

Doris E. Andino

## Not Just Another Island...

**S**itting in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea is located a “box” of surprises 100 miles long by 35 miles wide.

Rediscovered by Christopher Columbus on November 19, 1493, Puerto Rico was called by the Taino Indians Borinquen or Boriquen, which means the land of the Almighty God. When the Spaniards reached its shores, little did they know they had arrived at a well-established community where the chief or cacique was in charge of a small town or yucayeque. The men would fish and hunt and the women and children cultivated the crops. When somebody was sick they called the witchdoctor or bohique. Whenever battles or disagreements occurred between other tribes, the warriors or nitainos would come to the rescue. It might be logical to ask why they did not rebel against the Spaniards. The answer is, simply, because at the beginning the Tainos thought of them as immortals. During the next decades, Indians dug for gold, cultivated their land for the Spaniards, built ways and houses, intermixed, and were sick because of diseases brought from Europe. It seems to be an unfair way to treat aborigines, yet the intentions were to Christianize the

New World. Since Tainos did not live long and the development of the island needed workmanship, Africans were brought to the island to cultivate and build.

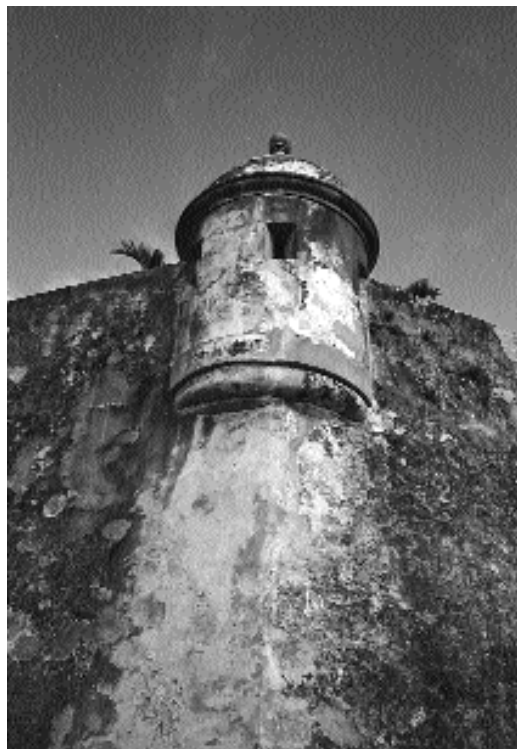
After the Spanish-American War in 1898, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines were ceded to the United States. Then by the Jones Act in 1917, Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens. It was in 1952 that the Commonwealth was created, a free association with the



United States; with common defense, currency, postal service, federal programs, and laws. This brief historical background gives an idea of how this Caribbean island is protected by the same regulations as other cultural, historical, and architectural landmarks.

“Sanjuaneros” are enamored of their city and with good reason. No other place under the U.S. flag has historical monuments dating back to the time of Columbus. During the 15th and up to the 19th century, constructions were done for different reasons; some for defense or military protection, others for urban purposes, not to mention churches and plazas as well as government buildings. Most of these structures are located in what is known as Old San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico. Many historians agree that this area is like a huge museum. It covers seven square blocks. It is the second oldest European settlement in the New World. When Juan Ponce de Leon, first Spanish governor, established his first settlement it was in Caparra. After that it was decided to move to San Juan Bay where Casa Blanca (1521) was built for his family. Ponce de Leon never lived here but his descendants did for over a period of 250 years. Afterward, it was used by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Nowadays, it is a museum which portrays the way “sanjuaneros” lived during the 16th and 17th centuries. The grounds on which the second oldest church, Iglesia San José (1532) sits were donated by Ponce de Leon’s family. Its architecture resembles the Isabelean gothic style in a way to honor Queen Isabel, the main patron who made possible Christopher Columbus’ trips to the New World. Its vaulted ceilings are quite impressive. When a restoration project was done in the 1970s a fresco painting of St. Telmo was found as well as a confessional built on the wall which priests had access to the Dominican Convent or Convento de los Dominicos (1523). Considered one of the first higher education centers, it also served as refuge for women and children during Carib Indian attacks. The interior patio served as a garden and later on it was used for activities sponsored by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. In the same area where the church and

*Castillo San Felipe del Morro, entrance sign; sentry box along the wall. Photos by the author.*



Ruins of the house of the first Spanish Governor of Puerto Rico, Juan Ponce de Leon. This is on the site of Caparra, the first capital of the island (1508–1521).



journey, as they walk through la Puerta de San Juan.

Among all the defense systems built during the following centuries, it is difficult to imagine that the governor's mansion was considered at some point a possible fortress. Spanish historian Oviedo said that not even a blind man could have such an idea. The mistake in the long run was beneficial. Today, it is the oldest executive mansion in continuous use in the New World. During the 18th century it went through changes under Conde Mirasol and became a palace. Public figures like President Kennedy, Charles

convent are located you can visit San José Plaza and a statue of Juan Ponce de Leon in the center. It was built of cannons left by Ralph Abercromby back in 1797. An identical statue is located in St. Augustine, Florida, the oldest Spanish settlement in the U.S.

San Juan Cathedral was started in 1540 with just two small rooms both with vaulted ceilings and a spiral staircase which led to the belfry. For many years it had no roof and that is called *en alberca* which means swimming pool. It must have been quite an experience! Later on, additions and restorations were done. Facing the Cathedral, a small plaza named after the convent in front, Convento de las Monjas Carmelitas, is now a hotel. Close to the same area is one of the few remaining gates which were part of the defense system that surrounded the capital.

Castillo San Felipe del Morro. Photo by the author.



According to city plans there were six in total. Each was dedicated to a saint, in this case, St. John the Baptist, the name given by the Spaniards, first to the island and later to the capital. The inscription reads "Benedictus Qui Vieni In Nomini Patri" (Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord). Part of the traditions among sailors was to walk to the Cathedral singing a "Te Deum" and giving thanks for a safe

Lindbergh, and others have been guests. It is a World Heritage Site. A year before, another true defense system was started, San Felipe del Morro; El Morro meaning headland or promontory. Originally consisting of a square and a range of cannons called "bateria flotante," it was expanded later into a self sufficient force complemented by the city walls. A six-level compact unit which rises 140' above sea level, El Morro was considered a defense station of the first order. Its construction was tested by British and Dutch attacks. Marshall Alejandro O'Reilly and Chief Engineer Thomas O'Dally transformed it into one of the most powerful strongholds in the Americas.

When El Morro was built it was done mainly to protect the bay from ship attacks. In the case of San Cristobal It was to protect the island from land attacks. Started in 1631, it is a massive structure that rises 150' above sea level. It features five independent units connected by moat and tunnel; each fully self sufficient should the others fall. When visited, it seems to be smaller than El Morro but it is not, it covers 27 acres. Both are World Heritage and National Historic Sites administered by National Park Service. Other places of historical, cultural, military, or religious relevance in Old San Juan include La Rogativa, La Capilla del Cristo, La Casa del Libro, La Alcaldia, La Plaza de Armas, El Teatro Tapia, La Plaza Colon. So as we have gone on this imaginary journey it is the author's hope to have shown those amazing tangible structures to help you conclude that Puerto Rico is "not just another island."

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