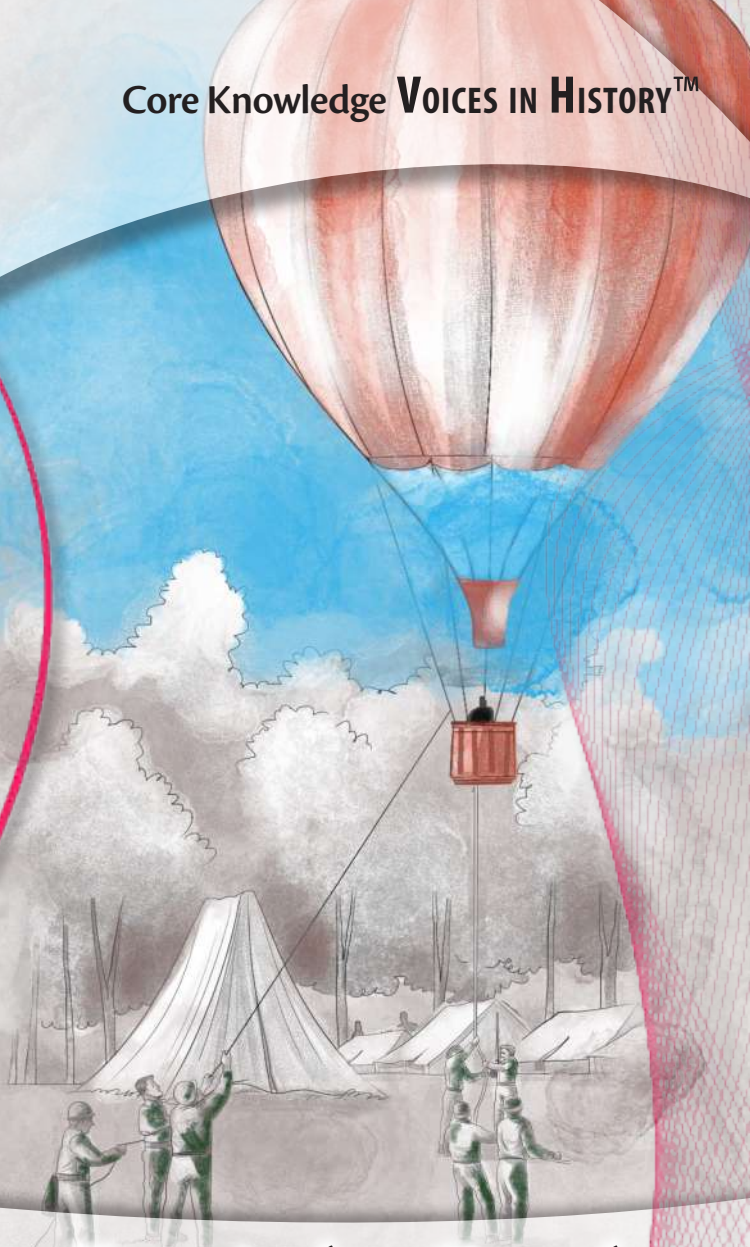




Core Knowledge **VOICES IN HISTORY™**



# **Federico Fernández Cavada**

## **The Spy in the Hot-Air Balloon**

by Silvia López

We are pleased that our materials in the Core Knowledge Curriculum Series™, Core Classics® Series, Voices in History™ Series, Collection of Tales™ Series, and Adventures in History™ Series available on our [website](#), are made available through a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



Through the license, the user is free:

- To share: to copy, distribute, and transmit the work
- To remix: to adapt the work

Under the following conditions:

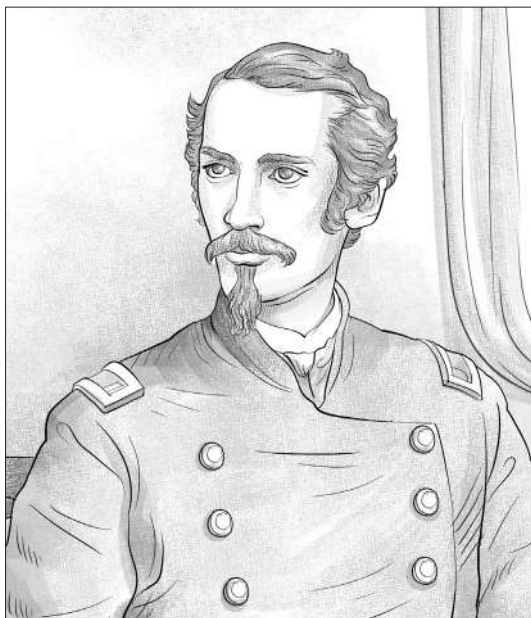
- You must attribute the work in the following manner:

This work is based on an original work of the Core Knowledge® Foundation made available through licensing under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial- ShareAlike 4.0 International License. This does not in any way imply that the Core Knowledge Foundation endorses this work.

- You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one.

With the understanding that for reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do that is with a link to this web page:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>



# Federico Fernández Cavada

## The Spy in the Hot-Air Balloon

by

*Silvia López*

# VOICES IN HISTORY: BIOGRAPHY SERIES™

ISBN 978-1-68380-903-6

COPYRIGHT © 2023 CORE KNOWLEDGE FOUNDATION

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PRINTED IN CANADA

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR:

ROSIE MCCORMICK

CORE KNOWLEDGE FOUNDATION

801 EAST HIGH STREET

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA 22902

[www.coreknowledge.org](http://www.coreknowledge.org)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1:</b> In the Air .....	1
<b>CHAPTER 2:</b> The Beginning: Who Was Federico Fernández Cavada? .....	8
<b>CHAPTER 3:</b> A Young Man in Philadelphia .....	13
<b>CHAPTER 4:</b> The Panama Railroad Company .....	19
<b>CHAPTER 5:</b> Fighting for a Cause .....	24
<b>CHAPTER 6:</b> Prisoner of War .....	37
<b>CHAPTER 7:</b> Back to Cuba .....	44
<b>CHAPTER 8:</b> The Last Days .....	49
<b>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS</b> .....	53
<b>MEET THE AUTHOR</b> .....	56
<b>MEET THE ILLUSTRATOR</b> .....	58



# 1

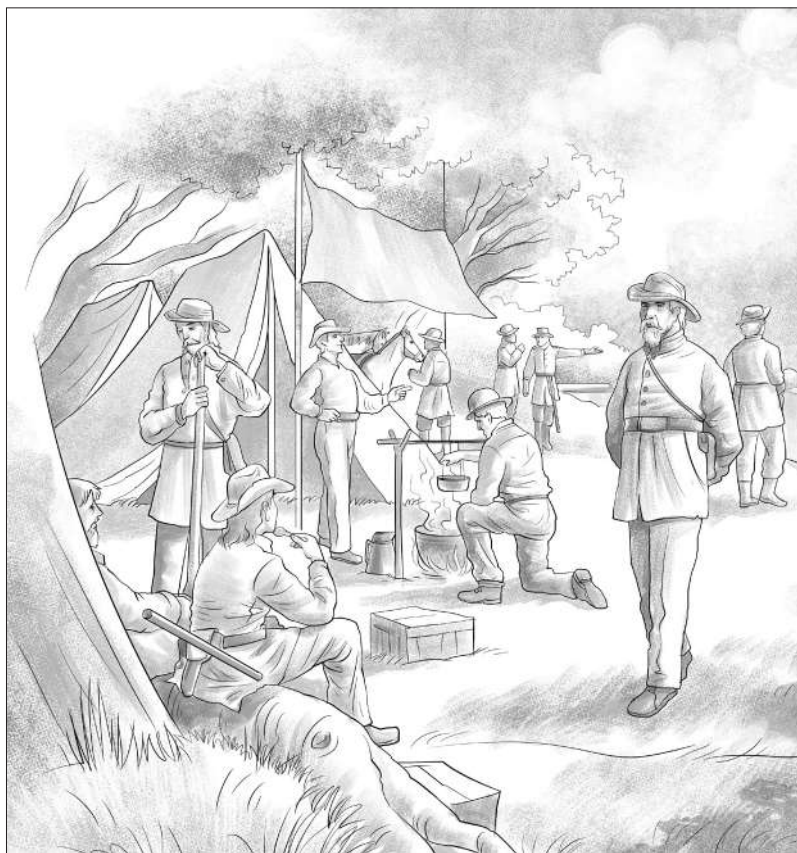
## In the Air

Captain Federico Fernández Cavada lifted his spyglass and surveyed the enemy camp. Tents, cannons, and campfires were spread out across a patch of land in southeastern Virginia. Suddenly, what looked like tiny clouds along the ground caught his attention. Could the puffs of dust be made by horses' hooves and marching soldiers? That could be a sign that troops were on the move. This was the kind of important information that the young officer would relay to his commanders.

It was the spring of 1862, and the American Civil War had been raging for a year. The United States, once a whole nation, had split in two. The war had pitted Americans against each other.

The Northern states still thought of themselves as the United States of America, or the Union. But the Southern states had formed a new country: the Confederate States of America, or the Confederacy. The two sides had given each other nicknames. Union soldiers—and anyone who

agreed with the North—were called Yankees. Those who supported the states in the South were called Rebels.

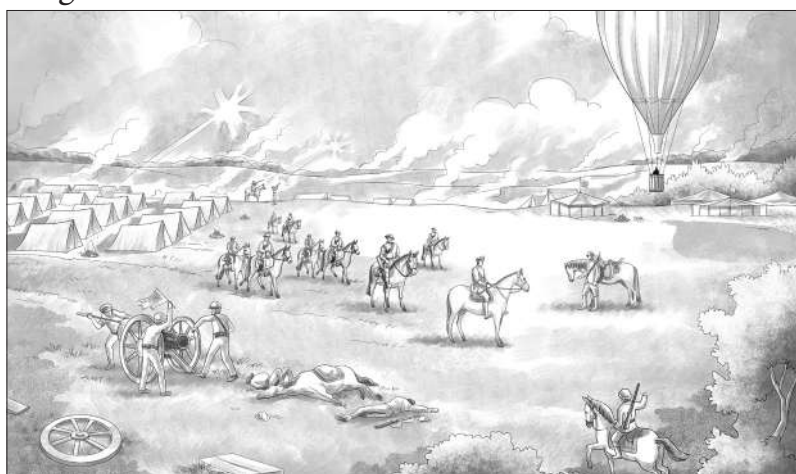


### **Hand-to-Hand Combat**

*Unlike wars today, the Civil War was very much fought in hand-to-hand combat. Yankee and Rebel camps were often set up at short distances from each other. The work done by spies was an important part of keeping tabs on the enemy.*

Federico was spying for the Union army. But he wasn't perched on a tree limb or lying flat on a hilltop. He was balancing inside a wicker basket hundreds of feet in the air. Above him loomed the globe of the *Constitution*, a huge balloon filled with twenty-five thousand cubic feet of hydrogen gas. With the camps fairly close to each other, Federico's balloon could hover over the edge of its own camp and have a broad view of everything that lay below. A team of handlers in the Union camp were in charge of manning thick ropes to keep it from flying away—and into danger.

If the balloon landed on enemy ground, its passengers, known as aeronauts, could be taken as prisoners of war. The Union could also lose the *Constitution* as well as the telegraph equipment it carried for sending messages to the ground.



As an enlisted member of the Union army's newly-formed Balloon Corps, Federico was trained in the use of special instruments that measured heights and distances. From the air, he drew a map of the land's topography—hills, creeks, woods, and other natural formations. Maps at the time were not as available, generally not as accurate, as they are today. A good map helped in planning battle strategies. One drawn from the air by a skilled topographer was rare and especially valuable.

As he sketched, Federico also described what he saw to a trained telegraph operator on board. The operator used Morse code to send Federico's words to another operator on the ground through a wire hanging off the balloon's side. In Morse code, each letter is represented by a different combination of dots and dashes. At the camp, the dots and dashes were translated, or changed, back into words.

### **Messages from the Sky**

*When the Civil War began, the telegraph was already widely used. The process of sending messages over long distances had been around for decades. But Samuel Morse had only invented his code in the 1830s. The Civil War was the first time his code was used to send messages from the sky!*

Whizz! Shots flew past Federico's head and that of his companion. Rebel soldiers had fired at the balloon. At a certain height, the aeronauts might be out of the reach of most artillery. But what goes up must come down. As soon as the handlers began pulling the *Constitution* back to Earth, it was again within range of the enemy's weapons.

**Don't Look Up**

*For the first two years of the war, the Balloon Corps was an important part of surveillance. Soldiers like Federico—good at observing, skilled in drawing and writing, and not afraid to fly—were recruited to ride in the balloons and gather information.*

Who was Federico Fernández Cavada? Why was he willing to be sent hundreds of feet into the air to spy on Confederate soldiers? The answers to these questions lie in Federico's earlier life.

**Thaddeus Lowe and the U.S. Balloon Corps**

*The balloon that took Federico to the skies was one of seven in the Union army's Balloon Corps. The founder of the corps was a self-taught scientist and part-time showman. His name was Thaddeus Lowe.*

*Thaddeus had always dreamed of flying. As a boy, he'd*

*placed a cat in a cage attached to a large kite. He let air currents carry the cat, cage, and kite up hundreds of feet. The terrified cat made it down safely and promptly fled. Thaddeus never used animals in his experiments again.*

*Later, Thaddeus began learning about the science that made hot-air balloons fly. He bought his own balloon and earned money by taking people up on rides. He also started building balloons for others. By his twenties, he had made a name for himself. But his biggest dream—flying a balloon across the Atlantic Ocean—was put on hold when the Civil War broke out. Wanting to serve his country, Thaddeus formed a new dream. He'd offer his balloons for spying.*

*How did Thaddeus manage to get the attention of the United States government? He used his skills as a showman to impress President Abraham Lincoln.*

*In June 1861, the president stood at a second-story window in the White House. He watched as Thaddeus launched the Enterprise near the U.S. Capitol. Thaddeus used city coal gas, which contained hydrogen, to fill up the balloon. In the field, he would produce the hydrogen through a chemical process.*

*Thaddeus had a telegraph operator with him in the balloon. The operator sent a telegraph message, or telegram, from the air to a station on the ground, from where it was relayed to the White House. There, another telegraph operator*

*wrote the message down on paper. Apparently, the president liked what he read. He arranged to meet Thaddeus, and the two men talked long into the night. Thaddeus was even asked to stay and sleep at the White House!*

*President Lincoln and Thaddeus discussed how balloons could be useful in the war. Balloons, Thaddeus said, could send telegrams to military leaders below, even as battles were taking place. Aeronauts could also draw maps showing enemy holdings and territories.*

*Thaddeus's ideas were given the go-ahead, and a new branch of the military was created—the United States Army Balloon Corps. Thaddeus began building more balloons, giving them patriotic names like the Constitution, the United States, the Washington, the Eagle, and the Excelsior. The two largest, the Union and the Intrepid, were as tall as a five-story building and could lift several people at a time.*

# 2

## The Beginning: Who Was Federico Fernández Cavada?

The dictionary defines *extraordinary* as “very unusual or remarkable.” But how do we know if someone in the past was extraordinary? Fortunately, because of historical records, we know a lot about many people in history who were indeed extraordinary. However, there are just as many extraordinary people that we know little or nothing about. Often, we have to piece together whatever snippets of information there are. And that is largely true of Federico Fernández Cavada’s life.

We know that Federico was an author, poet, artist, mapmaker, engineer, surveyor, soldier, leader, and aeronaut—and, ultimately, a hero. And yet, although he left behind a book, some artwork, and a few letters that give us an idea of his thoughts and feelings, much of what we know about his personal life was written by others.

But there's one way we might get to know Federico better. We can imagine what his life was like based on the circumstances of the time in which he lived and the events in which he took part. And we can piece together the little we do know for sure.

Federico Eduardo Isidoro Fernández Cavada was born on July 8, 1831, in the port city of Cienfuegos, on the island of Cuba. In Federico's Cuban birth certificate, part of his last name was misspelled as *Cabada*. Back then, misspellings happened often in birth certificates and other official records, and some documents from later in Federico's life also spell his name that way. *Fernández Cavada* is a compound last name. Both words are used together as one name.

Federico's father, Isidoro, had made his way to Cuba from an area of northern Spain called Santander. Federico's mother, Emily Howard Gatier, came from a prominent family. Some of her ancestors on her father's side had come to Cuba from France. Another part of her family lived in the United States, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Emily and Isidoro met and married in Cienfuegos, where they had three sons: Emilio, Federico, and Adolfo.

## **Cuba**

*Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean Sea. It lies just south of the state of Florida, on the edge of the Gulf of Mexico.*

*Christopher Columbus arrived on the island in October 1492, and as he did wherever he landed in the New World, he claimed the island for Spain. Spanish colonists soon followed, creating settlements. One settlement would become Havana, later Cuba's capital city.*

*Before the Europeans, Cuba was inhabited by Native tribes. The largest of these was the Taíno people, a subgroup of the Arawak peoples of Central and South America. The Taíno had no written language, but some of their words—like tabacu' (tobacco), barbicu' (barbecue), hamaca (hammock), canoa (canoe), and iguana—found their way into English. The word hurricane comes from huraca'n, the word for the violent storms thought to be caused by the Taíno goddess of wind.*

*People in the New World had no immunity to diseases such as measles and smallpox brought by Europeans. Diseases, along with forced labor, nearly wiped out the Native populations. Eventually, Cuba's location made it an important gateway to the Americas.*

*Federico was only seven years old when his father passed away. On July 28, 1841, Emily and her sons boarded a ship, the brig Delaware, in Cienfuegos. She had decided to raise the boys close to her family in Philadelphia.*

*Emily was later remarried to Samuel Dutton, but the boys kept their father's Spanish last name. The new family moved to Philadelphia's Spruce Street.*

*For Federico, Adolfo, and Emilio, life in Philadelphia in the 1840s would have been a lot like that of other middle-class children of the time. Families used the "best room," or parlor, to read, sing, or play charades. They also played card games that taught history, geography, and science—and for girls, recipes and cooking tips. Checkers, chess, and board games were big favorites. Instead of dice, which were seen as part of gambling, children twirled a teetotum, a sort of spinning top with numbers.*

*Clothes back then were very different from today's. For a fancy occasion, Federico's mother, Emily, may have worn a dress with a big skirt, narrow sleeves, and a very tight V-shaped waistline. Ladies—and gentlemen, too—tried to follow the fashions set in Paris, France.*

*Everyday clothes were probably simpler. Girls wore shorter versions of grown-up dresses. Boys wore a tunic and a belt over pants. But up to about the age of five, both boys and girls usually wore dresses!*

*It wasn't always easy to tell small boys and girls apart.*

---

**charades:** game in which players try to guess what other players are acting out

*Sometimes, one could do so by their hair. Boys usually had their hair parted on the side. Girls often wore their hair parted down the middle or pulled straight back. Once boys and girls were older, they dressed a lot like adults—at least when posing for pictures and paintings!*

*It's easy to imagine Federico's house as a lively place filled with the noise of three boys and their friends. They all might be trying to win at games like marbles, dominoes, and pick-up-sticks. In good weather, there was plenty to do outdoors. Federico might chase a hoop down the street with a stick, or hide, from one of his brothers during hide-and-seek. They might even play "base ball," making up the rules as they went along. Today's rules for baseball weren't formalized until 1845 and may have taken a while to reach the children's street games.*

*Whatever clothes Federico wore or games he played, we will simply have to imagine. What is clear is that Federico developed a strong sense of adventure.*



# 3

## A Young Man in Philadelphia

**I**n the mid-1840s, Federico attended Philadelphia's Central High School, the first public high school in Pennsylvania and one of the oldest in the United States. It's still open today.

At the time, many wealthy families sent their sons to expensive academies. Those schools taught mainly literature and classical languages, such as Latin and Greek. The families thought those subjects were important to create young gentlemen. Not everyone believed that poor or middle-class boys needed to study much after elementary school. Such boys often became apprentices in trades.

When a public high school was proposed in the 1830s, many of Philadelphia's taxpayers were not happy. At the time, industries depended on laborers. Voters were afraid that educated men would not be willing to take those jobs.

But Central High School's founders were men with advanced ideas. One of its early presidents, or principals, was the great-great-grandson of Benjamin Franklin. From the start, Central focused on preparing young men (girls were not admitted until 1983!) for "useful" careers.

At Central, Federico would have taken classes in art, math, science, engineering, and mechanical drawing. The school also encouraged writing. Federico's education would serve him well at different stages of his life. It sharpened his talents as a writer and artist, and he put to good use his training in engineering and drawing.

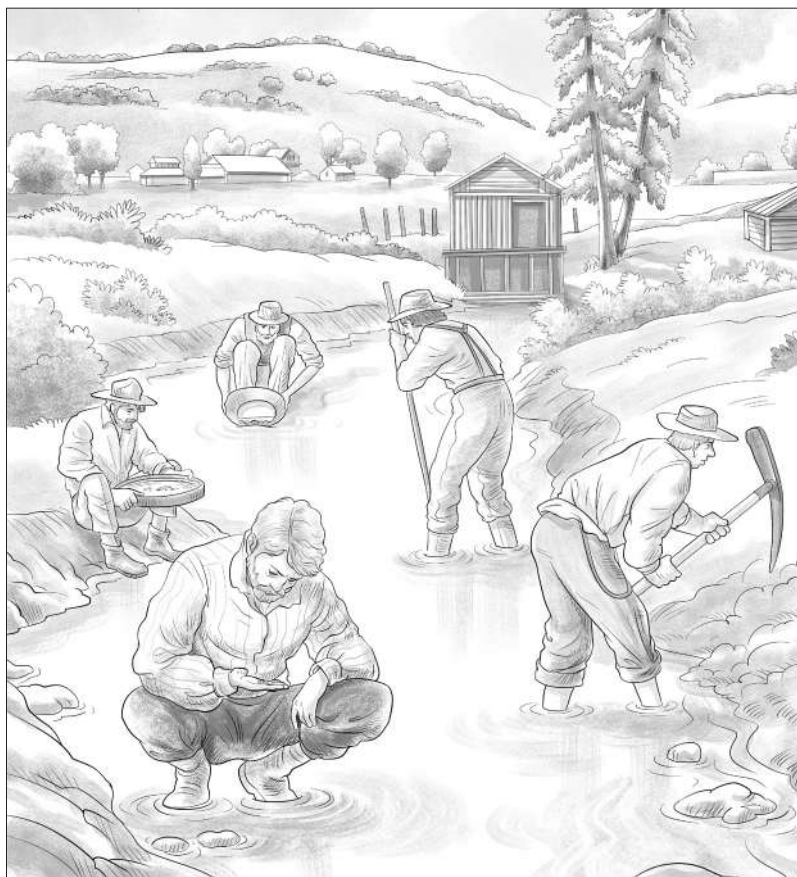
Central High School received a lot of praise and was visited by important people. Federico may have been a student when James K. Polk, the United States president at the time, visited in 1847.

The year 1848 was an important year, both for Federico and for the United States. Just as Federico was close to becoming an adult, the country was also growing.

That year, the United States won a war against Mexico. Much of the land in the West and Southwest became U.S. territories after the Mexican-American War. Quickly, settlers began moving to those lands.

Another event that year, in California, sped up this movement even more. It affected the country's history. It also changed the lives of many Americans, including the future of seventeen-year-old Federico.

In January 1848, a sawmill worker in what is now Coloma, California, unexpectedly found gold in a nearby river. This prompted what became known as the California Gold Rush—and *rush* was a good description!



People were excited about the idea of becoming rich. Thousands headed for the western states and territories, eager to make a fortune. Everyone was looking for ways to travel quickly and safely.

In the 1840s, transportation by land to the West Coast was not great. Roads beyond a certain point were little more than trails. People traveled on horses or in wooden wagons—or even walked!—part of the 2,500 miles or so between the coasts. Others boarded ships that sailed around Cape Horn, the southernmost tip of South America. The long, dangerous trip, about 17,000 miles, was rough and took several months.

There was a third way. It was faster but still difficult. It meant traveling across something called the Isthmus of Panama.

### **The Isthmus of Panama**

*On a map, the huge continents of North America and South America are linked by what looks like a bumpy, squiggly ribbon. This is Central America. The ribbon's thinnest point—only about thirty miles across—is the Isthmus of Panama. An isthmus is a narrow strip of land with sea on either side.*

*The Pacific Ocean borders the Isthmus of Panama to the west. On the east, the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea lead out to the Atlantic Ocean. A person could cross the isthmus*

*from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean without having to go around the continent of South America.*

*How was this route discovered?*

*On his fourth voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus sailed along the east coast of Central America. If this narrow strip of land did not exist, he may have sailed on to the Pacific and completed his dream of reaching Asia, and history would have been much different.*

*Soon after Columbus's reports about this land, the Spanish arrived and created settlements. One conquistador, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, landed at what is today known as the Isthmus of Panama. Not much later, he heard from the Indigenous people living there that a great sea lay just a few miles to the southwest. In 1513, Balboa set off to the southwest with 190 men. After twenty-five days of hacking their way through steaming jungles and swamps, Balboa and his men became the first Europeans to set eyes on the Pacific Ocean from its eastern shore. Balboa waded into the water—supposedly in full armor!—and claimed both land and sea for Spain.*

*To pay for its wars in Europe, Spain began plundering treasure from America's rich civilizations. Some of the richest, like that of the Incas of Peru, lay on the Pacific coast. Other than traveling overland, one way to reach the west coast of South America was by ship around the southern tip of the continent. The ships had to weather storms and pirates, and countless lives and cargo were lost. Thanks to Balboa's crossing of the isthmus, there was now a way to avoid the long sea voyage.*

*The Spaniards began building a road through the jungle just wide enough for pack animals. River canoes transported the loads back and forth the rest of the way. For centuries, this was the only way to travel across Central America. When gold was discovered in California, more people were willing to take the route. It was shorter than going by land across the United States or sailing around the tip of South America.*

*Passengers boarded ships in eastern cities, like Boston and New York, and sailed down the Atlantic Ocean to Panama. There, they paid outrageous prices to companies that transported them, on mules and boats, to the Pacific Ocean. Waiting ships then took them up to California and other cities on the West Coast of the United States. The whole trip took weeks rather than the months required by the overland and Cape Horn routes.*

# 4

## The Panama Railroad Company

**L**ong, hazardous overland trips. Rough sea voyages. Dangerous jungles. It seemed as if people wanting to make their way to California found nothing but hardships.

But one industry that was already growing in the 1800s was looking for better ways to help people get there.

In the eastern parts of the United States, railway companies had found ways to make trains faster and more comfortable. A fairly good system of railways took passengers back and forth between the bigger towns and cities. As the western states and territories grew, trains began to transport passengers between cities there too.

But there was a big problem.

No single line connected the two parts of the United States!

Many trains going east–west or west–east ran for short distances. When the line ended, passengers and

their baggage had to get off. If another line was not nearby, they traveled in stagecoaches or wagons or on horseback to catch the next train.

Two big companies, the Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad, set out to join their individual tracks to form a transcontinental rail line. But the project was difficult. It needed thousands of laborers. Conditions were harsh. The railroad took a long time to complete. The last spike of the railroad was pounded into the ground on May 10, 1869—just over twenty years after the gold rush began.

For decades, attempts had been made to build a railroad across Panama. All of them had failed. The jungle conditions were too challenging. But the gold rush created a new demand. A group of American businessmen decided to try again. They formed the Panama Railroad Company.

And Federico was offered a job!

As a boy, Federico had been sickly. His mother, Emily, was not happy when told he was to take a job as surveyor . . . in a Central America jungle!

What made Federico decide to do this? Friends may have told him that working outdoors would be good for his health. Or maybe he longed for adventure. Whatever the reason, in 1850, nineteen-year-old Federico traded

the city streets of Philadelphia for the tropical jungles of the Isthmus of Panama.

Federico arrived in Panama in 1850. Although he was well trained for the job, nothing could have prepared him for the working conditions. He probably wrote letters home describing his experiences during the years he spent there. We don't have those letters, but many other accounts were written. Most tell of the misery endured by everyone, from engineers to ditch diggers.

Land that looked like solid ground could actually be quicksand. With a wrong step, a person might disappear in minutes. So could machinery. This meant that a lot of the work had to be done by hand.

Men used knives and machetes to hack through vines and thorny plants that ripped through clothing. Antibiotics had not yet been invented, so if a small scratch became infected, it could result in serious illness. Poor sanitation and dirty water caused outbreaks of cholera, a disease brought on by bacteria.

Danger was everywhere. Jaguars, tarantulas, and venomous snakes lurked in the jungle. Workers constantly fought off millions of ants and sand flies.

---

**quicksand:** loose, wet sand into which people or things can sink easily  
**Antibiotics:** substances that treat infections by killing bacteria

Worse still were the mosquitoes. They swarmed in black clouds around the men as they worked. At the time, it wasn't known that mosquitoes carried malaria and yellow fever. Thousands of workers got sick from these diseases, including Federico. He may have come down with malaria several times.

Many of the men were brought in from the islands of the Caribbean, but there were also waves of Irishmen, Germans, French, and Chinese. New workers were constantly needed to replace those who died. It is thought that the railroad's construction cost more than twelve thousand lives. This number could be even higher. Many workers could not read or write. They weren't always registered. To the companies, they were nameless.



Federico remained in Panama until surveying of the railroad was complete. A friend of his, Oliver Wilson Davis, later gave a flowery account of Federico's condition when he got back to Philadelphia: "The malarious swamps of the Isthmus had not improved his health, but on the contrary had planted in his system the seeds of disease which followed him through life."

In poor health, Federico spent the next few years trying to get back his strength. He read, wrote, drew, and thought about what to do next.

Then, in 1861, another event changed his life.

The American Civil War broke out.

# 5

## Fighting for a Cause

**I**n the 1800s, the United States had millions of enslaved people. Most were in the Southern states, where farming depended on their labor.

The Northern states had begun to move away from farming and toward manufacturing goods. There were five times more factories in the North than in the South. Skilled workers, rather than slave labor, became important—though the cotton that was grown in the South was processed in many of these Northern factories and mills, making the owners of those businesses very rich.

Gradually, more and more people came to understand that slavery was wrong, and a growing number wanted to end the enslavement of people completely. Those fighting to end it were called *abolitionists*. The abolitionist viewpoint threatened businesses that relied on slave labor either directly or indirectly.

A politician by the name of Abraham Lincoln thought slavery was a “moral, social, and political evil.” He was afraid that the issue of slavery would divide the country. In a speech in 1858, he said that a “government cannot endure . . . half slave and half *free*.”

When Abraham Lincoln ran for president in 1860, the Southern states thought he would not just stop the spread of slavery but end it altogether. They threatened to secede, or break away, from the United States if Lincoln became president. A few weeks after Lincoln’s election, they began to do just that.

In April 1861, what was now the Confederacy attacked Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. This attack on a fort held by Northern troops was considered an act of war.

The American Civil War formally began on April 12, 1861. From then on, the Southern “rebels” and the Northern “yanks” engaged in battle after bloody battle. The outcome would determine the future of the United States of America.

<b>The United States of America (Union) During the Civil War</b>				
Nine* of the original thirteen colonies were part of the Union.				
California	Connecticut*	Delaware*	Illinois	Indiana
Iowa	Kansas	Kentucky	Maine	Maryland*
Massachusetts*	Michigan	Minnesota	Missouri	Nevada
New Hampshire*	New Jersey*	New York*	Ohio	Oregon
Pennsylvania*	Rhode Island*	Vermont	West Virginia	Wisconsin
<b>Territories of the United States That Joined the Union During the Civil War</b>				
Colorado	The Dakotas	Nebraska	New Mexico	Utah
Washington				
<b>The Confederate States of America During the Civil War</b>				
Four* of the original thirteen colonies were part of the Confederacy.				
Alabama	Arkansas	Florida	Georgia*	Louisiana
Mississippi	North Carolina*	South Carolina*	Tennessee	Texas
Virginia*				

When the Southern states broke away, their soldiers who had served in the United States Army became part of the army of the Confederate States of America. The North needed more men. Both Federico and his brother Adolfo wanted to do their part for the war.

Federico's doctors didn't think it was a good idea because of his health. But as usual, he decided not to follow their advice.

On July 20, 1861, Federico walked into the Girard House, the second-largest hotel in Philadelphia at the time. Just three days earlier, the Union army had opened an office at the Girard to sign up volunteers.

The recruiting officer who interviewed Federico, Oliver Wilson Davis, was impressed with him. The men became lifelong friends, and Davis would later go on to write a book about Federico's life.

"On the twentieth day of July, 1861," Davis wrote in his book, "a delicate-looking young man entered the . . . office . . . and asked for a position in the Twenty-third Pennsylvania Volunteers."

He went on to question Federico:

Davis: "What knowledge have you of military matters?"

Federico: "None whatever. . . ."

. . .

Davis: "What is your business?"

Federico: "Nothing. I was engaged on the survey of the Panama Railroad, but since I returned home have been unable to do any work on account of my health."

Davis: "Do you think you could endure the exposure of a soldier's life?"

Federico: "I do not know, but have made up my mind to try it."

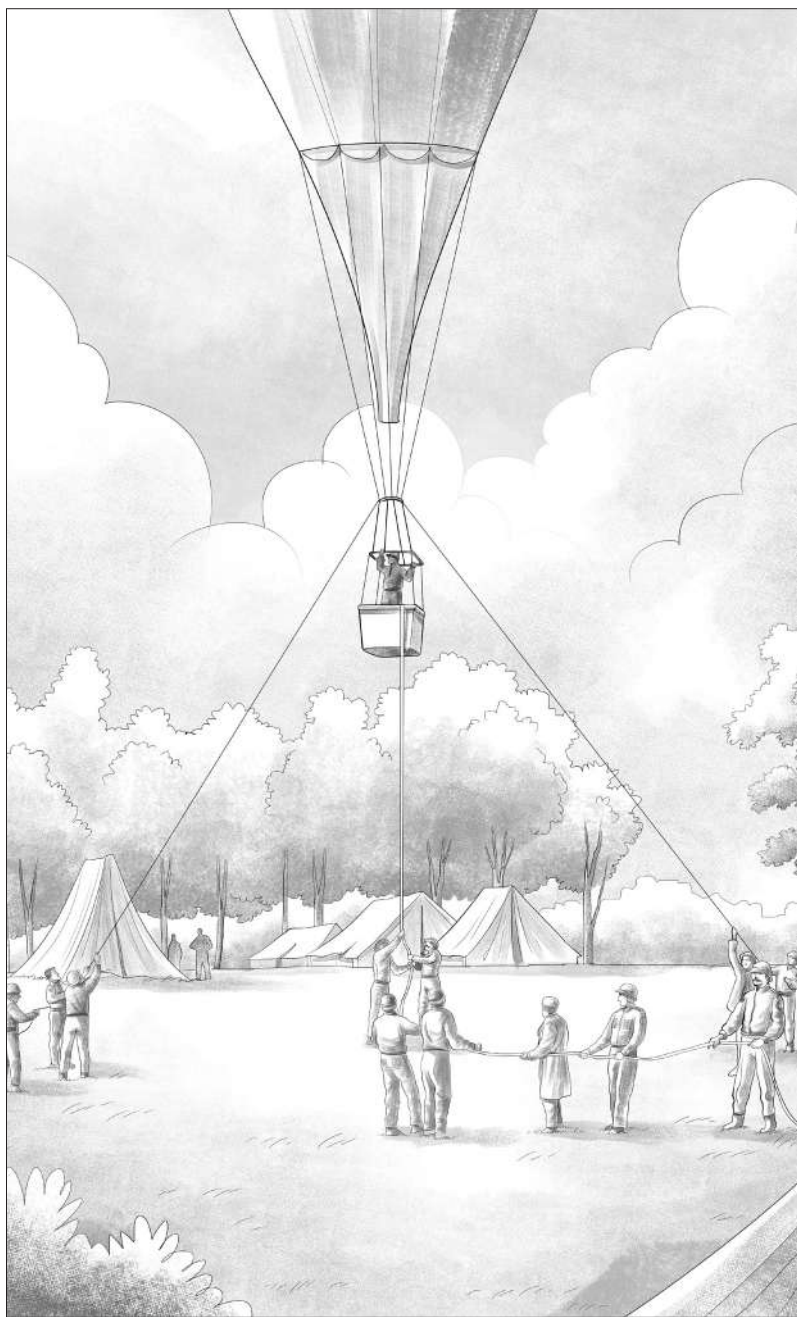
Davis liked Federico's "quiet but resolute manner . . . , his ready and pertinent answers, and his general appearance." He wrote, "I felt I had drawn a prize."

On the spot, Davis offered Federico the post of captain in the Twenty-Third Pennsylvania Volunteers.

The Union army quickly noticed Federico's special skills. He was a good writer and a talented artist. His school training and his work as a surveyor had given him a good eye for drawing maps and measuring distances. And his experiences with the Panama Railroad Company showed his willingness to take risks. He was recruited as an army engineer, and after some months of training, Federico stepped into the basket of the *Constitution* in April 1862.

In the 1860s, airplanes and helicopters had not yet been invented. In fact, very few people had ever left the ground. Orville and Wilbur Wright would not make their first successful flight until 1903.

It took a special kind of courage to go up in a balloon and risk being shot at hundreds of feet in the air. The Balloon Corps—the United States' first air force—probably suited Federico's adventurous spirit perfectly.



None of Federico's sketches have survived to this day. But a few made by other members of the Balloon Corps do exist. In some, the aeronauts later added a picture of a balloon. They wanted to show that the maps were drawn from the air.

Federico did not stay long in the Balloon Corps. It's not clear why he left. It could have been because he was offered an advancement in rank when he was called to join a new regiment, the 114th Pennsylvania Volunteers. He was commissioned as a major, then promoted to lieutenant colonel the next month. His brother, Adolfo, was made captain.

Federico traded dodging bullets in the air for dodging them on the ground.

The 114th took part in some of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. One, in Fredericksburg, Virginia, must have made a lasting impression on Federico. After the war, he made a painting of what he witnessed. He called it *The Battle of Fredericksburg, on 13th December, 1862*.

The painting shows Union and Confederate soldiers in hand-to-hand combat. Smoke from cannons and gunfire surrounds the fighting men. The explosions, one soldier later said, made the earth shake under his feet.

*The Battle of Fredericksburg* is different from the maps Federico would have drawn from the air or his technical drawings of the Panama jungle. The painting shows not only his talent but also his feelings as an artist. It shows combat, but it also shows human emotions like grief, bravery, and compassion. A soldier cries out in pain. Others pitch in to carry off a wounded companion. All the while, an officer—perhaps Federico himself—urges his flag-carrying men to enter the fight.

Federico not only painted but also wrote poetry. These lines, written in 1862, show his pride in being a soldier:

*I have pulled through many a march,*

*I have been in many a battle,*

*I have seen the bomb-shell burst,*

*I have heard the grapeshot rattle!*

*With the bravest, in the strife,*

*I have nobly risked my life.*

The Battle of Fredericksburg did not turn out well for the North. More than twice as many Union soldiers as Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded in the five-day battle. The Rebels called it a victory for the Confederacy.

A few months later, the days of the Balloon Corps came to an end. The balloons were in bad shape and needed expensive repair. Thaddeus Lowe, the founder, didn't always see eye to eye with army officers. He refused to fly in bad weather if he felt it was dangerous for the aeronauts. Eventually, he resigned. In 1863, the United States decided the Balloon Corps wouldn't be a permanent branch of the military.

As the war dragged on, Federico and the men of the 114th took part in battle after battle. Outcomes shifted from one opponent to the other. But regardless of which army claimed a victory, soldiers on both sides were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner.

The war also took a toll on civilians. Food was scarce. Disease spread. People lost their livelihoods. When opposing armies clashed, towns were damaged and nearby farms and fields ruined.

For Federico, his final fight as soldier for the Union was approaching fast.

In the middle of summer 1863, the 114th regiment arrived in southern Pennsylvania. It set up camp with other Union troops on the outskirts of the town of Gettysburg. On July 2, the second day of the battle, the sun rose quietly over a field called the Peach Orchard.

But the quiet did not last. The air was soon filled with the sounds of artillery, neighing horses, and shouting men.

After much loss of life, the battle ended the next day with a victory for the Union. The loss weakened the Confederacy. It was a turning point of the Civil War.

Gettysburg was also a turning point in Federico's life. Though he and the men of the 114th fought hard, Federico fell into enemy hands.

He became a prisoner of war.



### **The Battle of Gettysburg**

*The Battle of Gettysburg took place in and around the Pennsylvania town that bears that name. About one hundred thousand Yankee soldiers and seventy-five thousand Rebel soldiers clashed on the outlying fields on July 1, 1863.*

The Confederate army was led by General Robert E. Lee. Before the war, Lee had been a distinguished military officer for the United States. President Abraham Lincoln had asked him to lead the Union army. But Lee was a native Virginian. When his state seceded from the Union, he refused President Lincoln's offer.

At Gettysburg, Major General George Meade led the Union army. Both Lee and Meade were excellent commanders.

Lee's troops had moved through Maryland and into Pennsylvania. Lee hoped to take the town, continue north, and end the war.

Gettysburg would turn out to be the bloodiest battle of the Civil War. The Northern army had more men and was better equipped. But the fighting was fierce. The North had almost as many casualties—soldiers killed, wounded, or missing—as the South. In total, nearly seven thousand soldiers died, and more than forty thousand were wounded or missing.

Much of the fighting was done in hand-to-hand combat. But there was also the cavalry. Thousands of horses were killed in Civil War battles—about three thousand to five thousand at Gettysburg alone.

On July 3, the Confederate army could not advance. It had lost nearly one-third of its soldiers. The Union claimed victory. But it, too, had suffered many losses. When the Rebel army began to retreat, Major General Meade decided not to follow.

The Civil War would go on for two more years.

### **President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address**

*A few months after the battle, on November 19, 1863, President Lincoln traveled to Gettysburg. A cemetery was to be built at the site. After arriving by train, the president rode a horse from the house where he was staying as a guest. About fifteen thousand people had already gathered at what had once been the battlefield.*

*Lincoln was not the main speaker that day. The featured speech, given by former secretary of state Edward Everett, lasted for two hours. In contrast, the president's speech had fewer than three hundred words. It began with the now-famous phrase "Four score and seven years ago." What does that mean, exactly? Score is an old-fashioned word for "twenty." Four score and seven is another way of saying the number eighty-seven. Lincoln was talking about the*

*Declaration of Independence. It had been signed in 1776, just eighty-seven years earlier. Compared to other countries in the world, at the time of the Civil War, the United States was still a new nation. The outcome of the war would determine if it would stay united.*

*The president was criticized for giving such a short, simple speech. But later, historians realized that the message of the Gettysburg Address was powerful. It's one of the most meaningful speeches ever given by an American president.*

*Over time, President Lincoln's ending words in the speech have become famous. He asked those listening to make sure that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

# 6

## Prisoner of War

**I**n the morning of July 3, Federico and the other captured Union soldiers were marched to the rear of the Confederate lines to wait out the day's battle. They stopped just three miles away from the battlefield. Rebels holding bayonets—rifles with sharp knives on the end—made sure no Yankees tried to escape.

Earlier that morning, at daybreak, Federico had watched a straight-backed, gray-haired man leading a line of mounted men. It was Robert E. Lee. The Confederate general and his staff were on their way to the front. A little later, cannons marked the start of combat.

The fierce fighting at Gettysburg lasted all of July 3. By nightfall, it had become clear that the Confederacy wouldn't be able to advance. As thousands of soldiers on both sides lay dead or wounded, the Union declared victory.

On July 4, 1863, Lee and his defeated troops began to retreat south to Virginia. A long, painful march lay ahead for Federico and the other soldiers captured at Gettysburg. It would end in one of the Confederate prisons. Federico couldn't be sure of his destination—perhaps Richmond, Virginia. He knew that the city had several camps for prisoners of war.

Drenched in rain, the prisoners walked behind wagons loaded with wounded Confederate soldiers. The Union men trudged over slippery, stony roads or through knee-deep mud. Most had torn shoes and bleeding feet. They often walked for hours, only stopping long after midnight—if they stopped at all. Those who were sick, badly wounded, or just exhausted were left by the side of the road.

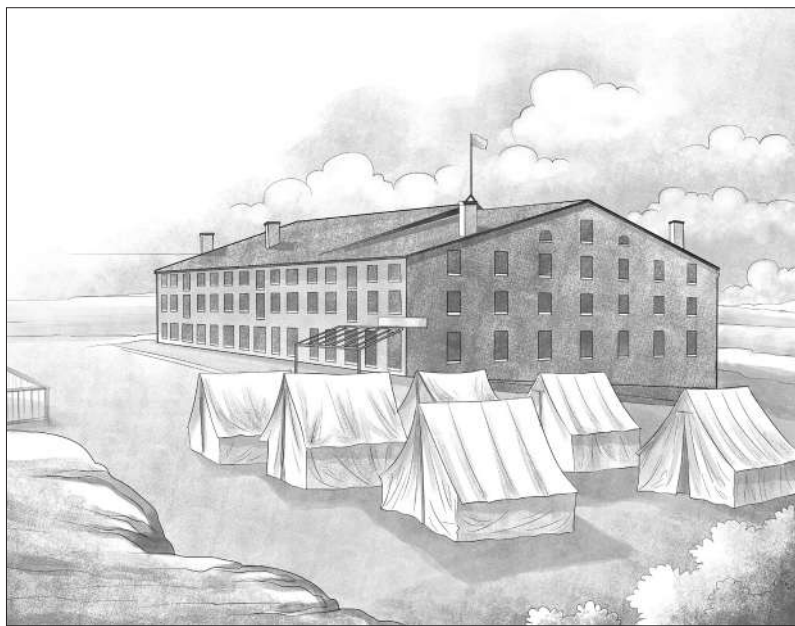
Bits of beef and a little flour were handed out for food. The captives speared the beef on the end of a stick to cook over the fire, and they mixed the flour with water and tried to bake it on hot stones. But when the rains began, cooking became almost impossible. Meals were eaten raw.

Finally, on July 18, the prisoners reached Richmond.

Federico had walked for nearly three weeks and almost two hundred miles. Although it was “beautiful

country," he later wrote, it "presented no charms to [their] weary eyes." The men wished for only two things: "Give us rest, and food."

Federico described his first glimpse of Libby Prison as "gloomy and forbidding." The three-story building had once been a busy warehouse at the edge of the James River. Now, the pale, thin faces of prisoners stared out through the bars of small windows. What those prisoners saw, Federico later wrote, was a "sorry column" of men "with haggard faces and uncombed hair; some carrying their wounded arms in slings; many with bare and lacerated feet," showing "the days of hunger, exposure, and fatigue, through which [they] had just passed."



Federico stumbled through Libby's gates knowing that it might be a long time before he left. Some of the men by his side would never leave at all.

Taken to the officers' floor, Federico found himself among dozens of men packed in rows. Carefully, he stepped over other prisoners until he came to his "quarters"—a patch of bare floor, about two feet by six feet. He wrapped himself in a dirty blanket someone had used before him, lay down, and waited for food. For days, this was nothing but bread, which the prisoners washed down with river water from a pump. There was no furniture. A few wooden crates were used as tables.

Libby Prison was meant to hold a little over a thousand men, but new prisoners were constantly being brought in. Eventually, this number more than tripled. As the floor became more crowded, the men were forced to sleep on their sides, "spoon" fashion, head to foot. One person, usually the highest-ranking officer, would call out, "Spoon over!" Then everyone would turn at the same time.

If the officers' situation was bad, that of enlisted men or captured civilians was worse. They were kept on the floor below, in even more crowded conditions and with less to eat. Sometimes, the officers would pass them

spare crackers or bits of bread through the slats in the floor. This often resulted in brawls as the desperate men fought each other for the food.

Federico coped with the “idle hours of . . . captivity” by doing what he liked best: writing and drawing. But not in the form of a diary or a journal. That, he said, would be “monotonous.” Instead, he wrote about and sketched scenes of daily life—like waiting for a turn to bathe in the single tub of dirty water or collecting pork fat and empty cans to make lamps.

Federico was also a good observer of human nature. He wrote about the feelings of despair, loneliness, and homesickness that filled Libby. He and his fellow prisoners, he said, were like passengers aboard a ship during a risky voyage. They shared “a common danger and a common fate.” Everyone’s “mutual interest” was simply to survive.

When he could look outside through the bars—which wasn’t always the case; some guards liked to shoot at the windows—Federico drew scenes of people at the river. He also drew other Richmond prison buildings and even a graveyard. It was as close as he or the others got to seeing the outdoors, as prisoners were not allowed outside.

**monotonous:** boring because it is always the same

Very little paper was available, so Federico made use of every small scrap he could find. He often wrote in the margins of newspaper pages collected from the other men. When a prisoner was about to be released, he might offer to smuggle out a few of the scraps. This was risky. Writings and drawings from the prisoners were thought of as contraband of war—in other words, illegal. If caught, the person might be sent back to prison. And yet many were willing to take a chance. Part of Federico's work left Libby hidden in other people's shoes.

After six months at Libby, Federico learned he was to be part of a prisoner exchange. This was an agreement in which prisoners were traded between the North and the South. Federico later wrote about the day he left the prison. He cheered at “the first glimpse . . . of the dear old flag flying from the truce boat” on the James River. After “a glorious trip up Chesapeake Bay,” in March 1864, he “stepp[ed] once more upon loyal soil.” Of this moment, he wrote, “I begin at last to be convinced that I am not dreaming, but that I am once more . . . positively—F R E E !”

Federico hid dozens of scraps filled with writing and drawings in his stockings. Back in Philadelphia, he began collecting those smuggled out by other prisoners.

---

**contraband:** items considered illegal to own or sell

He put them all together, along with his memories, and published his book *Libby Life: Experiences of a Prisoner of War in Richmond, Va., 1863–64*. He gave the money he made from the sales of the book to the widows and orphans of fellow prisoners who had died at Libby.

# 7

## Back to Cuba

**A**fter months in prison camp, Federico's health was worse than ever.

His poor health did not let him return to the battlefield, but he still wanted to serve his country. He asked for a job representing the United States in Latin America. He spoke Spanish, and his background made him a perfect candidate.

In the fall of 1864, Federico and Adolfo were sent to Cuba as diplomats. Adolfo took up a post in their birthplace, Cienfuegos. Federico went to Trinidad, one of Cuba's oldest cities.

The warm, tropical weather helped Federico gain back his health. In Trinidad, he met and married Carmela Merino, a young Cuban woman. A few years later, their son Samuel, named after Federico's stepfather, was born.

---

**diplomats:** government officials who handle negotiations between countries

Federico also wanted to reconnect with his roots. He took time to travel around Cuba, admiring the island's natural beauty. He made sketches and wrote articles that were later published in U.S. magazines. He also painted landscapes. To this day, they are still displayed in Cuban museums.

On April 26, 1865, the American Civil War came to an end. The United States began the hard task of rebuilding the country. But for Cuba, it was still a troubled time—and more problems lay ahead.

When Federico arrived in Trinidad, Cuba was a colony of Spain. The island's rich soil produced plentiful crops of tobacco, coffee, and sugar. These goods sold well in other parts of the world, but most of the profits went directly to Spain.

Many descendants of the early Spanish settlers considered themselves Cubans. However, Cuban-born citizens didn't have the same rights as Spaniards. They also did not have the same representation in the Spanish government. Some wanted to become a separate country, much like the British colonies had wanted independence from Great Britain.

Cuban rebels, also called *insurgents*, began fighting against the Spanish government on the island. Most of

the fighting took place as guerrilla warfare, or clashes between small, loosely organized groups and official military troops.

Federico and Adolfo agreed with the insurgents and their dream of independence. They worked behind the scenes, arranging for their brother Emilio to send weapons, money, and supplies for the rebels from Americans who sided with the Cubans.

In 1868, the insurgents formally declared war against the Spanish government.

Federico made a decision.

He sent his beloved “Mela” and Samuelito to stay with his family in Philadelphia. Then, in February 1869, he and Adolfo quit their posts and joined the rebels.

The soldiers-turned-diplomats were back to being soldiers.

The Cuban insurgents recognized Federico’s war experience. On April 4, 1870, he was named the commander in chief of all Cuban forces.

The war in Cuba was very different from the one in the United States. The island was controlled by the Spanish government. Well-equipped troops of soldiers held cities and towns. The rebels made camps deep in the countryside. This made it hard for the Spanish to find them.

Federico was active in recruiting more insurgents. He taught them tactics to harass the enemy. One such tactic was to raid Spanish-owned plantations and set fire to their crops, often at night. Ruined crops meant the government lost money. This made the Spanish authorities furious. Federico became known as “Captain Fire” and “Fire King.”

The government declared Federico dangerous. If he were captured, he would be tried as a criminal.

In the summer of 1871, Federico arranged to travel in secret to the United States. His main mission was to raise more support for the Cuban insurgents. His poor health had also caught up with him, and an old leg wound had not healed well. Among the men accompanying Federico was another soldier who was very ill. Federico hoped that both he and his friend might get medical treatment.

At dawn on June 29, the men set off in a rowboat to one of the many small coral islands, called keys, off the north Cuban coast. From there, a larger ship was to pick them up and take them to the United States. But currents and wind gusts carried the rowboat off course.

Spotting them, a Spanish gunboat set off in hot pursuit. Federico’s boat was no match for the powerful ship.

Some of Federico’s men were killed. Others managed to escape. They may have swum to a key and hid in the mangroves. Federico could have also fled, but he refused to leave his weaker friend behind.

Almost eight years to the day after Gettysburg, Federico again found himself a prisoner of war. The gunboat took him back to Nuevitas, a small town on the Cuban coast.

# 8

## The Last Days

**O**n July 4, 1871, Federico's friend Oliver Wilson Davis entered a store in New York and glanced at a headline in the *New York Herald*. He stopped to take a closer look.

### CAPTURE OF GENERAL CAVADA ... BY THE SPANIARDS

Havana, July 3rd.

**The Spanish Gunboat Neptuno captured the insurgent General Fredrico Cavada, while he was trying to leave the Island. He was taken to Puerto Principe for trial. His execution is certain.**

Davis began contacting powerful people. Federico was an American citizen. He had been an officer in the Union army and a diplomat. There were rules of international law. Davis didn't trust the Spanish authorities on the island. He didn't think Federico would get a fair trial.

News of Federico's capture caused a flurry of telegrams, notes, letters, and personal visits. As a lieutenant colonel, Federico had met men who now held important positions in the United States government. Davis even met with President Ulysses S. Grant! Formerly the commander in chief of the Union army, Grant had been elected president after the war. He reassured Davis, saying, "I have received telegrams from General Meade and other gentlemen on behalf of Cavada, and have already acted in the case."

For two weeks, Federico's fate was unknown. His friends and family waited anxiously for news. People in Cuba sent telegrams to American newspapers, but they were mostly rumors.

Then, on July 21, the *New York Times* published an article from their reporter in Havana. The article revealed that by the time Davis had learned of his capture, Federico had already been tried and executed. An eyewitness had given the reporter an account of Federico's last days.

Aboard the Spanish gunboat, *Neptuno*, on his way to Puerto Principe for his trial, Federico asked for writing materials. He had already written letters to his officers in the Cuban army and to his brother Adolfo. Now he wrote to his wife and son, "in the care of Mr. Samuel Dutton":

Neptuno gunboat  
Nuevitas, June 30, 1871  
My dearest wife—

I find myself a prisoner of war due to circumstances that you no doubt already know. I don't know what fate has in store for me—but you know that you and my adored little son will always be in my deepest thoughts.

With great hugs for you, and everyone else in the family,

Your loving Federico

That afternoon, Federico was taken to the Spanish barracks in the city of Puerto Principe. After a short trial, he was sentenced to die the next day. “Perhaps no man was so much hated by the Spaniards as Cavada,” the reporter wrote.

According to the eyewitness, in the afternoon of July 1, 1871, Federico “met his fate like a hero, without bravado or cynicism”:

When the fatal hour came he marched . . . erect and proud to the place of execution. When he arrived there he took off his hat, flung it on the ground, and in a loud tone of voice cried, *Adios Cuba, para siempre*. (Good-by Cuba, forever.) A volley was heard, and Federico Cavada ceased to exist.

---

**cynicism:** belief that people act only in their own interest

He was a week away from his fortieth birthday. In nearly four decades, Federico Fernández Cavada had lived through more events than most people do in a lifetime.

Just before Christmas 1871, Adolfo was killed in battle in Cuba.

The war in Cuba, now known as the Ten Years' War, lasted until 1878. It didn't end Spanish rule. In 1898, the United States went to war with Spain. The Cubans fought side by side with the American soldiers. Emilio served as a doctor during that time.

After Spain lost the Spanish-American War, it lost all its colonies in the New World. In 1902, Cuba became an independent republic.

Federico Fernández Cavada is considered a hero in Cuba's struggle for independence.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think it took a special kind of courage to volunteer for the Balloon Corps at the time of the Civil War?
2. Some soldiers in both armies might have never before seen a balloon in flight. What could they have been thinking when they first witnessed a balloon like the *Constitution* rising into the air?
3. Why do you think truly accurate maps were rare at the time? Imagine you were an army commander. Why would such a map be so valuable?
4. Federico had both natural talents and acquired skills. How did this combination make him a good candidate for the Balloon Corps?
5. Why might Cuba's location have made the island important to European countries wanting to colonize the Americas?

6. In the 1840s, boys played games with cards containing information about science and history, while the girls' cards taught cooking skills and recipes. What does this tell you about what was expected of boys and girls at the time? What might have happened if a girl decided to study what was traditionally thought of as a "man's field"?
7. What idea did the founders of Central High School propose that convinced Philadelphia's wealthier taxpayers to fund a free high school for poor and middle-class boys? What made this idea especially important in the industrialized Northern states at that time?
8. Central High School was founded in 1838, but girls were not admitted to the school until 1983. What does this tell you about the way society, including respected places of education, perceived the role of women for so many years?
9. How did the events of 1848 affect the growth of the United States? Why do you think the building of the Transcontinental Railroad was so important to this growth?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

---

10. Besides the movement of people, what other areas of society could have been affected by better transportation at the time?
11. What makes the Isthmus of Panama geographically important?
12. Why do you think the United States Army found itself short of soldiers when the Civil War broke out?
13. Why was the outcome of the Civil War so important to the history of the United States? What might have happened if the outcome had been different?
14. After he joined the Cuban rebels, Federico became known as the Fire King or Captain Fire. What did he do to earn these names? How do you think these activities may have sealed his fate once he was captured by the Spanish government on the island?
15. Now that you've learned about the amazing events of Federico's life, how might you describe his character to someone who has never heard of him? And if you had an opportunity to meet him, what events would you like him to tell you more about?

## Meet the Author



**Silvia López** was born in Cuba and emigrated to Miami as a child. Her lifelong love of books led to a career as a school librarian and later as a children's author. López's work reflects her interest in animals, history, folklore, and the lives of people who overcome obstacles to achieve great things. Her books include *Just Right Family: An Adoption Story* (2018), a 2018 Florida Book Award winner; *Handimals: Animals in Art and Nature* (2019), a 2022 Illinois Bluestem Award nominee; *Pacho Nacho* (2020); *Queen of Tejano Music: Selena* (2020), a Junior Library Guild selection, 2020 Florida Book Award winner, and Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature Best Books selection for 2020;

and *My Little Golden Book About Frida Kahlo* (2021). *Sonia Sotomayor: A Little Golden Book Biography* was released in August 2022. Some of her picture book biographies have been published in both English and Spanish. Silvia is bilingual and has a great interest in Hispanic culture, but she loves to write about anything and everything that catches her attention. Four of her projects, including two bilingual fiction Easy Readers, are due to be released in 2024. Silvia also enjoys mentoring other writers who have a true belief in and are excited about what their manuscript has to say, regardless of the topic. She currently runs the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) picture book critique group in Miami.

## Meet the Illustrator



**Kailien Singson.** A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school, and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in Arts. Having explored several new techniques in art through his education and professional years in educational publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors, and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at digital and traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.

# Credits

## **Cover Illustration by**

Kailien Singson & Ivan Pesic

## **Title Page Illustration by**

Kailien Singson

## **Text Illustrations by**

In Courtesy of Kailien Singson / 58

In Courtesy of Silvia López / 56

Kailien Singson / 2, 3, 12a-b, 15, 22, 29, 33, 39

Voices in History is a Core Knowledge Biography Series that encourages young readers to learn about real superheroes in history. As a result of acts of extraordinary bravery, ingenuity, strength, and determination, these people made a difference and changed the world. Perhaps their remarkable stories will inspire young readers to become the superheroes of the future.

## **Core Knowledge VOICES IN HISTORY™**

**These books are suitable for readers aged 8 and up.**

ISBN: 978-1-68380-903-6

