

Fortifications of San Juan

*Proposed
Puerto Rico*

As early as 1529, the fortification of San Juan, Capital of Puerto Rico, was used by Governor La Gama. "The island's defenceless condition", he wrote, "causes the people to emigrate". Eight years later the burning of the unfortified town of San German by French privateers added force to the Governor's plea.

The construction of a fort called La Fortaleza on the shores of San Juan Harbor had been begun in 1533 and was completed about 1540. But it was poorly located; consequently, a battery was constructed on the rocky promontory called El Morro at the entrance to the Harbor. The new fort, however, was not provided with guns for some years. Meanwhile privateers continued to be active, and in 1584 work designed to strengthen El Morro was begun. In 1595 the fort withstood an attack by Sir Francis Drake, but three years later an unexpected assault by George Clifford, Earl of Cumberland, resulted in English occupation of the forts and the city until yellow fever drove the invaders out after occupation of four months. A new fort, the Canvelo, was constructed between 1599 and 1609.

In 1625 El Morro was besieged for six weeks by a Dutch fleet of 17 vessels. The invaders occupied the city and burned 100 houses, but they were unable to take the forts. Weaknesses revealed by this siege induced the Spanish to erect walls about the city; this work was largely completed by 1641. The capture of Havana and Manila by the British dur-

ing the Seven Years' War was a warning to the Spaniards to strengthen the defenses of San Juan. It was at this time that the powerful San Cristobal fortress, mightier even than El Morro, was constructed, and the older fortifications were partly reconstructed. By the end of the century San Juan was probably, next to Cartagena, the most strongly fortified city in the New World.

In 1797, a British fleet of 60 vessels, with a landing force of 7,000 troops, attacked San Juan. So powerful, however, was the new defensive system that the British withdrew after vainly bombarding the Spanish positions for two weeks. On May 12, 1898, American naval vessels bombarded El Morro, while looking for the Spanish fleet.

The old forts of San Juan should be preserved. Not only do they constitute an outstanding, perhaps the outstanding surviving example of defensive systems in colonial America, but they also form probably the most historic group of buildings in the island. These forts prevented first the French, then the Dutch and the English from taking possession of Puerto Rico, and for almost 400 years enabled Spain to retain control.

El Morro, San Cristobal and the other forts are controlled by the War Department, as are also most of the remaining walls. From time to time, money has been appropriated for repair work, but much still remains to be done if the forts are to be preserved. The entire defensive system should be considered and treated as a whole.

San Juan
and
La Fortaleza

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