

The Spanish-American War Centennial and the San Juan National Historic Site

During the Quincentennial celebrations in May 1992, San Juan National Historic Site was shown to be the oldest Spanish Colonial site administrated by the National Park Service. For almost four centuries, after Christopher Columbus landed in Puerto Rico on November 19, 1493, the Island was one of the most important points for the Spanish government. The significance was recognized in the early-16th century by Charles V as the “Key of the West Indies.” The port of San Juan served as the principal element within the Spanish master plan for the commercial exploitation of the Americas. As a result of this, the city of San Juan slowly developed into a Royal Presidio and a defense of the first order. These fortifications show the significant role played by Spain in the exploration, settlement, and exploitation of the Americas, as well as representing the best of military engineering of the period.

Today, San Juan National Historic Site is preparing to play another major role in modern history—the centennial celebration of the event that marked the end of the Spanish Empire in the Americas: the Spanish-American War. On May 12, 1898, Admiral William Sampson’s bombarded the city of San Juan for three hours. From this event the United States emerged as a New World leader and commanded the island of Puerto Rico. The War Department became responsible for maintenance and preservation of the historic fortifications that for 400 years let Spain retain her colonial and maritime domains in the Caribbean.

On July 25, 1898, under the command of General Nelson Miles, the American troops landed at Guánica, a small town on the south side of the island 15 miles west of Ponce. After a brief, bloodless skirmish, the few Spanish defenders fled the town and surrendered to the Americans. A second skirmish followed the next day, again without American casualties. This skirmish gave Mile’s troops possession of the main road to Ponce. On July 27, the first of Miles’ reinforcements, the

brigade from Charleston, under the command of Maj. Gen. James H. Wilson, arrived off Guánica. Miles left his brigade on their transports and sent them on July 28, steaming into Ponce harbor with the battleship Massachusetts in support. Simultaneously, the troops from Guánica attacked the city by land. Outmaneuvered and hopelessly outnumbered, the Spanish garrison retreated toward San Juan. “After only a token resistance, Puerto Rico’s largest city had fallen to the Americans.”

On October 18, 1898, the United States Forces, under General John F. Brooke, took formal possession of the Island of Puerto Rico. These actions started 100 years of history of the American Presence in Puerto Rico (1898–1998).

The year 1998 will mark the 100th anniversary of the Spanish-American War, an admittedly little known chapter of United States history to most citizens, but nevertheless an important historic watershed which marks the emergence of the United States as a global power. The fate of the last four generations of the citizens of Puerto Rico, Guam, Philippines, Cuba, and Hawaii were forever and irrevocably changed by the events of 1898. Particularly for those 3.6 million American citizens who today live in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and their more than 3 million fellow Puerto Ricans who live in the US mainland states, the Spanish-American War is a crucial pivot point in their history, as important to their understanding of themselves and their culture as the Revolution or Civil War might be considered for mainland citizens.

The San Juan National Historic Site, which is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the only unit of the National Park Service whose history includes any battle of the Spanish-American War. A US Navy flotilla shelled forts El Morro and San Cristobal on May 12, 1898, the last combat to be experienced by the venerable fortifications of Old San Juan.

As 1998 comes closer, more and more visitors, both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking, will want to know more about what happened in 1898 than just a few mental footnotes about the battleship Maine, Teddy Roosevelt, and San Juan Hill, in Cuba. In Puerto Rico, there will be an

General Nelson A. Miles, leader of the expedition against Spanish forces on Puerto Rico. He had won the Medal of Honor for bravery at Chancellorsville, and fought in the Indian Wars against Chief Joseph and Geronimo before becoming the Commanding General of the Army.





The Black officers of Company L of the 6th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Company L was sent to Puerto Rico and was the only Black volunteer unit to engage in combat. 1st Lt. W.H. Jackson, Capt. W.J. Williams, and 2nd Lt. G.W. Braxton (l-r).

intensifying introspection about the Spanish-American War and the US era.

The San Juan National Historic Site has been designated as the Official National Park Service representative for events surrounding the Spanish-American War Centennial in Puerto Rico by the Southeast Area Field Director (NPS).

Some of the projects that are being developed at San Juan in preparation of this major event are the inauguration in February 1998 of the exhibit San Juan 100 years ago, and the publication "1898

Spanish-American War Bibliographical Sources available at the San Juan National Historic Site Military Archive Collection." The park is also working on its WWI Home Page which will include a section on the Spanish-American War.

Also, the park has been working and very active collaborating within local and international organizations on this centennial commemoration. We would like to share with the NPS community some of the activities that will be taking place through the centennial year:

Conference: "1898: The Treaty of Paris. Origins and Consequences for Cuba."

Sponsor: Florida International University/University of Miami, Miami, Fl.

Dates: May 14-16, 1998

Tel. 305-348-1991. Fax: 305-348-3593

Contact person: Uva de Aragón, Subdirector Cuban Research Institute, Florida International University Latin American and Caribbean Center, University Park, Miami, Florida 33199.

Conference: "1898 and the World: Context and Actors"

Sponsor and place: University of the Philippines, Quezon City, Phillipines.

Dates: June 9-12, 1998

Tel. 632-924-2966

Contact person: Dra. Maria Luisa Camagay

Conference: "1898 Hispanic America, Saxon America"

Sponsor: University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico.

Dates: Sept. 9-11, 1998

Tel. 787-764-0000 ext. 2026, Fax: 787-763-4811

Contact person: Dr. Luis Agrait, Director History Department, University of Puerto Rico

Conference: "The Treaty Guadalupe-Hidalgo: End of the Hispanic expansion for North America and the beginning of the Chicano experience in the United States"

Sponsor: University of Berkeley, California

Dates: October 16-17, 1998

Tel. 510-643-5996

Contact Person: Dr. Ignacio Navarrete

Conference: "1848 and 1898: the two Grand Facing Events of the Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon Civilizations in North America and their effects in the relations with Spain"

Place: Madrid, Univerisidad de Alcalá de Henares, Spain.

Dates: December 10-12, 1998

Tel. 305-348-1991, Fax: 305-348-3593

Contact Person: Uva de Aragón, Sub-Director Florida International University Latin American and Caribbean Center, University of Miami, Florida 33199

Conference and Exhibition: "Army and Navy on the 98: Cuba, Puerto Rico and Phillipines"

Sponsor: Ministry of Defense, Army Headquarters, Historic Military Service and Army Museum, Madrid-Avila, Spain

Dates: March 23-27, 1998

Contact Person: Coronel, Longinos Criado Martinez. C/O Martires de Alcalá, 9, 28015, Madrid, España Tel. (91) 547.03.00, 547.03.08, 547.03.09, Fax: (91) 559.43.71

Congress: "The 1898 Conflict: Origins and Consequences"

Sponsors: National Commission for the Commemoration of the 1898 Centennial, Interamerican University of Puerto Rico, National Park Service-San Juan National Historic Site

Dates: August 22-30, 1998, San Juan. Puerto Rico

Tel. 787-250-1912 exts. 2177/2178. Fax: 265-6965

Contact persons: Luis Mayo-Interamerican University of Puerto Rico

Milagros Flores-National Park Service, San Juan National Historic Site, phone: 787-729-6777, 729-6653

TVE, from Spain (Televisión Española), is producing a Documental Series entitled "Maine 98." Production will include filming on site in Spain, Cuba, Phillipines, the U.S.A. (continental) and Puerto Rico. Contact person: Angel Pelaez Poyán, Program Director Maine 98. Tel. (91)346 90 45/346 93 03, Fax: (91) 346 30 88.

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