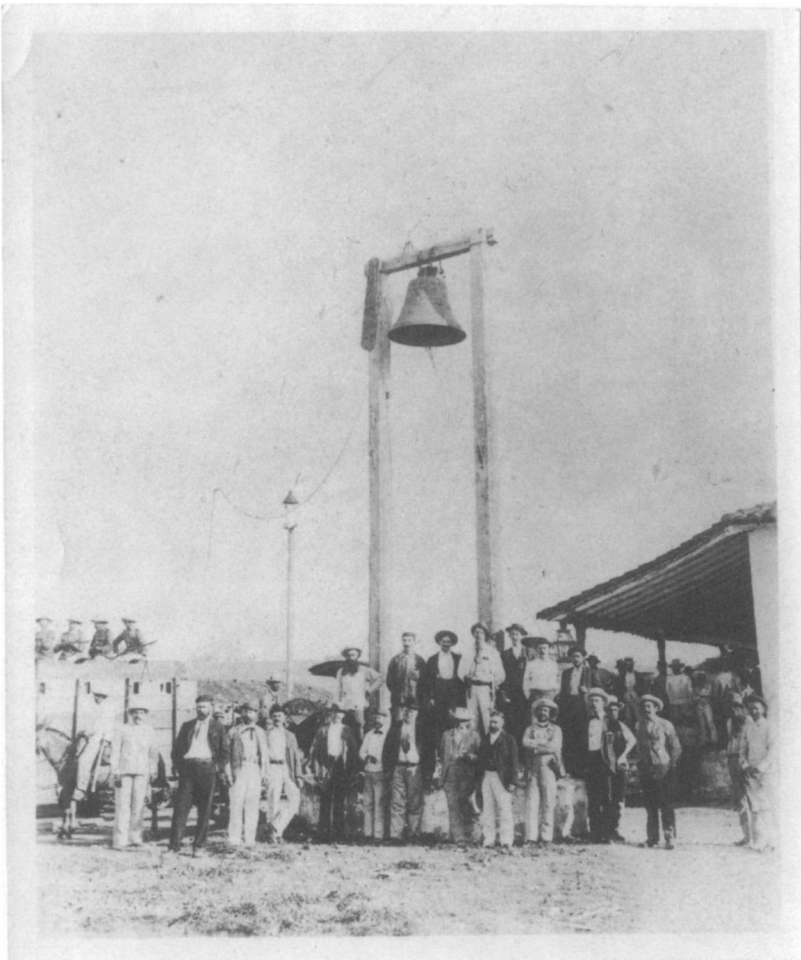
This is a private order but
suggests some of the same things to
send for sailing home.

J. S. M.

J. S. Murray

Letter from Murray to Atkins (in Boston) ordering fruit and food for Soledad.
J. S. Murray to Edwin F. Atkins, November 5, 1893, Atkins family papers,
Massachusetts Historical Society.

table in Cuba than they did for their workmen. Katharine Atkins penned the most thorough depiction of her family's fare and its preparation. She wrote, "The greatest inconvenience was the lack of ice. Meat had to be eaten the same day it was killed." But, she added, they had enough food "such as it was" and plenty of help. The men butchered the cattle for consumption, and a "negro woman" ground cornmeal for porridge. They also had a cook, although Katharine noted that the first "succession of cooks" did not live up to her standards because they objected to the "cleaning-up process."⁴⁰ Based on the fact that Edwin Atkins and his administrators simultaneously denied the productivity and necessity of women's work on the plantation as a whole, it is interesting to note that the Atkins family itself relied on female labor to prepare food for their own consumption. In addition to feeding the family unit, the Atkins's family cooks also helped them to entertain visitors.



Under the old slave bell at Soledad. Note government soldiers on train car at lower left. Photographer unknown. C. 1895. Photo #37.216.

The Force of Food

By the late 1880s, Edwin Atkins was living more comfortably than a few years prior and was better able to host guests. While residing at Soledad, he strengthened alliances and established friendships over food and drink. In November 1889, a large party that visited Soledad enjoyed a meal served on a table covered with the “choicest” roses. In 1893, a group of the most “distinguished visitors” came for breakfast, including Señor Dupuy de Lome, soon-to-be Spanish minister in Washington. “My acquaintance with Dupuy de Lome, dating from that breakfast party, developed into a warm friendship,” Atkins later recalled, “and during the insurrection I was indebted to him for many favors and much assistance during his stay at Washington.”⁴¹

Atkins proudly remarked in his memoir that he saw the years from 1884 to 1894 as “great progress for Soledad.” He went on to quantify the accomplishments of that decade: “The estate had grown considerably and now Soledad and its dependencies comprised some 12,000 acres. . . . In the crop season some twelve hundred employees lived on the estate.” There were approximately 750 head of working cattle and around 1,000 to 1,200 head of stock in the *potreros*. Atkins estimated the nominal book value of the estate at over \$800,000.⁴² While 1894 provided a moment for reflection on progress, however, Atkins, and many other people living in Cuba, found the following four years to be another matter entirely.

War of Independence (1895–1898)

In February 1895 war broke out in the eastern province of Oriente. Cuban rebels under the leadership of José Martí and Máximo Gómez sought to overthrow Spanish rule of the island to attain Cuban independence. In addition to fighting for a free Cuba, the insurgency—whose ranks were filled with slaves, former slaves, and other poor Cubans, along with their middle-class counterparts—espoused a vision of racial equality, land redistribution, and better work opportunities.⁴³ Edwin Atkins learned of the possible “trouble” in early February when Colonel Celada of the Spanish Civil Guard dined at Soledad. During dinner, Colonel Celada called aside J. N. S. Williams, Soledad’s new plantation manager, and told him that the government had information about a planned uprising in various locations in Cuba.⁴⁴ Over the next couple of months, after establishing a strong presence in the east, the insurgent forces began to spread westward toward Soledad.⁴⁵ Rumors of war reached Santa Clara by March 1895, but the Spanish forces had so far managed to suppress the rebellion across this province. By late July, however, a group rec-

ognizable as a local rebel force had begun to form around Cienfuegos.⁴⁶ That same month rebel leaders called for a cessation of all economic activity and warned that the cane fields of violators would be torched, thus threatening the planter class with long-term devastation.⁴⁷

Some former plantation workers took up the insurgent cause. For example, Claudio Sarría, a former slave who had grown up on Soledad, became a leader in the local insurgency. In December 1895, Williams reported that Sarría “and his gang” had done some damage to the estate. Williams passed along the caretaker’s report that a party of insurgents burned the *almacén* (warehouse) at Factoría and the sugar wharf. The caretaker explained that they used his lantern oil to set the storehouse on fire and stole his clothes and food.⁴⁸

This kind of direct assault occurred only rarely at Soledad. The more frequent rebel “incursions” consisted of small parties of insurgents who entered the estate to demand supplies or information. Given Soledad’s vulnerability, food became a primary mode of protection. The management at Soledad mostly succeeded at turning these situations to its advantage; they typically met groups of insurgents with friendliness, usually by supplying food at the fighters’ request. On January 17, 1896, for example, P. M. Beal reported to Atkins that approximately twenty men under a local insurgent nicknamed “the Mexican” came to Soledad after sweet potatoes and that they behaved “very well indeed.” Four days later, Beal wrote that “the Mexican” returned, lying in ambush near the Soledad *batey* with a force of about fifty men and demanding that Beal kill four oxen and make breakfast for the force. According to Beal, however, “the Mexican” was so drunk that he had forgotten that he and his men had already breakfasted.⁴⁹

In return for the food provided, the administrators hoped to protect the property from the insurgents’ torch or other tactics of war, and several documented instances attest to their success. An insurgent named Anastasio Ramírez García recalled receiving vegetables that “were given to us as a present by Captain Beal and his overseer. . . . [T]hey ordered the men to take the vegetables out and give them to us.” When asked in 1906 if his forces could have damaged Soledad’s properties during the war, cigar maker Andrés Díaz y Soto responded, “No sir, no sir, we have gone to that place and have asked for salt and we were forbidden by our commanding officers to do any damage whatsoever to that estate.” In addition to the protection Soledad gained by sharing food, the estate’s American-owned status also served to shield it from violence. Díaz y Soto remembered his officers instructing him not to damage the estate “on account of its being the property of foreigners.”⁵⁰

In his memoir, Atkins indicated that Captain Beal maintained “comparatively friendly terms” with both the Cuban insurgents and the Spanish forces throughout the war. The Spanish authorities recognized Soledad’s “friendliness” to the insurgents and in 1895 sent a complaint to the U.S. State Department accusing Soledad of “neutrality” as opposed to allegiance to Spain. Interpreting this accusation as a suggestion that his plantation was in fact “favoring the insurgents,” Atkins informed the State Department that Soledad had received orders to respect Spanish authorities and to deny all demands for money by the insurgents.⁵¹ Neither in his rendering of the accusation against Soledad nor in his response was there any mention of food. So long as the Spanish government did not specify food as a political term of trade between insurgents and plantation management, Atkins could equivocate and continue to use it to protect his estate.

Soledad’s “gifts” of food did not always successfully protect the estate. Rebels destroyed the sugarcane at Soledad, as at many other plantations in Cuba. Atkins wrote home in March 1896 that a party of four, including the son of a mother whom “we had been feeding out of charity to keep her from starving,” had torched the cane.⁵² He believed his provision of food should have protected his property, at least from people whose families had received aid from Soledad.

While Soledad provided Cuban troops with food supplies, the owner and administrators did so grudgingly and cautiously, attempting to hide these transactions.⁵³ In contrast, the Soledad owner and administrators entertained many levels of Spanish troops on the estate, providing them not only with food but also with leisure activities and alcoholic spirits. Spanish merchant and former soldier Ignacio Duarte later remarked that whenever the Spanish army went to Soledad the administrators treated them very well, “furnishing the officers with food and in order to amuse us there was a billiard table there at our disposal in case we cared to play a game.” Duarte commented that he did not recall ever seeing anyone talking to the insurgents on the estate.⁵⁴

Not all Spanish forces shared Duarte’s blindness, willful or otherwise. Acutely aware of the suspicions that Spanish officers had, Atkins sought to allay their fears over food and drink. In January 1897, for example, he made amends with the leaders of one regiment of Spanish guerrillas. Atkins invited General Prats and his officers upstairs to breakfast with him. At first Prats refused to stay, but Atkins convinced him to have a cocktail, “which he was very willing to do.” Over their cocktails, Prats explained that Atkins had been accused of paying the insurgents. Atkins denied this suggestion while enjoying a “very attractive breakfast.” The display ultimately overcame Prats’s ear-

lier resistance and he ate with Atkins as he was “evidently hungry.” They capped off the meal with champagne. “After a couple of hours I was able to explain everything satisfactorily,” Atkins noted. In fact, as Prats was leaving, Atkins overheard him instructing the guerrillas under his command to protect Soledad from insurgent forces.⁵⁵ Had Atkins held this conversation without the accompanying meal and drinks, it seems less likely that he would have succeeded so consummately.

The strategic value of foodstuffs owed to their general scarcity during the war. As Cuban insurgents attacked the sugarcane fields, Spanish forces responded with counter-attacks on small farms. Early in 1896 Spanish general Valeriano Weyler arrived in Cuba with 500,000 additional soldiers and began an aggressive campaign to destroy the Cuban countryside and its food supply. Like the insurgents who torched the cane fields to harm the livelihood of the planter class, Weyler and his forces used fire to lay waste the insurgents’ resources. Although these efforts did not engage the enemy directly, Weyler realized that as long as the *pacífico* (peaceful) population was able to move about freely, transport supplies, cultivate crops, and tend to their livestock, Spain could not win the war. Consequently, Spanish forces set food reserves on fire, razed homes, and seized or killed livestock. In autumn of 1896, General Weyler issued a decree that the rural population must evacuate the countryside and report to “reconcentration” camps. He banned subsistence agriculture and trade between the cities and countryside and ordered livestock owners to drive their herds into the cities.⁵⁶

The violence of both Spaniards and Cubans had the same result: a substantive decrease of food supplies and food sources in Cuba. Around Soledad in particular, the Spanish attack on food sources revealed itself in the charred smell and gray clouds hanging in the wake of the fires burning in the hills. In March 1896, Atkins wrote home that these fires marked the presence of Spanish troops destroying rebel camps, which he described as places where the men lived with their families, repaired arms, cared for the wounded, raised vegetables, and drove in cattle. The following month, Atkins asserted that the fires could “lead finally to but one result, starvation for the poor of both sides.”⁵⁷

A reporter who traveled with Cuban troops under Máximo Gómez during the summer of 1898 witnessed the effectiveness of Spanish efforts to starve the insurgent forces. N. G. Gonzales, editor of the South Carolina newspaper the *State*, described the rebels’ constant quest for edible food—and their willingness to eat barely edible foods in order to survive. Upon joining the group in early July, Gonzales watched the men consume strange combinations of

The Force of Food

“old and new food.” He described simmering concoctions of hutia (a Caribbean rodent) with Boston baked beans or plantains with Chicago canned beef. Soon, he learned that these unconventional and somewhat unappetizing meals provided an unusual feast for Gómez’s troops. One week later, he realized that the troops had almost none of their rations left. Capturing the situation in concrete detail for his American readers, Gonzales wrote that the widespread hunger of the insurgents was evidenced by the pairs of flat stones “encountered everywhere, lying in heaps of broken shells” of *corojo* nuts. “None but a starving man,” he explained, “would eat the insipid, greasy kernels.”⁵⁸

In February 1897, Atkins wrote to the Spanish minister, Dupuy de Lome, whom he had first befriended at a breakfast in 1893, with his concerns. The present policy, he argued, caused starvation and disease—often fatal—among the Cubans. He stressed the scarcity and high cost of food, attributing the problem to the destruction of the countryside by Spanish forces. The common people, he reported, had little food and no means to buy imported goods. In January 1898, Atkins acknowledged the impact on the insurgents in particular, noting that some who were passing through the area could not stay long because there was nothing to eat. “Even the buzzards are starving,” he commented, “and eat the cotton waste out of the boxes of the railroad cars.”⁵⁹

The Spanish forces must have also been hungry; however, with the power of the government behind them, they were better able to claim food. One ex-



*View of cattle,
Soledad.
Photographer
unknown.
Undated.
Photo #37.283.*

ample of this capacity impinged directly on Soledad. Spanish battalions and guerrillas fighting in the area in 1898 demanded forty-eight head of cattle from the estate. Lt. Don Melchor García's demand specified four head of cattle for the "consumption of the guerilla forces" operating near Soledad. Apparently, the Spanish forces successfully acquired them. In November 1898 the estate invoiced the Spanish government for one bull, thirty cows, nine heifers, and twenty-nine yearlings—worth \$2,458.⁶⁰

Food supplies given to the troops detracted from the plantation's ability to feed its own work force. Managers' estimates of eating house expenses suggest that the number of workers fed at Soledad dropped substantially from 1895 to 1897 and increased slightly from 1897 to 1898, reflecting the decrease in laborers and indicating an overall decrease in food per person after 1895.⁶¹ In early 1898, Atkins remarked that Soledad was able to find enough laborers to work but was not able to feed them a healthy amount of meat. The Spanish demand for cattle obviously had an impact on the plantation: Atkins explained that his estate could not afford to buy new cattle because they had to be imported and cost three times as much as before the war.⁶²

In addition to feeding the workers on the plantation, Atkins proudly provided food relief to many of his hungry neighbors. In contrast to his earlier treatment (mostly removal) of women from Soledad, Atkins was especially willing to help widows with small children during and after the war. In February 1898, he encouraged "his widows" to obtain papers from the mayor recommending them as "needy people" so that he could provide them with a weekly provision of rice, beans, salt, and jerked beef. He required this documentation because he found it difficult to "separate the worthy from the others." The latter included, for example, a local guerilla who had been sending his wife to Soledad for food while he received wages from the Spanish government. Atkins gave more willingly to women and children than men because, as he wrote home, "all able-bodied men" could find work on his estate. His generosity was predicated on his perception of the women's uselessness as laborers; women could not find a job on Soledad but could receive handouts there. In another letter home, Atkins quantified Soledad's importance in sustaining local life and livelihood during 1898: "The whole population of one thousand people seem to live in some way from this estate."⁶³

By early 1898, American officials confirmed U.S. plans to intervene in Cuba, heralding the end of Spanish control.⁶⁴ In April, President McKinley requested and received permission from the U.S. Congress to conduct a military intervention, after which the U.S. declared war on Spain and sent troops to

the island. The American action went quickly, at least in part because Cuban insurgents had already stalemated the Spanish forces. The Peace Protocol of August 12, 1898, brought the conflict to a close after only three months of U.S. involvement.

For three years the Cuban insurgency had battled Spanish forces in a bid for national liberation. With U.S. intervention, their struggle was subsumed under the new descriptor of the “Spanish-American War,” a name that erased Cuban leadership and involvement.⁶⁵ In December 1898, the U.S. and Spain (without Cuban participation) signed the Treaty of Paris, formally transferring the control of Cuba from Spain to the United States. By signing this agreement, the United States government deferred the Cuban insurgency’s goals of national sovereignty.

Resuscitating the island’s foodstuffs—and simply saving its destitute people from starvation—had already become a U.S. responsibility in 1898. The government instituted many policies to eradicate Cuban hunger, such as removing the taxes on food sources and supplies and implementing a rationing program. American officers at the ports of entry admitted beef, cattle, and other food supplies intended for the “relief of starving inhabitants of the Island” free of duty and managed the “gratuitous distribution” of these supplies.⁶⁶

During the time from the Peace Protocol to the final signing of the Treaty of Paris, many Cubans needed food urgently to survive. Shortly before signing the Peace Protocol the U.S. had begun to assume responsibility for food distribution in Cuba. On August 1, 1898, the U.S. issued General Order No. 110 specifying the rations to be supplied to troops of the Cuban Army and the Cuban destitute. The list included little of nutritive value: eight ounces of bacon, twelve ounces of flour (or sixteen ounces of corn meal), six pounds of coffee, ten pounds of sugar, two quarts of vinegar, two pounds of salt, four ounces of pepper, and four pounds of soap. In September 1898, W. G. Beal wrote to Atkins of the “extreme suffering” among the insurgent families, especially on the part of women and children coming down from the hills.⁶⁷

United States Early Occupation (1899–1900)

The United States military occupation of Cuba officially began on January 1, 1899. The military government inaugurated its control with a number of initiatives, including an assessment of the postwar condition of the Cuban people and the Cuban landscape. The consequent reports documented large numbers of destitute Cubans across the country and confirmed that every day

many died from hunger. The governor of the provinces of Santa Clara and Matanzas, Gen. James H. Wilson, later estimated that one-seventh of the population of Santa Clara, where Soledad is located, had died of wounds, sickness, or starvation during the war and its immediate aftermath. George R. Cecil, who traveled across the neighboring province of Matanzas with Governor Wilson, reported that starvation “had almost completed its work” by January 1899. The military government estimated that it would need to supply hungry people with four to six weeks of food as “the country has no resources on which to draw.”⁶⁸

The U.S. government provided many Cubans with much-needed access to food resources, but in doing so it compelled the Cubans to accept the legitimacy of the occupation. Food became, as Louis A. Pérez has argued, a means for “social control.” Further, it became a strategy for squelching any continuing cause for Cuban national sovereignty. On June 20, 1899, Leonard Wood, then governor of the province of Santiago de Cuba and future governor of Cuba, told a New York newspaper correspondent that he had issued an order that “No Cuban bearing arms should have work or food.” An unnamed journalist writing for the conservative Cuban newspaper *Diario de la Marina* echoed and widened Wood’s assertion. Refuting those Cubans who still wanted independence, the writer claimed it would be better to be the “head of the rat than the tail of a lion,” arguing that “even a rat, if he has had experience in life, prefers to be among others in a spacious larder where cheese is plentiful, than to be alone in a cage with nothing to eat and no one to lend him a helping hand.”⁶⁹ The journalist, like Wood, placed food at the center of this argument between a hungry and constrained Cuban independence and the stocked “larder” of American occupation.

In a very concrete manifestation of their power over the well-being of the Cuban people, U.S. military officials controlled the entry and distribution of food in Cuba. For the most part, the policy on imports removed economic barriers. In one of Gen. John R. Brooke’s first acts as military governor, in March 1899 he abolished taxes on beef cattle and all articles of prime necessity, such as “food and fuel.” The military government also prohibited municipalities from taxing the importation or exportation of merchandise and cattle. In July, the government authorized the admittance of bulls and cows for breeding purposes free of duty for one year.⁷⁰

Other early relief efforts included the distribution of rations to hungry Cubans and employment programs. In military governor John Brooke’s civil report published in 1900, the War Department reported having sent out 5,493,000 rations. The report also noted that “employment was given to

those who could work” and that they were paid weekly so that they could buy food. Several months after formal aid had begun, U.S. administrators proclaimed that real destitution requiring the provision of food supplies had almost disappeared from Cuba.⁷¹

During the spring of 1899, some administrators recommended that the U.S. military government provide Cubans with productive resources and credit. In May of 1899, for example, Governor Wilson asked for \$80,000 each for the provinces of Santa Clara and Matanzas. The funds would allow him to furnish “each beneficiary with at least one pair of oxen, a cart, one milk cow or goat, two pigs, ten poultry, plows, and a suitable number of machetes and hoes . . . together with a small sum of money.” The resources would make it possible for each recipient to build a cottage and feed his family until he could make his property productive. Major General Brooke refused: the government would not distribute livestock and tools directly to those in need but only through the medium of banks. By June, Governor Wilson apparently had changed his mind; he agreed with Brooke that the banks were the best means for transferring funds.⁷²

In September, Wilson issued a report that praised the renewal of Cuban soil and the American distribution of rations. Many farmers appeared to have “so far progressed in the cultivation of vegetable food that the issue of rations is no longer necessary.” The rationing program had worked; “In every instance it is confidently believed that they reached the sick and starving people for whom they were intended.” Still, despite his optimism, Wilson noted that there remained a scarcity of cattle, hogs, and poultry for consumption.⁷³

These losses, however, did not characterize all estates, and some U.S. administrators highlighted the uneven recovery between the wealthier sugar plantations and tobacco districts and the rest of the country. The captain of the Second Cavalry in Santa Clara warned that the prosperity of a handful of wealthy sugar planters should not “blind the government to the general Agricultural depression.” Brooke’s report documented that agriculture and trade “had practically disappeared” everywhere in the province of Santa Clara, except for the municipal district of Cienfuegos and the sugarcane and tobacco districts. U.S. administrators offered some suggestions as to why the sugarcane districts in Cienfuegos suffered less destruction and made a better recovery from the war. Administrator George R. Cecil argued that by contributing money to both the Cuban and Spanish forces, “several fine ingenios managed to save their mills from destruction” during the war. While generally unrecognized by U.S. administrators, it is also likely that the estates’ provision of food to both forces helped to protect their mills. Further, those peo-

ple living around sugar plantations or cities had better access to employment opportunities and rationing programs.⁷⁴

Even in the relatively prosperous sugar districts, most of the sugar plantations had been destroyed during the war. Of 1,100 sugar mills registered in Cuba in 1894, only 207 survived the war, and not all of these were able to contribute to the harvests of 1899–1900 or 1900–1901. Soledad stood out among those plantations that survived the war and quickly regained its productivity. Writing home in March 1900, Atkins remarked that “We are filled to bursting with sugar.” In 1900 and 1901, Soledad produced one of the largest sugar crops in the province of Santa Clara.⁷⁵



*View of oxen and cart full of sugarcane, Soledad.
Photographer unknown. Undated. Photo #37.211.*

As the owner of a surviving plantation, Edwin Atkins was asked to handle the distribution of provisions to local people. He did so, but he also criticized U.S. administrative decisions. In one letter home he ridiculed some of the rations provided: “I just called up one of my Major friends to ask why they sent a barrel of vinegar to starving people.” Atkins suggested the government should instead distribute a few staples such as rice, corn, codfish, salt, sugar,

and canned goods and convinced one of his “major friends” to send him the provisions he requested.⁷⁶ Atkins’s position as an American plantation owner and longtime Cuban resident enabled him to challenge an American official with confidence and obtain better rations for the hungry people in his area. Other distributors, most of whom did not enjoy the prominence of U.S. citizenry during this period, probably would not have had the same success.

With the hostilities over and prosperity returned to Soledad, Atkins found many opportunities to entertain important guests. In January 1900 he had Colonel Corliss, Captain and Mrs. Wright, and several others to Soledad for breakfast. Their meal featured a turkey, a traditional celebration food indigenous to the Americas. In March, he hosted a high-profile breakfast party for Gov. Gen. James H. Wilson, Gov. Gen. Leonard Wood, Sen. Nelson W. Aldrich, and Sen. Orville H. Platt. The guests enjoyed a meal with “some of everything” along with cocktails and champagne. Once again, the meal had the desired effect of strengthening relationships with influential people. Atkins remarked proudly, “General Wilson was particularly agreeable and wanted me to promise to come and make him a visit in Matanzas.”⁷⁷

After the war, Atkins and his managers seemed to recognize the importance of using food and drink to establish and rebuild alliances with and between the laborers on his estate. In the spring of 1900, for example, Atkins provided the workers on the plantation with a feast to celebrate the end of the sugar crop. In the description he sent his family of this event, he noted the presence of Cuban and Spanish celebrants at the party. There was beer and roast pork, and “feasting and dancing at all the colonias [cane farms] among the negroes during the night.”⁷⁸ It is not certain whether all the “negroes” were celebrating separately at the *colonias*, but Atkins did continue to distinguish the “negroes” as a group, even as they were legally free and sharing in the celebration and enjoying roasted pig along with the other laborers. It is also apparent that the Spaniards and Cubans celebrated together despite the recent war, in which some of them may have fought against each other.

Conclusion

As Soledad moved into the new century, Edwin Atkins reaped the rewards of its prosperity, even undertaking and realizing unusual projects. Most prominent among these was the Harvard Botanical Station, which he established on his Limones property in 1901. Born out of the desire to “produce a hardier race of cane,” the Harvard Botanical Station not only hybridized sugarcane but also introduced a substantial variety of plants and fruit trees from the

United States to Cuban soil.⁷⁹ The venture had its roots in Atkins's early commitment to the productivity of plantings on Soledad.

When he took control of the plantation in 1884, Atkins worked with his administrators to streamline and control the production, distribution, and consumption of food on the estate. Atkins and Murray sought to make Soledad self-sufficient in basic foodstuffs and focused their attention on plantings of both tropical and temperate zone cultigens, such as the plantains and potatoes that formed the basis of the laborers' diet. The Harvard Botanical Station formalized and extended this commitment. In 1924 Harvard University also established a Biological Laboratory on the premises to investigate further tropical biology in a more controlled setting. By the time Atkins published his memoir in 1926 he proudly decreed, "Our gardens have now one of the largest collections of tropical plants in the western hemisphere."⁸⁰ As opposed to the destruction of plantings that Atkins had encountered upon taking formal ownership of the estate, the establishment of a scientific laboratory devoted to studying and incorporating various plantings on Soledad likely contributed to Atkins's sense of accomplishment.



Above: Interior view of Harvard Botanical Laboratory, Soledad.

Photographer unknown. C. 1930. Photo #37.410.

Right: Men gathering papayas at the Harvard Botanical Garden, Soledad.

Taken by David Fairchild, March 31, 1924. Photo #37.389.



At the same time that Atkins began collaborating with U.S.-based scientists to establish the botanical station, he continued to entertain other high profile U.S. figures who visited Soledad in the wake of the war. In 1901 and 1902, American ships frequently docked in Cienfuegos Harbor, and “there was hardly a day when Soledad did not entertain some interesting guests.” During this time, Atkins and his staff fed and amused U.S. military officials and politicians such as Gen. Daniel Sickles and a Congressman from Iowa.⁸¹

In 1906, Atkins hosted a very different type of event, receiving a commission of lawyers from the U.S. government who visited Soledad to interview L. F. Hughes on Atkins's claim for wartime losses. As opposed to past meetings, Atkins was cautious about sharing food and drink with American officials during this meeting. He recalled that he "ran . . . out" his "boy" Tony when he offered cocktails to the commissioners and lawyers "for fear it would be put in evidence that I was trying to influence the court." Still, after the first adjournment the cocktails were offered and accepted. In the end, Atkins won a very substantial award, receiving a U.S. Treasury warrant for \$62,496.53 in March of 1907.⁸²

The decision of this commission notwithstanding, Soledad thrived in the postwar period and established a foundation for continued prosperity. "Of course there are other factories which turn out more sugar," Atkins remarked in 1902, "but few, if any, which cultivate so large an area of cane or do so large a business as all our various interests combined." During the 1910s, the next generation of Atkins men expanded the family business: Edwin and Katherine's first son, Robert, formally joined E. Atkins & Co. in 1910 and their second son, Ted, in 1916. By 1925 Soledad managed and sold 10 percent of the sugar crop produced in Cuba as a result of its acquisitions of other plantations and sugar interests.⁸³ The extent of this expansion bespeaks the aptitude of Edwin Atkins's business acumen in general, as well as his careful management of food production and provisioning on Soledad, which helped the estate to survive the turbulent late nineteenth century.

NOTES

1. Benjamin Allen, *A Story in the Growth of E. Atkins & Co. and the Sugar Industry in Cuba* (Boston, 1925), 13.
2. According to his granddaughter's account of her family, E. Atkins & Co. dispatched the largest number of sugar vessels of any merchant from Boston harbor. See Helen Claflin, *A New England Family* (Belmont, Mass., 1956), 65.
3. I would like to thank Rebecca Scott for generously sharing her work and sources with me and providing suggestions about primary sources available in the Atkins family papers (Atkins FP) at the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) and the U.S./Spain Treaty Claims (Record Group 76) at the United States National Archives. I express my appreciation to Sueann Caulfield, who helped me to sharpen my analysis. I am grateful to Sidney Mintz for his kind and substantive suggestions on how to improve this essay. I extend my gratitude to Peter Drummey and Donald Yacovone at the Massachusetts Historical Society for spearheading the organization and production of a finding aid for the Atkins family papers and for their as-

The Force of Food

sistance during my research trips to the MHS. I thank Donald Yacovone and Ondine Le Blanc at the MHS for their careful copyediting and insightful recommendations to improve this paper. I thank Joe Schwartz at the U.S. National Archives for helping me locate and request letters from the Records of the Military Government of Cuba (RG 140). I am very grateful to Kathleen López for sharing her transcriptions of the letters from J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins. I thank Shannon Dawdy for sharing a draft of her paper on food and farming in Cuba now published as “La Comida Mambisa: Food, Farming, and Cuban Identity, 1839–1999,” *New West Indian Guide* 76 (2002): 47–80. Lastly, I express my appreciation to Sarah Arvey, Lindalia Ludwick, and Christopher Eckman for their careful reading of and suggestions for this essay in its various manifestations.

4. Rebecca J. Scott, “A Cuban Connection: Edwin F. Atkins, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., and the Former Slaves of Soledad Plantation,” forthcoming in a publication from the Massachusetts Historical Society. Provided by author.
5. For a more thorough analysis of the connections between Atkins and Adams, please see Scott, “A Cuban Connection.”
6. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to John Quincy Adams II, Feb. 9, 1890, Charles Francis Adams II Papers, MHS.
7. Rebecca J. Scott and Michael Zeuske, “Property in Writing, Property on the Ground: Pigs, Horses, Land, and Citizenship in the Aftermath of Slavery, Cuba 1880–1909,” *Comparative Study of Society and History* 44 (2002): 669–699.
8. Edwin Atkins managed to sustain Soledad through the deep pockets of E. Atkins & Co. While other plantations were forced to close during economic downturns or because of the destruction of the War of Independence, Atkins was able to continue to finance operations at Soledad.
9. I have chosen to use the word “negroes” because it was the term that Edwin Atkins and his plantation administrators used to describe a group of laborers on the plantation that were most likely African or of African descent. Even before Cuban slave emancipation in 1886, Atkins was hesitant to admit he owned bound laborers. After all the *patrocinados* gained their freedom, Atkins and plantation administrators continued to use the word “negro” to describe a group that most likely consisted of former slaves and their descendants. Ada Ferrer eloquently addresses the benefits of utilizing racial categories “derived from the period and setting under study.” Ada Ferrer, introduction to *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 10–12.
10. I thank Kathleen López for helping me to identify the number of and racial/ethnic status of laborers on Soledad. In Atkins’s classification of laborers on Soledad sent to General Bates on Jan. 29, 1899, he calculated a total laboring population of 1,183 people with 468 blacks, 376 Spaniards, 218 native whites, and 121 Chinese. Atkins calculated that blacks made up 39.57 percent of the workforce, while the second largest group, the Spaniards, made up 31.78 percent. Native whites (18.43 percent) and Chinese (10.23 percent) laborers rounded out the total. See E. F. Atkins to Gen. Bates, Jan. 29, 1899, Atkins FP, MHS. For a more comprehensive

- analysis of Chinese immigrants to Cuba, see Kathleen Lopez, "'Faithful Men' in the Cane: A Microstudy of Chinese Wage Laborers in Cienfuegos, Cuba," paper presented at Asian Migrations to the Americas, Aug. 11–16, 2000, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad.
11. E. F. Atkins to Atkins family, Jan. 8, 1882, in Edwin F. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba* (1926; New York, 1980), 75.
 12. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 96.
 13. As Sidney Mintz pointed out to me, the most important (and perhaps the only) ways that slaves obtained food were estate production, importation, and their own labor. Following Mintz, David Sartorius provides a case study that explores the importance of conucos to slaves' subsistence on a particular plantation in Cuba. See David Sartorius, "Conucos y subsistencia: el caso del ingenio Santa Rosalía," in *Espacios, silencios y los sentidos de la libertad: Cuba entre 1878 y 1912*, ed. Fernando Martínez Heredia, Rebecca J. Scott, and Orlando F. García Martínez (La Habana, Cuba, 2001), 108–124.
 14. E. F. Atkins to Gen. Bates, Jan. 29, 1899, Atkins FP, MHS.
 15. This conclusion stems from the fact that Don Pedro García, who led at least one of the food raids, hailed from Spain.
 16. In his biographical dictionary of Cienfuegos, Luis J. Bustamante writes that J. S. Murray was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1834 and died in Cienfuegos in 1907. After studying engineering in the United States, he came to Cuba in 1859 and landed a job as a railroad engineer in 1861. Atkins writes, "I had known Mr. Murray from many years and had first met him in 1877 at the American Consulate when he was supervising engineer of the Cienfuegos & Santa Clara Railway, afterwards the Cuban Central. He was a native of Pittsburgh, but through long residence in Cuba was thoroughly acquainted with local conditions, understood the people, and spoke Spanish fluently. He made a very effective manager of Soledad for a number of years, until failing health forced him to retire." See Luis J. Bustamante, *Diccionario Biografico Cienfueguero* (Cienfuegos, 1931); and Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 91.
 17. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, May 29, 1884, ser. 4, Soledad Sugar Co. Records, Atkins FP, MHS.
 18. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, June 11, 1884, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS. Don Pedro was apparently not punished for this act, suggesting that the transition of plantation ownership provided a moment in which a soon-to-be former overseer might claim the fruits of previous labor—and more—without serious retribution. Atkins briefly described Don Pedro in *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 91–92. He wrote, "In my day, when the estate was working under Escarza, the receiver, the mayoral in charge seemed just as primitive a man [as Juan Sarriá, the former master]. He was a Gallego, Don Pedro García, the picture of a pirate, with a black beard reaching to his waist. He had been a slave trader in his earlier career, and when he overheard my conversation about putting in some modern machinery, he strongly urged me not to do so, but to fit up an expedition for Africa and allow him to bring back a cargo of Ne-

The Force of Food

- groes. This was years after the slave traffic was stopped and slavery abolished, but Don Pedro had evidently not heard of that.”
19. E. F. Atkins to J. S. Murray, June 6, Sept. 24, 1884; P. M. Beal to E. F. Atkins, Jan. 1, 1885, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS. See also letters from J. S. Murray for the same period.
 20. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, July 22, 1884, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS. Murray repeatedly spelled the word as “negros”; however, for consistency I use the spelling “negroes” when not quoting him directly.
 21. Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York, 1988), 126; Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1899* (1985; Pittsburgh, 2000), 194.
 22. This issue is further explored in Scott and Zeuske’s essay “Property in Writing.”
 23. I thank Sidney Mintz for his suggestion about this formulation.
 24. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, June, 19, July 31, 1884, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS.
 25. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, May 26, 1885, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS. Murray also attributed the work stoppage to the fact that he had made the “negros” sell their horses. For further analysis of the importance of hogs, horses, and mules in this community, see Rebecca J. Scott, “Reclaiming Gregoria’s Mule: The Meanings of Freedom in the Arimao and Caunao Valleys, Cienfuegos, Cuba, 1880–1899,” *Past and Present* 170 (2001): 181–216.
 26. E. F. Atkins to J. S. Murray, June 3, 1885, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS.
 27. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, Aug. 6, 1885 (Murray listed 37 men and 18 women as patrocinos); J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, May 26, 1885; E. F. Atkins to J. S. Murray, Aug. 14, 1885, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS. I first learned of this Atkins letter in Scott’s essay “Reclaiming Gregoria’s Mule,” 12–13. For a cogent analysis of the claims and contests over resources including animals, land, and tools, see Scott and Zeuske, “Property in Writing,” 666–669.
 28. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, Sept. 28, Oct. 19, 1886, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS.
 29. E. F. Atkins to J. S. Murray, June 12, 1885, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS.
 30. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, Sept. 7, Sept. 14, 1886, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS. On Sept. 7, Murray wrote, “I am having some trouble with the negroes in regard to their rations they claim the right to eat in the eating house. I judged it best to give them a small increase to satisfy them. They don’t understand their position yet, they want at the same time the privileges of patrocinos and freemen without the responsibilities of the last.”
 31. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, Sept. 14, 1886, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS.
 32. W. G. Beal to E. F. Atkins, June 14, 1887, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS. Atkins also referred to W. G. Beal as Captain Beal.
 33. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, July 14, 1885, ser. 4; E. F. Atkins to J. S. Murray, July 22 1885, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS.
 34. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, July 6, July 22, Aug. 3, Aug. 10 1886, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS.
 35. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, Oct. 12, 1886; E. F. Atkins to J. S. Murray, Oct. 20,

- 1886, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS.
36. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, Oct. 17, 1887; E. F. Atkins to J. S. Murray, Nov. 14, 1887; J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, July 18, 1889, ser. 4, Atkins FP, MHS.
37. J. S. Murray to E. F. Atkins, Nov. 2, 1893, ser. 11, Atkins FP, MHS.
38. Louis A. Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 11.
39. A small fraction of laborers resided in the dwelling house. Further analysis of account books is necessary to obtain a more precise idea of the availability of American food supplies on Soledad.
40. Katharine Atkins, written impressions, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 103–104.
41. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 139 (roses), 142–143 (Dupuy de Lome).
42. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 108, 138.
43. For a comprehensive analysis of the composition and aims of the insurgency, see Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*.
44. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 146. Scotchman J. N. S. Williams replaced J. S. Murray as general manager of Soledad in 1893, due to Murray's failing health. Williams remained in this position until 1898, when L. F. Hughes, a young Welshman who had served as his assistant manager, replaced him.
45. Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*, 141–143. Ferrer argues that the insurgency in the eastern part of the island was so strong that the Spanish authorities "did not bother to challenge it." In contrast to the Ten Years War (1866–1876), the rebels fighting this war took the unprecedented action of successfully entering the western half of the island, reaching Havana in early 1896 and the westernmost town of Mantua soon after.
46. Scott, "Reclaiming Gregoria's Mule," 16–17.
47. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 162–163.
48. J. N. S. Williams to E. F. Atkins, Dec. 7, 1895, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 182–183.
49. P. M. Beal to E. F. Atkins, Jan. 17 and 21, 1896, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 196. Unfortunately, neither Beal nor Atkins mentions "the Mexican's" real name. It is likely, however, that he was Mexican-born Juan Ramírez Olivera, a man who local archivist Orlando García Martínez characterizes as a leading figure in the Cuban insurgency. See Orlando F. García Martínez, "La brigada de Cienfuegos: Un análisis social de su formación," in *Espacios, silencios y los sentidos de la libertad*, 167–168.
50. Deposition of Anastasio Ramírez García, May 15, 1906; deposition of Andrés Díaz y Soto, May 12, 1906, claim 387, US/Spain Treaty Claims, Record Group 76 (RG 76), National Archives Building (NAB), Washington, D.C. Ramírez García was a farmer. Another insurgent, Fernando Melero Prado, testified that whether or not their forces received provisions or supplies from the Soledad estate was the private matter of the insurgent officers and therefore less known by the rank and file. Even though Melero Prado did not admit to receiving anything from Soledad, he replied that he considered the men in charge of the ingenio Soledad to be "friendly." De-

The Force of Food

- position of Fernando Melero Prado, May 12, 1906, claim 387, RG 76, NAB. Melero Prado was a merchant.
51. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 156, 164–165. In a postwar lawsuit brought against Spain and heard by the Treaty Claims Commission in 1906, Atkins claimed damages to the estate caused by the war and attempted to avoid the appearance of partisanship in order to maintain the legitimacy of his case. In his memoir, published a couple of decades after the lawsuit, Atkins was able to include and exclude specific details and otherwise alter the record of his involvement in the war.
 52. E. F. Atkins to Katharine Atkins, Mar. 21, 1896, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 228. Both Rebecca J. Scott and Michael Zeuske explore the phenomenon of freeborn sons of former slaves joining the Cuban insurgency in a recent edition of the *New West Indian Guide*. See Rebecca J. Scott, “The Provincial Archive as a Place of Memory: Confronting Oral and Written Sources on the Role of Former Slaves in the Cuban War of Independence,” *New West Indian Guide* 76 (2002): 191–210; and Michael Zeuske, “Hidden Markers, Open Secrets: On Naming, Race-Marking, and Race-Making in Cuba,” *New West Indian Guide* 76 (2002): 211–242.
 53. Because the Spanish government had made it clear that Soledad should not aid the insurgents, it is possible that neither Williams, Beal, nor Atkins recorded any such transactions.
 54. Deposition of Ignacio Duarte, May 11, 1906, claim 387, RG 76, NAB.
 55. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 254. Many of the available depictions of food exchanges postdate the exchanges themselves. For example, Atkins’s description of his 1897 interaction with General Prats was published in his memoir in 1926. Not surprisingly, Atkins’s portrayal of Soledad’s relationship with the Spanish and insurgent forces changed over time.
 56. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 165–166.
 57. E. F. Atkins to Katharine Atkins, Mar. 24, Apr. 2, 1896, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 233.
 58. Entries, July 6, July 12, 1898, in Narciso Gonzales, *In Darkest Cuba: Two Months Service under Gómez along the Trocha from the Caribbean to the Bahama Canal* (Columbia, S.C., 1922), 111, 145. *Hutia* is the English translation for the Spanish word *jutía*. Hutias are a rare type of rodent indigenous to the Caribbean region; they are generally found in forests and rough hillsides.
 59. E. F. Atkins to D. D. Lome, 1897; E. F. Atkins to Atkins family, Jan. 20, 1898, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 257, 268.
 60. Second Deposition of L. F. Hughes, Exhibit 1-8, May 26, 1906, claim 387; Appendix, “Schedule A,” Nov. 26, 1906, fol. 4, RG 76, NAB.
 61. Second Deposition of L. F. Hughes, May 26, 1906, RG 76, NAB. From January to March of each year estimated costs were \$5,599.79 in 1895, \$1,147.54 in 1897, and \$2,101.52 in 1898. There is no record for eating house expenses in 1896 in this deposition.
 62. E. F. Atkins to Atkins family, Jan. 20, 1898, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 267.
 63. E. F. Atkins to Atkins family, Feb. 6, Feb. 17, 1898, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*,

- 271-272, 274.
64. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 177.
65. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 179.
66. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 286-287.
67. General Order No. 110, Aug. 1, 1898, in *Civil Report of Major-General John R. Brooke*, U.S. Army, *Military Governor, Island of Cuba* (Washington, 1900), 22; W. G. Beal to E. F. Atkins, Sept. 2, 1898, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 289.
68. James H. Wilson, "Special Report of Brig. Gen. James H. Wilson, U. S. V., Commanding the Department of Matanzas and Santa Clara, on the Industrial, Economic, and Social Conditions Existing in the Department at the Date of American Occupation and at the Present Time," Sept. 7, 1899, in *Civil Report of Major-General John R. Brooke*, 334-335; George R. Cecil, Report on tour of Matanzas with Governor Wilson, Feb. 1, 1899, file 577, Records of the Military Government of Cuba, Record Group 140 (RG 140), NAB; Report of the Board on conditions in Matanzas, Jan. 20, 1899, file 296, RG 140, NAB.
69. Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 105; *New York Evening Sun*, June 20, 1899, as cited in Hermann Hagedorn, *Leonard Wood: A Biography*, 2 vols. (1931; New York, 1969), 1:255; *Diario de la Marina*, Oct. 5, 1899 mañana, 1. This excerpt was written in English. I first saw the *Evening Sun* quotation in Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 528.
70. Adna R. Chaffee, Orders, Mar. 25, 1899; R. A. Alger, Tariff Circular No. 83, July 12, 1899, in *Civil Report of Major-General John R. Brooke*, 29, 94.
71. *Civil Report of Major-General John R. Brooke*, 8-9, 129.
72. James H. Wilson, Letter to Adjutant General Division of Cuba on proposed relief measures in provinces of Matanzas and Santa Clara, May 9, 1899, file 3726, RG 140, NAB; Brooke, *Civil Report of Major-General John R. Brooke*, 13; James H. Wilson, Response on wrapper to plan for reconstruction of the province of Santa Clara, June 19, 1899, file 3726, RG 140, NAB. "I much prefer the plan of establishing an agricultural bank with the funds as fast as they are paid over. It would not be good business, in my judgment, to give as a gratuity any money to the farmers because it would not be possible to give money to all."
73. Wilson, "Special Report," 334-335.
74. Fred S. Foltz, Letter introducing report on agricultural conditions in the provinces of Matanzas and Santa Clara, Feb. 3, 1900, file 1670, RG 140, NAB; *Civil Report of Major-General John R. Brooke*, 9; Cecil, Report on tour of Matanzas, 2-3; Report of the Board on conditions in Matanzas, 2.
75. U.S. War Department, *Informe Sobre el Censo de Cuba*, 1899 (Washington, D.C., 1900), 44-45, as cited in Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba between Empires, 1878-1902* (Pittsburgh, 1983), 347; E. F. Atkins to Katharine Atkins, Mar. 1, 1900, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 316; *Civil Report of Military Governor Leonard Wood* (Washington, D.C., 1901), 88. It seems that Soledad actually manufactured the second largest sugar crop in Santa Clara.
76. E. F. Atkins to Atkins family, Jan. 23, 1898, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 298. Atkins does not specify exactly who asked him to handle this distribution. He

The Force of Food

- wrote that provisions were sent by “the Red Cross or Government for [the nearby towns of] Cumanayagua or Ojo de Agua.”
77. E. F. Atkins to Atkins family, Jan. 26, Mar. 23, 1900, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 311–312, 317–318.
78. E. F. Atkins to Katharine Atkins, Apr. 13, 1900, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 318–319. Atkins describes this party as one of the first celebrations of the end of the crop season.
79. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 332.
80. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 332.
81. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 325. Unfortunately, Atkins does not specify this congressman’s name.
82. Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 337–338.
83. E. F. Atkins to Katharine Atkins, Feb. 26, 1902, in Atkins, *Sixty Years in Cuba*, 329; Allen, *A Study in the Growth of E. Atkins & Co.*, 8.