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Felix Varela: Social Reformer

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Felix Varela was born on November 20, 1788 in Havana, the Spanish colony of New Spain, and spent his formative years in St. Augustine, Spanish Florida. He passed away on February 27, 1853, in St. Augustine, Florida, and in between was of great influence in Cuba, Spain, and in the greater New York City area and to a lesser extent in the St. Augustine area.

Felix Varela was the grandson of Lt. Col. Bartolome Morales (1737 - ?), commander of military forces in Spanish Florida. He helped raise Felix after the death of Felix's mother, Maria Josefa Ignacia, a few days after childbirth. Morales also served as Lieutenant Governor in Holguin, Cuba, interim governor of East Florida, and commander of the Third Battalion of the Cuban regiment at the Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine. Morales arrived in St. Augustine with his daughter Rita Josefa and grandson Felix. Felix was raised in large part by Aunt Rita.



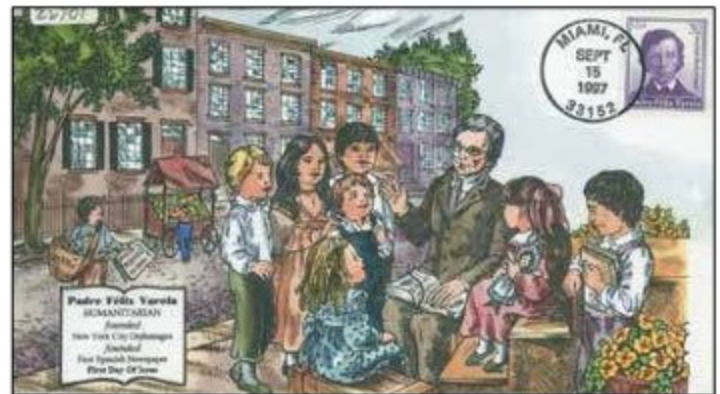
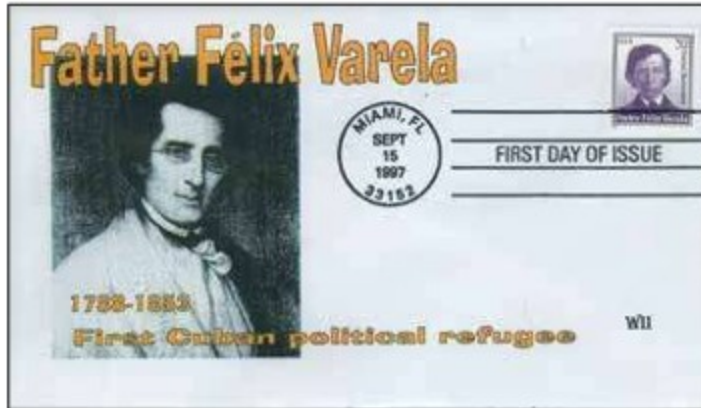
The mausoleum where Felix Varela was originally buried remains at the Tolomato Cemetery in St. Augustine, Florida.



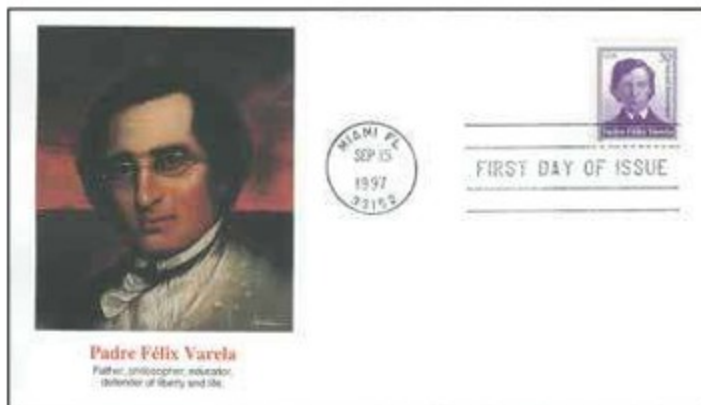
*Early photograph of
The Very Reverend Felix Varela,
D.D.*

At about the age of 14, his grandfather offered Felix the opportunity to attend military academy in Spain so he could become an officer as had his father and grandfather. Surprisingly, Felix declined and because of the influence of Father Miguel O'Reilly asked for permission to pursue a life in the priesthood. It was common to find Catholic Irish throughout the Spanish Empire who found it more desirable

than living under British Protestant rule in Ireland. Examples include Arturo O'Neil, governor of Spanish West Florida, and Bernardo O'Higgins, Viceroy of Chile, and his son of the same name who was a revolutionary in the wars of Spanish independence. Felix Varela attended San Carlos and San Ambrosio Seminary in Havana, the only seminary in Cuba at the time and simultaneously attended the University of Havana where he studied law. He was ordained at the age of 23. A year after being ordained he joined the faculty teaching philosophy, physics, and chemistry. While there he taught many illustrious Cubans and established a literary society.



Examples of U.S. first day covers from 1997 for Padre Felix Varela.



In 1821, Varela was chosen to represent Cuba in the Cortes Generales of Spain in Madrid. He joined in a petition to the crown for the independence of Latin America and published an essay for the abolition of slavery in Cuba. Varela also advocated for the autonomous governance for the island of Cuba. In this particular aspect he was influenced by Father Jose Agustin Caballero (1771-1835) who wrote and spoke on this particular idea extensively. Varela was his pupil at the San Carlos and San Ambrosio Seminary in Havana. After the French invasion of Spain (1823) overthrew the liberal government and restored Ferdinand VII to the throne, he brutally suppressed all opposition, and Varela was sentenced to death. Before being arrested he fled to Gibraltar and on to the United States -- specifically to New York City.

In New York City he founded the first Spanish newspaper in the United States (*El Habanero*), but it only produced seven issues. He went on to publish other newspapers such as *El Mensajero Semanal*, and *The Protestant's Abridger and Annotator*. He also published many articles about human rights, religious tolerance, cooperation between English and Spanish-speaking communities, and the importance of education.

Varela worked extensively with the Irish immigrant community and learned Gaelic ... probably recalling the influence of Father Miguel O'Reilly. In 1827, Varela founded the Church of the Immigrant in the poor Five Points neighborhood of Manhattan (the area was portrayed in the movie *Gangs of New York*), later known as Chinatown, and the congregation as the Church of the Transfiguration. It continues to serve a large immigrant

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community to this day, and houses a memorial to Varela.

In 1837 Varela was named Vicar General of the Diocese of New York. He served on the council that reformed Catholic education in the United States for nearly a century where he advocated teaching science in the vernacular language, English. He was awarded a doctorate in Baltimore, Maryland, originally founded as a Catholic colony. In 1848, he developed severe asthma and retired to St. Augustine, where he died in 1853. He was buried in a mausoleum in the Tolomato Cemetery. Materials were brought from Cuba as well as laborers to build the mausoleum. In 1911 his remains were removed to Cuba where he was reinterred in La Gran Aula at the University of Havana. The mausoleum remains at the Tolomato Cemetery, (see illustration), where I served for a year on the board of the Tolomato Cemetery Preservation Association. I am also lifetime member number 1.



Cuba issued this stamp in 2003 in recognition of the 150th anniversary of Felix Varela's death in St. Augustine, Florida.

The 32¢ Felix Varela stamp was released in Miami on September 15, 1997. A post office named in his honor is located at 14310 SW 8th Street (Tamiami Trail) in Miami. There is also a high school in Miami named in his honor and a street is named for him in St. Augustine, ironically misspelled as "Varella" Street. The San Carlos Institute in Key West is possibly named in honor of the seminary where Felix Varela studied. It is one of two possibilities.