

The Bodega: History, People, Purpose

Before you decide what should happen to the corner store, you should know what the corner store has meant. This is the story of an institution New York built — and the photographer who saved its picture.

When the debate over New York's grocery stores calls something "the small grocer," it's easy to picture an abstraction — a business, a line on a budget. But the corner store in a Bronx or East Harlem neighborhood is rarely just a business. For the better part of a century, it has been one of the most important community institutions New York's immigrant neighborhoods ever built. It has a name in this city: the **bodega**.

The word is Spanish — *bodega* means a storeroom, a warehouse, or a wine cellar. But in New York it became something specific: the small, owner-run neighborhood grocery, usually on a corner, that sold the food of home alongside American staples. To understand the grocery-store decision in Hunts Point, you have to understand what a *bodega is* — and who built it.

An institution born of migration

The bodega grew directly out of the Puerto Rican migration to New York. After the **1917 Jones Act** granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, movement to the mainland became easier, and Puerto Rican communities — which some historians called *colonias*, and residents called *barrios* — took root in East Harlem, Williamsburg, and the South Bronx. The earliest bodegas emerged in the 1920s to serve these enclaves: lunch for factory workers, and the foods families couldn't get anywhere else.

Then came the great wave. New York's Puerto Rican community grew roughly **tenfold between 1940 and 1960** — from about 60,000 people to more than 600,000. Families opened stores and named them after places on the island. The shops sold *café*, plantains, rice and beans — but they sold something else, too.

A bodega was never only a store. It was a piece of home, a meeting place, and an anchor for a neighborhood finding its feet.

Bodegas extended credit when money was short. They were where you heard the news, found a job lead, spoke Spanish without translating yourself. The owner — the *bodeguero* — knew your family. As the historian Carlos Sanabria, who grew up the son of a *bodeguero*, put it, these corner stores were **anchors for the social and cultural life of the neighborhood**, not just places to buy groceries.

The photographer who saved the picture

Most of that world would have vanished without a trace — except that one man pointed a camera at it.

JUSTO AMBROSIO MARTÍ · 1925–1985

"I was so happy to pass through Brooklyn — to see the bodegas along Atlantic Avenue, bananas hanging on the windows."

A **Cuban photographer**, Martí arrived in New York City by steamship in 1925 and spent his life documenting the daily working-class life of the city's Latino community — celebrations, protests, politics, family, and above all the bodegas that were becoming a NYC institution.

Here's the remarkable part: he photographed nearly **200 Puerto Rican-owned bodegas** not as an art project, but on behalf of the **Puerto Rican Merchant Association** — taking pictures of each store's interior and exterior to satisfy a requirement of the New York State **liquor-license** application. A piece of paperwork became one of the richest visual records of a community that history often ignored.

That Merchant Association, founded in **1946**, wasn't only about licenses. It organized small-business owners to defend themselves — against corrupt police searches, and against the urban-renewal "slum clearance" projects of the 1950s that bulldozed Latino storefronts, often without the owners' input. The bodega was also a site of *economic organizing* — small owners banding together to hold their ground. Hold onto that thread when you study who has power in a neighborhood's economy.

Martí's full collection — more than **30,000 negatives** and thousands of prints, spanning 1948 to 1985 — was donated to the **Center for Puerto Rican Studies (CENTRO) at Hunter College** in 1984. It now lives in the Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, where Carlos Sanabria drew on it for the book *The Bodega: A Cornerstone of Puerto Rican Barrios*. Without an archive like this, a community's memory disappears when the people who held it are gone — which is its own lesson about who gets to keep their history.

A living, changing institution

The bodega never stopped evolving. As the Puerto Rican population shifted, **Dominican** families took up the counter; by the 1970s and 80s, **Yemeni** and other immigrant owners brought their own traditions, opening halal bodegas. Today "bodega" no longer means a specifically Puerto Rican store — it means the owner-run corner store of *any* immigrant community, and there are an estimated **13,000 across New York City** — under pressure from rising rents, gentrification, and exactly the kind of question this lab studies.

THE NYC BODEGA: A TIMELINE

- 1917** | The **Jones Act** grants Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, easing migration to the mainland.
- 1920s** | The first Puerto Rican bodegas appear in NYC *barrios* — lunch spots for factory workers, lifelines for new arrivals.
- 1925** | **Justo Martí** arrives in New York by steamship and begins documenting Latino working-class life.
- 1946** | The **Puerto Rican Merchant Association** is founded — organizing owners against harassment and displacement.
- 1940–60** | NYC's Puerto Rican community grows **tenfold** (≈60,000 → 600,000+). Bodegas boom alongside it.
- 1950s–60s** | Martí photographs nearly **200 bodegas** for the Merchant Association's liquor-license filings.
- 1960s+** | Dominican families increasingly run the city's bodegas as the community changes.
- 1970s–80s** | **Yemeni** and other immigrant owners join the tradition, opening halal bodegas across the city.
- 1984** | Martí's collection is donated to **CENTRO** at Hunter College — preserving a community's memory.
- Today** | An estimated **13,000 bodegas** across NYC — under pressure from rent, gentrification, and competition.

CARRY THIS INTO THE LAB

When the grocery-store debate talks about "the small grocer," remember who that is: an institution this city built over a century, run by families, anchoring blocks, passed from one immigrant community to the next. That doesn't tell you whether the city store is right or wrong. But it means the bodega owner's voice in this decision isn't just a business interest — it's the voice of one of the neighborhood's oldest pieces of itself. Study it with respect, not extraction.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Center for Puerto Rican Studies (CENTRO), Hunter College — Justo A. Martí Photographic Collection, 1948–1985, and "The Legacy of the Puerto Rican Bodega." Carlos Sanabria, *The Bodega: A Cornerstone of Puerto Rican Barrios*. Pedro A. Regalado, "Storefront Archives: Looking Back with Justo Martí." Historical context: Untapped New York, Lower East Side History Project, NPR Code Switch. Figures verified May 2026 — and like all facts in this course, worth re-checking at the source.