

## **CASANOVA DE VILLAYERDE, EMILIA (1832 ?–1897)**

“aquí hay más miseria de la que Ud. puede imaginarse entre los emigrados cubano. No ya solo hombres, sino mujeres y niños, desnudos, descalzos y sin pan que llevarse a lo boca.” (Here there is more misery than you could imagine among the immigrant Cubans. Not only the men, but women and children, naked, barefoot, and without bread to take to their mouths.) Emilia Casanova de Villaverde. Personal correspondence to president of La Junata Patriótica de Cubanas en Nueva York.

The political activist and doyenne of Cuban independence, Emilia Casanova was born into a rich slaveholding family in Cuba. As a member of the Creole elite, young Casanova distanced herself from her father's conservative views. Her first trip to the United States in 1852 had a profound impact on her. The period she spent in New York was long enough for her to come in contact with eminent members of the Cuban exile community, and she agreed to carry some important, but subversive, documents back to the island. In 1854 the entire family moved to Philadelphia where she met and married the Cuban patriot and writer, Cirilo Villaverde, a staunch supporter of independence and author of the island's seminal novel, *Cecilia Valdés*. The couple moved to New York and Emilia quickly integrated into the exile community, organized public meetings, wrote articles and treatises, and opened her home to the friends of the Cuban revolution. She was a founding member of several political women's organizations including the earliest, Las Patriotas de Cuba, and La Liga de las Hijas de Cuba. These groups supported the Cuban militants during the Ten Years' War through a variety of activities and fund raisers. Casanova continued to build networks with eminent Americans and foreigners friendly to the cause of Cuba Libre. She was the first Latina woman to address the Congress of the United States on behalf of the independence movement. A leading figure in the exile community, during the Spanish-Cuban-American war (1898), Casanova de Villaverde resumed her activism.