

HOW TO TRAVEL TO CUBA NOW: SPECIAL REPORT

CUBA TRADE

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Mobile: Havana's Sister City

Alabama's port city has a relationship with Havana that goes back three centuries, right to the port of Havana, where a statue of Mobile's founder looks homeward. Today it is a large shipper of U.S. goods to Cuba.

By Doreen Hemlock





City Fathers: Mobile's mayor William S. "Sandy" Stimpson poses with the Statue of French naval hero Pierre Le Moyne

At the entrance to Havana harbor stands an eight-foot statue of French naval hero Pierre Le Moyne, dressed in an elegant overcoat, a sword at his side. Le Moyne is known for founding the capital of French Louisiana in 1702. Havana was a lifeline to the city near the Gulf of Mexico, supplying the settlers with building materials, weapons, and even French women who transited through Cuba. Le Moyne died in Havana and was buried there.

An identical statue now graces the waterfront of the city Le Moyne founded: Mobile, in today's Alabama. The bronze figure looks toward its Cuba counterpart just over 600 miles away across the Gulf. Leaders of Mobile had the replica made and installed in 2002 to honor the city's three centuries of ties with Cuba, a relationship that continues strong to this day.

Mobile might not come first to mind when considering U.S.-Cuba relations, but there are plenty of reasons to put Alabama's only seaport city high on the list—even baseball.

For 315 years, the port city—alternately French, Spanish, British, and finally American—has been trading with Cuba. In the past it imported sugar, tobacco, coffee, and rum while sending down rice, cotton, timber, and paper. Today, Mobile ships tons of U.S. chicken to Cuba monthly, ranking among the top U.S. export hubs to the island.

When the Soviet Union dissolved, Mobile was the first U.S. town to develop a Sister City link with the communist island. Since 1993, its nonprofit Society Mobile-La Habana has been organizing trips, conferences and other exchanges, long before engagement with Cuba became popular.

Perhaps most startling, Mobile stands out as the place that gave Cuba its beloved sport of baseball. Two Cuban brothers who attended Mobile's Spring Hill College learned the sport and returned home to start Havana's first baseball team some 150 years ago, building an enduring cultural bond.

To be sure, Mobile lacks the big Cuban-American community that ensures links to the island for other U.S. cities such as Miami. But that may be an advantage for the coastal town that combines the Old South charm of Savannah with the French-Spanish flair of New Orleans.

"We don't have the political biases in our community that some of the southern cities in Florida have in their population," said William S. "Sandy" Stimpson, Mobile's mayor since 2013. When it comes to Cuba, Mobile is pragmatic. Business-minded Stimpson even visited Cuba last year, looking to expand trade.

Indeed, it was the Alabama State Port Authority that filled the void this winter when Florida seaports decided not to sign cooperation agreements with Cuba amid new political pressures. Port leaders from Mobile traveled to Florida to sign their own cooperation pact with Cuban port officials who were visiting Tampa. "With that signing, we made a very public statement that we're very much in favor of trade with Cuba," said James K. Lyons, CEO of the state agency based in Mobile. The city's decades-long engagement encouraged Alabama's governor and state legislature to recently call for lifting the U.S. embargo on Cuba, a move that state officials said would help boost Alabama and U.S. business.

"Mobile really stepped out before anyone else did in trying



Mobile - Fast Facts

Population: 193,000 city, 414,000 metro area

Major Industries: Port of Mobile, Aerospace manufacturing

Major Employers: Port of Mobile, Austal, Airbus, ThyssenKrupp

Ground Transportation: 2 Interstate Highways, 5 Class 1 Railroads

Water Transportation: Port of Mobile (54 million+ tons annually)

Airports: Mobile Regional (AA, United, Delta); Brookley (Air Cargo)

Port of Mobile: Economic Impact of \$22.8 billion

Deep Water: Aerial view of Mobile's docks and harbor

to develop the Cuba relationship," said attorney Grey Redditt Jr., president of the Society Mobile-La Habana and a frequent visitor to the island. "As a result, the Cubans view Mobile as a close friend, more so than South Florida cities where there is a lot of pushback for opening up."

Why Mobile (and Alabama) back Cuba trade

It might seem strange that Alabama, a Republican-led state, would be so keen to engage with Cuba. But Alabama counts agriculture among its largest industries, and that's where Cuba offers opportunity now.

Since Congress passed an embargo waiver in 2000 allowing sales of U.S. farm goods to Cuba, poultry has been the biggest U.S. export to the island. Alabama is second in the nation in producing broiler chickens after Georgia, and Mobile is key to shipping that chicken to Cuba. The city's port lately has been sending one or two ships of frozen chicken parts to Cuba per month, typically with some 4,500 tons per load. Shipments neared 50,000 tons last year, U.S. government data shows.

"From the standpoint of costs, it's a benefit for Cuba to ship poultry from Mobile. It's a straight shot from Alabama" near U.S. chicken production sites and roughly a day-and-a-half sail away, said Dan Autrey, chief of staff and legal adviser at the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries. Autrey has visited Cuba three times on official missions, twice with the state's agriculture commissioner.

Still, some shipments now go first to Kingston, Jamaica, and

then to Cuba's Mariel port. Volume remains limited by U.S. rules that require Cuba to pay cash in advance for farm products. If sales to Cuba were allowed on credit, "we could potentially triple the business that we're doing," said Lyons, eager to establish regularly scheduled service directly to Cuba's leading port.

Financing for sales would be welcomed by the Alabama Poultry and Egg Association, which says their industry provides a \$15 billion impact and 86,000 jobs in the state. "When we visit Cuba, Commerce and Agriculture people always tell us, 'Other countries sell us on credit. You don't,'" said Ray Hilburn, an associate director, who has visited the island twice. "We want to increase demand for our product."

Beyond poultry: Manufacturing, tourism and imports

Of course, Mobile has lots more to offer Cuba than chicken. The coastal city of some 200,000 people is part of a metro area of nearly 1 million residents, Alabama's third largest. While its port and trade have long been its main economic engine, the city has recently been attracting foreign investment to major manufacturing operations, including the first U.S. aircraft assembly plant by Europe's Airbus, a \$1 billion-plus steel mill owned by Luxembourg's ArcelorMittal, and shipbuilding by Australian contractor Austal. Just Austal's naval shipyard alone employs more than 4,000 people.

"We're the only place in North America where big airplanes and ships are being built. There are ship-builders around, and Seattle and Charleston build airplanes, but no one else is doing



**“They sell the greatest T-shirt on the base,
It says Guantanamo: Close but No Cigar**

In Guantanamo: Jerry Lathan, a long-time Republican leader in Alabama, sits on the Alabama state council of Engage Cuba

Today, Cuba represents just a tiny fraction of Mobile's port activity. With more than \$850 million in improvements since 2000, the seaport now handles more than 54 million tons of yearly cargo at its public and private terminals, including petroleum products bound for refineries. That hefty volume typically ranks the seaport among the top dozen or so nationwide by tonnage.

But when two-way trade with Cuba starts, Mobile could have an edge over U.S. rivals. “We’ve built relations over the years with different people in Cuba that put Mobile in a favorable light, so if there’s contestable cargo where it can go to this port or that port, maybe Mobile could garner a position of some favor,” Lyons told Cuba Trade.

Small business interest: From construction services to farm equipment and mangoes

Owners of small businesses in Mobile see Cuban opportunities too, including Jerry Lathan, who founded The Lathan Company 36 years ago. His firm started out doing roofing and branched out to historic restoration. It now employs about 40 people and brings in \$8 million-plus a year, he said.

Lathan sits on the Alabama state council of Engage Cuba, a group lobbying for greater ties with the island. He sees engagement helping draw Cuba into the global commercial system.

“Being involved with trade that promotes agricultural goods and helps relations with our port is a better path than abject isolationism,” said Lathan, a long-time Republican leader in Ala-

bama. “Staring contests usually don’t get you anywhere. Engagement is different than surrender. We need to find a way to make a difference and change.”

Lathan recently visited the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo in eastern Cuba to explore a possible roofing contract and wondered when Washington will let U.S. contractors work in the rest of the island. “They sell the greatest T-shirt on the base,” Lathan recalled. “It says: Guantanamo: Close but No Cigar.”

Already building Cuba ties is The Woerner Companies, a fourth-generation family farming business based near Mobile that employs some 300 people, operates nationwide, and brings in more than \$40 million a year in revenues. The family started out farming potatoes and other vegetables in Alabama, but now mainly grows and sells turf grass for homes and real-estate developments. It’s also building a factory to dehydrate fruits and vegetables into flour and, maybe later, for healthy snacks.

Christina Woerner McInnis first visited Cuba several years ago with an Alabama agricultural exchange mission and got hooked, returning several times since. “You get where everyone has their set ways of doing things. It’s real hard to change. But when you go to Cuba, you get a totally fresh perspective,” she said. That includes growing food without chemicals and using limited machinery, often producing fruits little known in Alabama, like the creamy tropical mamey. “They have ingenuity to think outside the box. It’s all natural,” she said. “And they are willing to share everything they do.”

To reciprocate the hospitality, the Woerners welcomed a



Field Research: Christina Woerner McNnis of The Woerner Company in Cuba

"the regulatory unknown. Obviously, no one wants to invest significant time and resources on something on potentially shaky ground," said Ensler.

At Woerner, McNnis definitely takes the long view, focusing on what Cuba and the U.S. have in common. She laughs out loud about the time her uncle Eddie met a farmer in Cuba who looked like his double and was equally hyperactive. "They said, 'Mi hermano,' [My brother]," recalled McNnis, as she snapped a photograph of the burly, gray-haired, mustached duo. "It was the funniest picture you ever did see."

Long-term interest in Cuba extends even to the state's visionary business leader David G. Bronner, who took the Retirement Systems of Alabama (RSA) from a \$500 million fund in 1973 to top \$34 billion today, partly by investing in real estate from golf resorts to office buildings. In Mobile, the pension fund built the RSA Battle House Tower, described as the tallest building on the U.S. Gulf Coast outside Houston. The spired tower rising 745 feet takes its name from the adjacent, historic Battle House hotel, which was elegantly renovated as part of the complex opened in 2007. Montgomery-based RSA also owns or developed other key buildings and hotels in greater Mobile.

"I'm totally fascinated by Cuba. It's really the island of the whole Caribbean that everyone looks to," Bronner said. He visited with former Mobile Mayor Mike Dow, who spearheaded the city's push for Cuba engagement starting in the 1990s and remains a friend. Bronner has seen how Cuba is opening its market

and would like Washington to let U.S. business in. "There will be big changes in the next decade. Everyone in the world recognizes Cuba. We're the last country that doesn't," said Bronner.

Building links through exchanges in education, research and art

With the embargo limiting U.S. business, many exchanges with Cuba now focus on education and culture. Especially active is the long-established University of Alabama, whose Cuba Initiative kicked off in 2002 and grew into a Center for Cuba Collaboration and Scholarship. The Center has sent more than 100 faculty members and at least 80 students to Cuba, some for repeated visits, from its base in Tuscaloosa in west-central Alabama. It's been organizing semester-abroad programs in Cuba since 2009, some involving classes at the University of Havana, said co-director Steve Miller, who first visited in 2002.

In Mobile, the Center has been helping with varied Cuba projects, recently linking local curators with artists in Cuba for an upcoming exhibit at the Alabama Contemporary Art Center. "Cuba is our closest foreign country. We don't operate in a vacuum, and we need to connect with people near us," said curator Amanda Solley, 30, a painter who visited Havana in April to help organize the Mobile show.

Solley first met artists from the island at the University of Alabama's third annual Cuba Week held last October in