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## Fortifications: Identifying Their Significance

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Our American fortifications, which at one time represented the defense of the territories, today have become a fragile system. Fragile because they must survive in a world where they are not understood for what they are: historic landmarks. Having lost their original context, they must survive in a new one for which they were not conceived, accommodating such things as electrical, water supply, heating, and air conditioning systems; soft drink dispensing machines; Internet wiring; modern plumbing; offices; and kitchens equipped with cutting-edge appliances—to mention a few. These and more constitute a long list of threats to protected sites.

But perhaps one threat to this fragile heritage that goes unnoticed is the lack of knowledge regarding its significance and, consequently, inadequate interpretations of its significance.

Effective interpretation of a heritage site is the result of knowing its significance along with responsibly documenting what the site represents and signifies. It means being clear about why and who envisaged the structure, its use, its construction, its history.

Without this primary information, our possibilities for interpreting the site fairly and appropriately are greatly reduced. At the same time, the chances increase that aggressive and inappropriate interpretation of the significance of the landmark will occur. This kind of interpretation contravenes the site's authenticity and converts well-intentioned protection efforts into threats themselves, ones that work against this fragile heritage.

When we talk about the rescue of our American fortifications, how many times does the image come to our minds of a numerous team of historians or researchers hunting down documentation that will reveal the significance of the complex or the particular monument, rather than architects hard at work designing methods to salvage walls and deteriorating historic material? Even though during the last two decades there have been a considerable number of publications, both in the Spanish- and English-speaking worlds, regarding defensive structures, one of the remaining obstacles is the lack of broader and deeper historic research on primary sources.

In view of the increasing interest in renewing the American fortifications, which has been expressed by various global entities, it seems to me of vital importance to keep in mind that in the effort to rescue these structures we should not lose sight of the fact that as part of the process we also have to rescue the history of the site, the history that is to be found in the documentation. Documentation is the tool that will allow us to be most accurate in our rescue efforts in terms of interpretation, reuse, and management of American fortifications.

I have personally witnessed several initiatives directed at recovering this particular American heritage. These initiatives underscore the pressing need for taking a step back and recommencing with historic research, a much-needed first step. If we want to be effective in leading recovery efforts and in using and managing these ancient fortifications, while high-

lighting their significance in our times, we should first turn to the archives to search out the truth about the fortifications. After that decisive first step, we will then be in a position to evaluate and interpret them.

I would like to briefly share some successful efforts that have been made on documentation rescue for the fortifications systems at San Juan National Historic Site in Puerto Rico. This is a monumental complex begun in the 16th century by Spain, which recognized the importance of the San Juan Bay as a secure base for naval operations from which all vessels entering the Caribbean could be controlled. Today, the National Park Service manages the national historic site and is responsible for the management and protection of the complex of the principal fortifications of the city of San Juan, which were declared a World Heritage site in 1983.

### **The 1797 project**

In 1995 we began a research project on the British attack on San Juan, Puerto Rico, that occurred in 1797, and was to be the last British attack in the Caribbean during the 18th century. Spanish primary sources had been studied, but not the British primary sources. After two years of research, heretofore unmentioned documents were found in the British archives. Notable was the discovery of an unedited map of the British campaign signed by General Sir Ralph Abercromby on the island of Trinidad, where he stopped immediately after his withdrawal from the island of Puerto Rico following the failed attack. Along with the map, there was accurate information on the number of British losses and on the fact that, much to our surprise, the battle of resistance minimally involved the fortifications and had mostly occurred in the area of the Martin Peña Bridge, a mangrove that divided the island of Puerto Rico from the islet of San Juan.

### **The 1898 project**

The search for documentation on the state of the fortifications in San Juan at the time of the Spanish-American War at the General Military Archives in Madrid resulted in the discovery of a vast collection of historic documents. Exactly at the time the centenary of the transfer of Puerto Rico from Spanish to American rule (1898–1998) was being celebrated, in an unprecedented event we suddenly found ourselves with a vast treasure of documents of incalculable historic value on our hands. Almost 4,000 boxes of uncatalogued documents on the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico were waiting to be researched. The National Park Service, along with the Office of the Official Historian of Puerto Rico and the Department of History at the University of Puerto Rico, immediately entered into conversations with the Institute of Military History and Culture at the Spanish Defense Ministry with a view to preparing an inventory of the recently discovered materials.

As a result of this first stage of the negotiations, a preliminary inventory of the documents was prepared by the National Park Service. In turn, this preliminary inventory paved the way for an agreement between the Puerto Rico House of Representatives, through the Office of the Official Historian, and the Institute of Military History and Culture in Spain, the first such international agreement between these institutions. In addition, a catalogue was

later published, titled *Documentación de Puerto Rico en el Archivo General Militar de Madrid*, by the Spanish Ministry of Defense in 2002.

The importance of this discovery for Puerto Rican historiography lies in the richness of documentary information on unresolved aspects of the last years of Spanish rule which had remained in the wake of the Spanish-American War. The fortifications of the city of San Juan came to the fore during that conflict when, on May 12, 1898, they were bombarded by Admiral William Sampson's fleet.

This collaboration resulted in the transfer to Puerto Rico of these documentary resources on microfilm and CD-ROM formats, including almost 1,000 telegrams related to the Spanish-American War campaign, whose existence had been unknown; documents on the military and civil organization of the overseas province during the 19th century until the last days of Spanish colonial rule in 1898; as well as documents spanning the 16th to the 18th centuries which refer to the island. There is also an important cartographical collection of 590 maps and drawings that are extremely useful for the history of architecture and military engineering in Puerto Rico, particularly for the analysis of urban development in the city of San Juan.

The most significant blocks of information are those related to military campaigns in Puerto Rico, the internal structure of the Spanish military system on the island, the organization of the Army in Puerto Rico, the development of foreign relations and of those with neighboring provinces, and finally, the peace negotiations and the Spanish evacuation of Puerto Rico. The first stage of this project directed at rescuing this valuable documentary collection culminated successfully in the publication by the Spanish Ministry of Defense of the catalogue of the documentation related to Puerto Rico in the General Military Archive of Madrid (referred to above), along with an exhibition of some examples of the documentation.

### **The San Juan Walls project**

A second phase has allowed us to design and prepare an exhibition based on these newly discovered resources and to use a selection of the documents, maps, drawings, and photographs for the enjoyment and reflection of community members and visitors at large. The exhibition reveals the military, economic, social, architectural, and cultural dimensions of the historic significance of the San Juan walls and Fort San Cristóbal, as guardian of the so-called War Zones. The area came to the fore in the city's growth beyond its walls and assisted at the birth of the Puerta de Tierra neighborhood that developed on the demolished remains of the old walls after an intense fifteen-year struggle between the residents and Spanish government authorities.

To conclude: it is of vital importance to keep in mind that, in the effort to rescue these structures, we should not lose sight of the fact that as part of the process we also have to rescue the history of the site. That history is to be found in documentation, which is the tool that will allow us to be most accurate in our rescue efforts in terms of interpretation, reuse, and management of American fortifications. Documentation is our most effective ally in protecting the authenticity of our heritage.