



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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before the

United States House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 2444
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Thank you, Chairman Raúl Grijalva, Ranking Member Bruce Westerman, Chairman Joe Neguse, Ranking Member Russ Fulcher, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit this testimony at the legislative hearing on H.R. 2444, the Fort San Gerónimo Preservation Act, under the consideration of this Committee.

I am Juan Vera Vega, State Underwater Archaeologist and Director of the Nautical Archeology Council ascribed to the *Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña* (Spanish for Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, hereafter ICP). The Council's objectives are to conserve, protect, study, and research the submerged cultural resources of Puerto Rico. Today I present before you as a subject matter expert, supported by 19 years of experience on-site at Fort San Gerónimo del Boquerón, and at the request of the Executive Director of the ICP, Carlos Ruiz. I testify to express support for the Act under your consideration regarding the Fort San Gerónimo del Boquerón. This structure was crucial for the protection of the City of San Juan, the oldest city under the American flag, which this year celebrates its 5th Centennial.

Fort San Gerónimo del Boquerón played a major role during the British attack of 1797, the largest military invasion in our history. The fort was pummeled continuously with cannon fire for 13 days and its walls were reduced to rubble. Despite this, its defenders did not retreat or surrender. They bravely fought to defeat the most powerful army and navy in the world at that time. This enshrines the continuation of our Spanish heritage, culture and language.



The Spanish empire set foot in the New World on 1492. Soon, other European powers were interested in the so-called new territories and craved a share of its riches. The English, Dutch and French embarked in multiple military campaigns against Spanish possessions in the Americas. Spain embarked in a large-scale effort for the development of its defensive structure in the New World. For four centuries, the Spanish crown, continuously updated its defenses as new technology and military tactics evolved.

The defense of the Bay of San Juan and its harbor were of the utmost importance. The first large defensive structure to be built in Puerto Rico was “La Fortaleza” also known as the “Palacio de Santa Catalina”, from 1533 to 1540. Various other defensive structures were built to protect the two entrances to the bay. In 1539, El Morro tower at the main western entrance and in 1587, a small wooden fort with the capacity of up to six cannons at the Boquerón inlet at the eastern tip of San Juan isle. It was refortified in 1609 and renamed *San Jerónimo del Boquerón*. Spain invested in a massive fortification program as a grand plan for the defense of its territories, particularly in the Caribbean Islands. Italian engineers from the Antonelli Family under the service of the Spanish Crown brought to America the newest military designs developed in Europe coinciding with the renaissance period.

In the mid eighteenth century the King of Spain assigned Field Marshal Alexander O’Reilly, a military engineer, with the responsibility of redesigning San Juan’s forts and reorganizing the military structure. He overhauled Fort San Geronimo’s design into its present form and added the Boquerón Battery to the First line of defense. The fort’s construction lasted from 1791 to 1796.

After losing the thirteen colonies in the American Revolution, England reassessed its role in the New World and focused its efforts in controlling the Caribbean basin. Britain had many islands of the Lesser Antilles, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, Jamaica and many other under its domain. It just required Trinidad and Puerto Rico to complete an iron clad grip in the region and squeeze out Spain from the richest of the content. It offered to return Gibraltar back to Spain in exchange for Trinidad and Puerto Rico. Spain said no. England would not take no for an answer. They first arrived in Trinidad with a massive fleet; the Spanish governor surrendered the Island without any resistance. Puerto Rico was now in General Ralph Abercromby’s sight.





GOBIERNO DE PUERTO RICO

Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña

In 1797, just one year after the completion of Fort San Geronimo, Puerto Rico was subjected to the largest invasion in our history by the British Empire. The invading force was led by General Abercromby with over 14,500 troops and sailors and a naval force led by Admiral Henry Harvey with a compliment of 66 to 72 ships. The British army and navy were the most powerful military machine in the world. The Fort was mainly manned by local militia from around the island, French privateers, and a hand full of Spanish soldiers. The onslaught lasted thirteen days. On April 30, a thirty-man contingent of militia men from Toa Alta, commanded by their sergeant Jose “Pepe” Díaz led a counterattack on a British battery which manned over 300 troops, that was pounding Fort San Geronimo. Pepe Díaz and his men over ran the enemy’s position. This assault unleashed a massive retreat of all British held positions and a successful defeat of the enemy. “Pepe” Díaz was killed in action but his sacrifice, along with many others, guaranteed our identity as a people...as Puerto Ricans.

Our victory during the British attack of 1797, cemented the continuity of our culture and history, but it also denied the British of a stronghold in the Caribbean that would have changed the correlation of power during the war of 1812. The young republic of the United States would have found it much more difficult to contain the British attack to the homeland.

The fort’s unique design and its relatively small size, compared to el Morro and San Cristobel Forts, are its strength. The low profile of the upper deck in relations to the sea water level make it a “water line fort” or “water battery”. The low elevation of the cannons enable the use of “skip shot” or “ricochet shot” hitting enemy ships at their waterline. This type of damage would lead to the inevitable sinking of the vessel. No enemy ships never made it past Fort San Gerónimo del Boquerón into the harbor.

This unassuming structure saw more battles than all of the other forts in San Juan, including Fort San Cristobal and Fort El Morro which are each 10 times the size of Fort San Geronimo. Its small size would lure enemy ships, under a false sense of security. Its strength lies in its simple structure, its armament, and its strategic location, but above all, it was manned by fearless defenders that made the Fort a formidable adversary.



The sandstone blocks (known as “*sillares*” in Spanish) used to build the fort were quarried from the sandstone outcrop under its present location. Tropical woods, sandstone blocks, lime mortar and low-fires bricks are the four essential building materials of the Fort. The structure features 2 ramps that were used for the movement of artillery pieces, some weighing four-tons or more. It has an upper and lower plaza, a guard’s house, an outhouse, the Commander’s office, two cisterns, powder storage room, a chapel, a kitchen, embrasures, 5 cannons, two skylights, weapons room which also doubled as a multi-use space, a blacksmith room, and bridge connecting the Fort to the isle.

It is safe to say that the Fort San Gerónimo del Boquerón played a crucial role in the history of Puerto Rico, the United States and the Americas. It remains as a standard-bearer of the cultural and historic ties that link the Hispanic world. Today, it stands as a beacon of the Americas and the people that share this New World.

Despite its cultural and historic value, the San Gerónimo del Boquerón Fort is our most endangered property within the military patrimony in San Juan. This historic property is an iconic building due to its location at the entrance of the Atlantic Ocean and the Condado Lagoon. The approval of this Act would once again treat the different aspects of the defense of San Juan (the City walls, El Cañuelo, El Morro, San Cristobal and San Gerónimo) as different components of a single defensive structure. San Juan’s fortifications system is one of the most complete and preserved of the entire Americas and are part of the UNESCO World Heritage Properties.

In 1956, the Fort San Gerónimo del Boquerón was included in the list of properties of the then recently founded ICP. It was restored to house a military museum that lasted until the building needed major restoration works. The history of the conservation of the fort through its life is related to its harsh location which is vulnerable to strong winds and ocean waves. Many restoration and rehabilitation projects were and are carried out to stabilize the structure but after the damages caused by Hurricane Maria in 2017, the fort is in much need of intervention.

Significant damage was caused by Hurricane Maria. One of the major impacts of the strong waves was the disappearance of the protective rock barrier built surrounding the fort. Once this protective





barrier was lost, the sea waves directly impacted the fort's walls, causing significant structural movement, as evidenced through the appearance of cracks in important exterior walls. The hurricane's 200mph winds also removed the upper plaza waterproofing membrane.

Shoring and underpinning works must be carried out as soon as possible to stop any further structural damages to the walls. As part of the rehabilitation and restoration plan, ICP is going through the long process of claiming funds from the recovery efforts budget from FEMA. No final decision has been made about this although a precise analysis of the damages was performed.

Besides the efforts carried out by ICP to get the funding for the intervention in the fort, it is important to involve groups and institutions that can advocate for the restoration and rescue of such an iconic building. The *Amigos del Fortin*, are a collaborating group that raise funds through activities in the fort to help with the restoration efforts. ICP requested that the Fort San Geronimo del Boquerón Fort be included among the "11 Most Endangered Places 2021".

The ICP was organized as an official, corporate, and autonomous entity whose purpose is to preserve, promote, enrich, and diffuse the cultural values of the Puerto Rican people, and achieve a broader and fuller awareness thereof (Act No. 89 of June 21, 1955, as amended). The ICP has undergone abrupt and substantial budget cuts that persist to date, since the enactment of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (also known as PROMESA, Public Law 114-187). This presents pressing challenges to preserve our Built Heritage, including the Fort San Gerónimo del Boquerón.

It is crucial to establish Fort San Gerónimo del Boquerón in Puerto Rico as an affiliated area of the National Park System to ensure and guarantee resources for the continued restoration and preservation of this historic site. We bring to the attention of the Committee that the restoration and preservation of historical properties is the right thing to do and, in our case, serves as a cornerstone of the Visitor's Economy. The Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña and the Nautical Archeology Council support H.R. 2444, the Fort San Gerónimo Preservation Act.

Thank You