

San Juan National Historic Site Celebrates its 50th Anniversary

The defense system of Old San Juan was built by the Spaniards between the 16th and the 18th centuries to protect its most strategic location on the island of Puerto Rico, which was San Juan harbor. By right of conquest, Spain claimed the Caribbean as her exclusive territory. To safeguard her New World possessions, fortifications were built to maintain her trade monopoly against England, France, and Holland.

El Morro and El Cañuelo forts protected the city from sea attacks, whereas San Cristóbal fort protected against land approaches. The city walls provided additional protection to its population.

Because of the growth of Old San Juan's population during the late-19th century, a section of the city wall was demolished. After the Spanish-American War (1898), Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States by the Treaty of Paris signed that same year.

The old Spanish defenses, San Felipe del Morro, San Cristóbal, El Cañuelo, and the city walls were used then by the U.S. Army for military purposes. The San Military Reservation Headquarters of the U.S. Army Antilles, was later known as Fort Brooke Military Reservation, after the Commanding General John R. Brooke.

View of San Juan National Historic Site. Photo by Steve Kozosky.



In the immediate post-World War II years, historians, preservationists, and groups interested in tourism joined forces to secure establishment of a San Juan National Historic Site. It was understood that the National Park Service was the most suitable agency to manage the Site to conserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources, as well as its values for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. In 1948, the Department of the Army and the Department of the Interior reached an agreement regarding future management of the area. Since the fortifications had an exceptional importance to the nation as major monuments of American history, preservation projects were started. The first significant work started when a section of the west wall (Sta. Elena and San Agustín) were rebuilt, along with some sentry boxes.

Although San Juan National Historic Site was established by the Secretary of the Interior on February 14, 1949, it remained under the control of the Department of the Army as part of the Fort Brooke Military Reservation until September 1961. The site was comprised of Fort El Morro, Fort San Cristóbal, the city walls, Fort El Cañuelo, and Casa Blanca.

Research and collection of historical data were started immediately in order to make information available to the public by means of exhibits, lectures, markers, and publication of folders. The first tour started at El Morro on January 18, 1950, led by park guide Julio Marrero Nuñez who in 1962 became the first Puerto Rican superintendent.

In September 13, 1961, the U.S. Army determined that the forts, the city walls, and El Cañuelo were no longer essential to the military establishment of Fort Brooke, and that consequently the historic structures, with adjacent lands could be transferred to the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. A total area of 36 acres was involved. On El Morro grounds, areas such as the baseball field, golf course, swimming pool, and housing facilities were dismantled.

Visitor services expanded, Fort San Cristóbal was opened to the public in 1961. The National Park Service headquarters also moved to Fort San Cristóbal.

A cooperative agreement was signed between the Department of the Interior and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in 1976. It defines the areas of jurisdiction and responsibility. This agreement establishes a good-neighbor policy whereby the Park Service and the Commonwealth consult with each other as required to ensure the “smooth management” of the historic site.

During the 1960s and 1970s, research programs were started to interpret and preserve the historic structures. During the 1980s, a period of in-depth planning took place. In 1983, San Juan National Historic Site, including La Fortaleza, was declared a World Heritage Site because of its exceptional universal cultural value.

A series of guidelines for the park was created to assess management, development, and use of San Juan National Historic Site. Short- and long-term goals were established in documents such as the *General Management Plan*, and the *Historic Structure Report* to address current problems and achieve identified management objectives.

As part of the preservation projects, the Army Corp of Engineers once again joined efforts with the National Park Service in planning and completing a water breaker to protect the historic structures of El Morro, and its adjacent walls. In order to bring back the original landscape (esplanade) of San Felipe del Morro Fort, the main road, parking area, and trees were removed.

El Morro Castle,
San Juan
National Historic
Site. c. 1943.
Photo courtesy
San Juan
National Historic
Site.



The visitor services facilities and programs have grown according to its demands. Around two million visitors came to our forts and participated in the various interpretive programs developed, such as guided tours, audiovisual presentations in English and Spanish, and self guided audio cassette tours. To further interpret the history of the sites, waysides were designed and placed within the park. New exhibits were added to the already existing museum at El Morro.

As a contribution to the interpretive program, the Municipality of San Juan worked together with the park in establishing a living history program. Men dressed as Spanish colonial soldiers marched along the streets of Old San Juan, ending with a recreation of the change of guard at San Cristóbal Fort.

The park that once started with a small staff, has grown to allow a diverse group of professionals which contribute with their knowledge and expertise. San Juan National Historic Site staff consists of the following divisions: Management, Administration, Interpretation, Visitor Protection (law enforcement), Resource Management, Maintenance, and the latest established Fee Collection, and the Caribbean Spanish Colonial Research Center and Military Archives.

The 1990s has been characterized by the implementation of what has been recommended by the research done through the years. Some of the preservation projects that were developed included the Santa Elena Powder Magazine and El Morro lighthouse restoration. As part of a five-year research program, historic walls underwent preservation work.

Summer provided the time to involve the community and the local artists in a “story-telling” program. San Cristóbal Fort main plaza came alive with the performance of well known stories and legends.

The casemates have been used to accommodate new exhibits that commemorate significant historical events. In 1997 a display of information and graphics on the 1797 British attack was developed.

In preparation to receive the 21st century, the park has been involved in the design of new museum exhibits and visitor centers for both forts. To meet the overall objectives, the following themes will focus on the strategic location of Puerto Rico, its place in the Spanish Colonial Empire in the Caribbean, and the world international conflicts between the Spanish, Dutch,



El Morro Castle, San Juan National Historic Site, 1999. Photo courtesy San Juan National Historic Site.

English, French, and Americans for control of the Caribbean: the technology of fortifications emphasizing the European military engineers who designed the forts with specific defensive goals; the United States in Puerto Rico, and the role of the forts in the Spanish-American War, World War I and II; and the Puerto Rican Heritage (Taíno, black, and European).

Educational programs development are on-going projects that will allow students to learn about our history. “Parks as Classrooms” and “Wonders of the World” are dedicated to move the history classroom to the forts as a first-hand

approach in the learning process. While “Parks as Classrooms” focuses on the evolution of the forts, “Wonders of the World” emphasizes the uniqueness of the forts being a World Heritage Site.

In keeping up with the new technology, San Juan National Historic Site joined the National Park Service format by creating its own web site. You may access it using the following address: <www.nps.gov/saju/index2.html>.

The interpretive program will continue its expansion providing a variety of services. While research will be an on-going process, it will allow for historical projects like “Voices of Fort Brooke Oral History,” and publications.

The Caribbean Spanish Colonial Research Center and Military Archives will be a tool for in-depth investigations. Its materials will be catalogued using the latest technology to allow its researchers a quick access to their information needs.

Protection of our resources would not be possible without the efforts and involvement of our skilled staff. It is our commitment to continue preserving our unique legacy for future generations.

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ELECTRONIC REHAB introduces the *Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation* to anyone who is thinking about rehabilitating a historic building—property owners, architects, engineers, contractors, developers, members of historic district commissions, and maintenance personnel and other caretakers of historic buildings.

Learn what the *Standards* are, who uses them, how they’re applied, what to do before you start work, and the DOs and DON’Ts of rehabilitation. Each Standard is explained with illustrated examples of project work. To test your understanding of the Standards, ELECTRONIC REHAB features a follow-up quiz on the rehabilitation of two historic buildings—one commercial and one residential. You make work decisions using the *Standards* and get immediate feedback on how you did!