



### ***The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean***



*(National Park Service)*

The ancient stone walls rise majestically above the blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean, simultaneously towering over the harbor entrance and casting their silhouette into the colonial city of Old San Juan, Puerto Rico. Tunnels and staircases wind through the interior, leading back to the time when the fort provided the keystone to protection of the Spanish Empire that spread across the Caribbean.

These massive masonry defenses, which were begun in the 16th century, today exist as the oldest European style fortifications within the territory of the United States. Now one of the most beautiful spots in Puerto Rico, the battlements illustrate the remarkable work of Spanish military engineers and recall more than 400 years of history in the Americas. The San Juan National Historic Site, as it is now called, represents the past so well that the United Nations has designated it as a World Heritage Site because of its "outstanding, universal" cultural value.



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### Where this lesson fits into the curriculum

**Time Period:** 1500s-1800s

**Topics:** This lesson could be used in history, social studies, and geography courses in units on colonization or European settlement and trading patterns in the Western Hemisphere.

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### **Relevant United States History Standards for Grades 5-12**

*This lesson relates to the following National Standards for History from the UCLA National Center for History in the Schools:*

#### **US History Era 1**

- **Standard 2A:** The student understands the stages of European oceanic and overland exploration, amid international rivalries, from the 9th to 17th centuries.
- **Standard 2B:** The student understands the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of the Americas.

#### **US History Era 2**

- **Standard 1B:** The student understands the European struggle for control of North America.

#### **US History Era 6**

- **Standard 4B:** The student understands the roots and development of American expansionism and the causes and outcomes of the Spanish-American War.
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### **Relevant Curriculum Standards for Social Studies**

*This lesson relates to the following Curriculum Standards for Social Studies from the National Council for the Social Studies:*

#### **Theme III: People, Places, and Environment**



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- Standard C: The student uses appropriate resources, data sources, and geographic tools such as aerial photographs, satellite images, geographic information systems (GIS), map projections, and cartography to generate, manipulate, and interpret information such as atlases, data bases, grid systems, charts, graphs, and maps.
- Standard I: The student describes ways that historical events have been influenced by, and have influenced, physical and human geographic factors in local, regional, national, and global settings.

### **Theme VI: Power, Authority, and Governance**

- Standard C: The student analyzes and explains ideas and governmental mechanisms to meet needs and wants of citizens, regulate territory, manage conflict, and establish order and security.

### **Theme IX: Global Connections**

- Standard E: The student describes and explains the relationships and tensions between national sovereignty and global interests in such matters as territory, natural resources, trade, use of technology, and welfare of people.

### **Relevant Common Core Standards**

*This lesson related to the following Common Core English and Language Arts Standards for History and Social Studies for middle school and high school students:*

#### **Key Ideas and Details**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

#### **Craft and Structure**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6

#### **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7

#### **Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.10



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### About This Lesson

This lesson is based on the World Heritage List nomination file for the historic fortifications of San Juan and the National Park Service handbook, *The Forts of Old San Juan*. It was first published online in 2001. This lesson was written by Rosanna Weltzin and other members of the staff of San Juan National Historic Site. It was edited by Teaching with Historic Places staff. This lesson is one in a series that brings the important stories of historic places into classrooms across the country.

### Objectives

1. To explain the strategic importance of Puerto Rico as part of Spain's plan to defend its empire in the Caribbean;
2. To understand the evolution of the Spanish strongholds, in particular San Juan's development from a primitive post to a "plaza fuerte" or stronghold;
3. To examine how the 1898 Treaty of Paris affected Puerto Rico;
4. To learn how historic structures provide a link between the "old" and the "new;"
5. To investigate a historic site in their community;

### Materials for students

**The materials listed below can either be used directly on the computer or can be printed out, photocopied, and distributed to students.**

1. Two maps of San Juan Island and Spanish forts in the Caribbean;
2. Three readings on the history of Puerto Rico and the evolution of its defensive system readings;
3. A drawing and photo of El Morro;
4. A drawing and photo of San Cristóbal.

### Visiting the site

The forts of San Juan, administered by the National Park Service, are located along Norzagaray Street in Old San Juan. They are open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., except for Christmas Day. For more information, contact the Superintendent, Fort San Cristóbal,

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Norzagaray Street, Old San Juan, Puerto Rico 00901-2094, or visit the park's Web site at <http://www.nps.gov/saju> .



### Getting Started



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**Why do you think this structure was built?**



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### Photo Analysis Worksheet

#### Step 1:

Examine the photograph for 10 seconds. How would you describe the photograph?

#### Step 2:

Divide the photograph into quadrants and study each section individually. What details--such as people, objects, and activities--do you notice?

#### Step 3:

What other information--such as time period, location, season, reason photo was taken--can you gather from the photo?

#### Step 4:

How would you revise your first description of the photo using the information noted in Steps 2 and 3?

#### Step 5:

What questions do you have about the photograph? How might you find answers to these questions?



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## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### **Setting the Stage**

Spain began developing a New World empire when men such as Christopher Columbus started searching for a shorter route to the spices available in the Orient. Although they could not find a shorter passage, explorers soon discovered that the Americas offered other equally profitable resources—most notably vast quantities of gold and silver.

In 1493, Columbus became the first European to visit Puerto Rico, an island situated at the gateway to the Caribbean from Europe. The Spanish then ignored the island until 1508, when Juan Ponce de León established a small settlement there he called Caparra. Puerto Rico then became part of an empire that would last until the end of the 19th century. "New Spain," as the government called the territory it claimed in the Americas, at times extended from Florida down through South America, from the eastern end of the Caribbean across Central America to the Pacific Ocean. Spain soon discovered that its people and possessions needed protection from both the native population it tried to control and from other European nations who also wanted the region's wealth. To protect its empire, Spain developed a series of forts; among the most important were those in Puerto Rico.



## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Locating the Site

#### Map 1: Spanish forts in the Caribbean



(National Park Service)

By the 16th century, Spain had found so many riches in the New World that it set up a trading route involving two fleets. Both entered the Caribbean Sea just southeast of Puerto Rico but followed different routes at different times of the year. The *flota*, relatively small ships, left Spain in the spring; the *galeones*, which were larger, left in midsummer. The *flota* collected goods such as sugar, coffee, hides, ginger, and other tropical products from Hispaniola (Dominican Republic), Cuba, and Veracruz, Mexico. The *galeones* picked up gold, silver, pearls, and other precious stones from Cartagena de Indias on Colombia's northwestern coast and Portobelo at the Isthmus of Panama. The two fleets, both of which had to be protected from attacks by armed vessels, met at Havana, Cuba, the following spring. Together they sailed up the east coast of Florida, then turned east to return to Spain. They dropped off their cargoes of treasures and raw materials in Spain, then loaded up with supplies and merchandise to take back to the colonies.

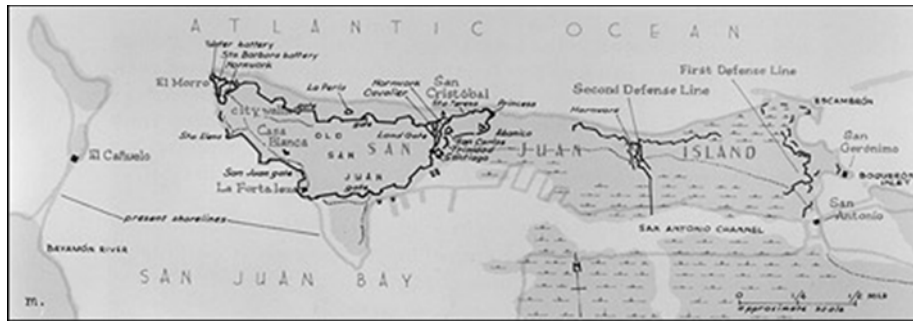




## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Locating the Site:

#### Map 2: San Juan Island, Puerto Rico



*(Drawn by Albert Manucy)*

The Spanish began developing defenses on San Juan Island, a beautiful barrier island on the north coast of Puerto Rico, in the 1530s. Only three and one-half miles long and one mile wide, the island lies where San Juan Harbor meets the Atlantic Ocean. Over the next 250 years, the Spanish built up its fortifications, and each location named on the map was at one point a defensive position.

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## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Questions for Map 2

1) Where do you think the main fort should have been located in order to defend San Juan from an attack by sea? Why? What about an attack by land? Why?

2) What position seems the least effective in defending San Juan? Why?



## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Determining the Facts

#### Reading 1: The Discovery and Colonization of Puerto Rico

It was during his second trip to the Americas that Christopher Columbus landed on present day Puerto Rico. When he and his crew arrived there in 1493, they found it inhabited by several thousand Arawak Indians, known as Taínos. The indigenous population called the island Boriquén, but Columbus, before continuing on to explore more of the Caribbean, named it San Juan Bautista, Spanish for "St. John the Baptist."

Fifteen years later, a member of Columbus's party returned to the island. He was Juan Ponce de León, the Spanish conquistador who would later become famous for his unsuccessful search for the Fountain of Youth. Ponce de León was the island's first Spanish governor, overseeing a troop of 50 soldiers and a group of settlers. The Spanish soon discovered the harbor we know today as San Juan, but at the time they called it Puerto Rico—"fine or rich port." As the years passed, however, the name of the island and the harbor shifted: Puerto Rico came to refer to the entire island, and San Juan identified the port and the city that grew up around it.

Though the harbor offered a beautiful setting, Ponce de León chose to locate the settlement somewhere else. He selected a wooded site surrounded by hills and swamps about two miles south of the port, giving it the name Caparra. It turned out to be less than ideal for a seat of government or for a military base: the swamps made the location unhealthy and hard to reach, it was located too far from the port to transport goods, and it was difficult to defend. The colonists urged Ponce de León to move the settlement, but he refused. Only an order from the King of Spain reversed Ponce de León's decision.

The colonists chose for a new home a beautiful barrier island along the north coast. It was an excellent location: it overlooked the entrance to San Juan harbor; was open to cooling winds off the water; and had features, such a jagged reef along its ocean side and a craggy steep shoreline on the harbor side, that made it naturally defensible. The transfer of settlers from Caparra to San Juan began in 1519 and was completed in 1521, the year Ponce de León left Puerto Rico to colonize Florida.

The Taínos initially welcomed and helped the Spaniards. Their friendship turned to hostility, however, once the Europeans increased in number, took over land, and kidnapped Taíno women. The Spanish forced many Taínos to labor like slaves to mine gold and produce crops; this work and European diseases quickly pushed the indigenous population towards extinction. Though at first afraid to fight back because they believed the Spanish were immortal, the Taínos learned otherwise when a number of them drowned a Spanish soldier. In 1511, they began to rebel against the Spanish, but their primitive wooden weapons, stone axes, and arrows were no match for Spanish firearms. After their defeat, many fled to the Lesser Antilles, smaller Caribbean islands to the southeast, where they joined forces with the Caribes, a fierce tribe of South American Indians who previously had been their enemies. Together they began a

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campaign of terror and harassment against Puerto Rican settlers for nearly a quarter of a century.

Puerto Rico became known as the gateway to the Indies, the name that people used to identify the islands of the Caribbean. Though the island possessed little gold or silver, Spanish officials still viewed it as important. Because of ocean currents and winds, both the *flota* and *galeones* passed nearby as they began their trading sweeps through the Caribbean. Puerto Rico's strategic location also offered relatively easy access to the many claimed lands of Spain's new empire. Government officials decided that, in order to protect the lands they had seized in Central and South America, including their trading route in the Caribbean, they would establish one of their most important forts on the islet of San Juan—what today is known as Old San Juan.

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## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Questions for Reading 1

- 1) Why was Caparra such a poor location for the first Spanish settlement?
  
- 2) How did Spanish colonization affect the Taínos?
  
- 3) How did the Taínos react to the Spanish?
  
- 4) Why did San Juan become such an important part of New Spain?





## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Determining the Facts

#### Reading 2: The Evolution of a Defensive System

San Juan's first defensive building was Casa Blanca, a substantial structure used to store weapons and government funds. It also was built to house the first Spanish governor, Ponce de León; he never lived in it, but his descendants did for more than 250 years. Strategists soon began telling the king to improve the defenses: given that Puerto Rico was "the entrance and key to all the Indies ... [and] the first to meet the French and English corsairs [pirates]." They also suggested that he "should order a fort built ... or the island will be deserted."<sup>1</sup>

The government then built what became known as La Fortaleza (the Fortress). Construction started in 1533, but because it did not have cannons or permanent troops, the building was almost useless for any military purpose. Even if it had had weapons, many observers complained, La Fortaleza was certain to be ineffective because it had no command of the harbor entrance. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, a Spanish historian who saw La Fortaleza when construction began, reported that "only blind men could have chosen such a site for a fort." The fort should have been built, Oviedo suggested, on *el morro*, a headland at the harbor entrance that stood at the top of a steep slope 100 feet high. Within two years, the Crown approved funds to fortify *el morro*. Its first structure was a round masonry tower called San Felipe del Morro in honor of King Phillip II. The water battery, a semicircular platform intended to hold cannons, was later constructed over the rock at the foot of the slope below the tower.

Funds for construction came from a central government located in Mexico. Known as the viceroyalty of New Spain, it collected taxes from the richest areas and distributed them to areas like Puerto Rico that lacked their own wealth but were crucial to defending Spanish territory and shipping. These government subsidies, known as *situados*, continued through the 18th century, paying for land fortifications, soldiers, and armed ships.

Later events demonstrated why San Juan needed strong defenses. In 1595, Sir Francis Drake, the infamous English buccaneer, unsuccessfully challenged the entrance to the harbor in an attempt to seize a cargo of gold and silver awaiting transport to Spain. Three years later, another Englishman, the Earl of Cumberland, entered the harbor, captured the governor's headquarters, and besieged El Morro, as the fort had come to be known. An epidemic of dysentery soon forced the Earl to abandon his plans to make San Juan a permanent English station in the Caribbean.

After Cumberland withdrew, El Morro's defenses were improved again. Its hornwork (fortifications that resemble the outreaching horns of a bull, intended to cut off the possibility of a land attack) was rebuilt, and a new gun deck overlooking the harbor channel was added. In 1625, a Dutch fleet forced its way into the harbor and captured the city of San Juan. When it laid siege to El Morro from the land side, however, the defenders offered stiff resistance and drove off the Dutch.



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Over the next 150 years, San Juan's defenses became more elaborate. In 1645, King Felipe IV remarked, "It is the front and vanguard of all my West Indies, and consequently the most important of them all—and the most coveted by my enemies."<sup>2</sup> El Morro, for example, became a six-level complex that rose 150 feet above the ocean. Cannons could now cover both land and water approaches. Other work added storerooms, troop quarters, a chapel, and a prison; ramps, tunnels, and stairways offered access to the different areas of the fort.

El Morro was not the only area the Spaniards strengthened. Among the additional works was a small masonry fortification across the bay to the west of El Morro. Named San Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross), it is usually called El Cañuelo after the tiny island on which it was built. A wooden stockade originally defended this site, but Dutch attackers burned it during their 1625 assault. A stone fort was built in the 1660s to help defend the harbor entrance and the mouth of the Bayamón River, which linked San Juan to inland settlements.

Another fortress developed along the coast about a mile east of El Morro. Castillo de San Cristóbal (St. Christopher Fort) is the largest fortress built by the Spanish in the Americas. Its construction in 1634 started with Fortín del Espigón, located on the northeast edge of Old San Juan. A fortified wall, much of it built with forced labor, gradually enclosed the entire town. Over the next century San Cristóbal developed into an elaborate fort. Covering about 27 acres, it defended the town from land attacks from the east. Its main section was a hornwork that essentially continues the walls surrounding the city. In front of the hornwork were three fortifications: the San Carlos and Santiago ravelins and the Trinidad counterguard; a dry moat surrounded them. Beyond the moat was a sizable *plaza de armas* (open area) that led out to a strong fort whose arrow-shape led it to be called El Abanico (the Fan). Seaward from El Abanico are Santa Teresa, a battery aimed at the ocean, and La Princesa, whose guns could fire towards the sea and land. The highest part of San Cristóbal was the *caballero* (cavalier), a large gun platform on top of the hornwork.

Many of these improvements occurred after King Charles III took the Spanish throne in 1759. He ordered three men in the Spanish army—Field Marshal Alexander O'Reilly, Chief Engineer Thomas O'Daly, and Chief Engineer Juan Francisco Mestre—to make the island a "Plaza Fuerte," or "Defense of the First Order." They modernized and expanded both Castillo de San Cristóbal and Castillo de San Felipe del Morro, thickened the city walls, and built new batteries at various places along the wall. By the end of the 1780s San Juan was one of the most heavily fortified cities in the Americas, so much so that military facilities had taken over much of the old city. These defenses proved their effectiveness in 1797, when they helped Spanish soldiers repulse 7,000 British soldiers besieging San Juan.





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### Determining the Facts

#### Reading 3: The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

During the 19th century, most of Spain's New World colonies revolted and gained their independence. By the 1890s, the only remnants of the once far flung Spanish empire were Cuba and Puerto Rico. When a revolution in Cuba sparked the Spanish American War, a United States naval flotilla bombarded San Juan. This May 1898 barrage caused no great damage, and there was no further United States military action against the city.

Two months later, however, Gen. Nelson Miles landed American troops on the southern coast of Puerto Rico. As his troops were advancing through the outskirts of San Juan, the United States and Spain signed an armistice bringing fighting to an end. On October 18th, the American forces under Gen. John R. Brooke took formal possession of Puerto Rico.

The Treaty of Paris (1898), which officially ended the war, established the San Juan Military Reservation. An Act of Congress in 1903 then reserved it for military use. In World War I, the American military used Puerto Rico much as the Spanish had: it served as an outpost against threats to U.S. shipping, in this case through the newly-built Panama Canal. Other parts of the fort were adapted to new uses, as old bunkers and batteries were modernized and El Morro became part of the sprawling administrative, housing, and hospital complex. Changes continued during World War II. The United States army added coastal defense observation posts and hidden command and communication centers within both El Morro and San Cristóbal; these blocky concrete additions can still be seen. In 1943, the installation was officially designated Fort Brooke in honor of Major General Brooke, who was the island's first American governor.

The status of Puerto Rico also was changing. By the Jones Act of 1917, Puerto Rico had become an incorporated territory of the United States. The territory received partial self-government in 1947, when its residents received the right to elect their own governor. They wrote their own constitution and began electing a non-voting Congressman to represent them in Washington, D.C. Today, the people of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens, but they are unable to vote in presidential elections.

After World War II, the American military decided it no longer needed all of Fort Brooke. On February 14, 1949, El Morro, San Cristóbal, El Cañuelo, the gate of San Juan, and most of the city wall became San Juan National Historic Site, which is administered by the National Park Service. Old San Juan retains many elements of colonial times, such as cobblestone paving, inner patios and courtyards, overhanging balconies, and religious shrines. Its most impressive features remain, as they have for 400 years, the old fortifications that once guarded the city. They now attract more than two million sightseers to America's jewel in the Caribbean. Their historical importance is perhaps best illustrated by their designation as a United Nations World Heritage Site—a place with exceptional and universal cultural value.



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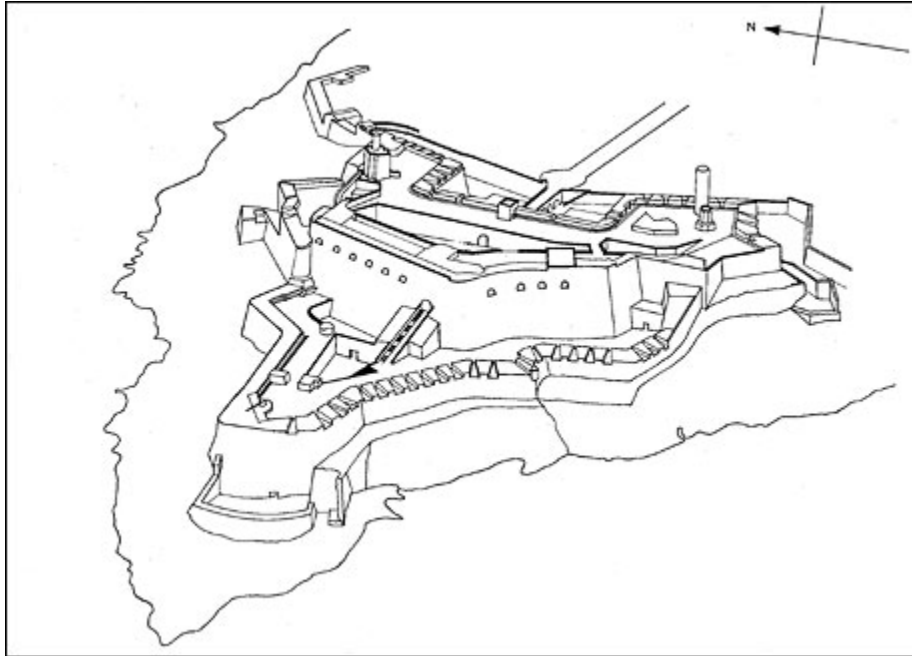
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## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Visual Evidence

#### Drawing 1: El Morro



*(Historic American Building Survey, National Park Service)*

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## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Visual Evidence

Photo 1: El Morro and the western part of San Juan



*(National Park Service)*

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## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Questions for Drawing 1 and Photo 1

1) What natural features made El Morro a good place for a fort? (Referring back to Map 2 may be helpful.)

2) How did the Spanish build so as to take advantage of those natural features?

3) Why do you think they added the *glacis*, the grassy area between El Morro and the town?

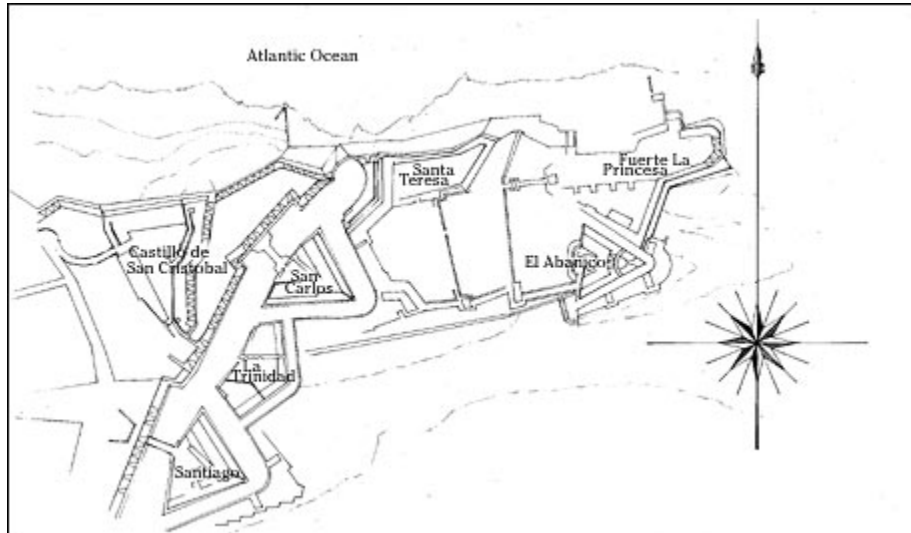




## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Visual Evidence

#### Drawing 2: San Cristóbal



*(Historic American Building Survey, National Park Service)*



## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Visual Evidence

#### Photo 2: Aerial view of San Cristóbal



*(National Park Service)*

San Cristóbal illustrates a principle known as "defense in depth," in which each part of a fort supports, and is supported by, one or more other parts. This system means that even if an enemy breaks through an outer barrier, there are higher and stronger sections that the defenders can use to drive out the attackers.

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## *The Forts of Old San Juan: Guardians of the Caribbean*

### Questions for Drawing 2 and Photo 2

1) Refer to the paragraphs on San Cristóbal in Reading 2. Which of the elements mentioned there—the city wall, the *cavalier*, the moat, the *plaza de armas* and the hornwork—can you label on Drawing 2?

2) How do the Santiago ravelin, the Trinidad counterguard, the great moat, and the hornwork illustrate "defense in depth"?

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### **Putting It All Together**

The following activities will help students better understand the chronology of European control of the Americas as well as learn more about the history of their own community.

### **Activity 1: Spain and Other Colonizers**

How did European control of the Americas change over time? Have students use an atlas or a world history book to find maps that show the areas of the Americas controlled by European nations at three or four different times—for example: 1600, 1650, 1750, and 1850. At each time, which European nation controlled the most territory? At what point did colonies become independent? What do these changes suggest about what was happening in Europe?

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### **Activity 2: Comparing an Old City to a New City**

Each community has a history and physical evolution of its own. Have students go to the library or local historical society to obtain an old map, or series of maps, of the local area. Insurance maps for successive 20 year periods are especially useful to find out how the buildings in a particular block have changed over the years. As the students are doing their research, have them consider the following questions: Were the houses built the same way? Are public agencies such as police and fire department, government buildings, and schools located in the same places as they were many years ago? Why did this happen? What unique structures appeared in each time period? Then have students combine their work to show how the area has developed over time. What forces might have caused the changes?

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### **Activity 3: Photographing History**

Have students, either working alone or as part of a small group, prepare a photo essay that tells the story of an important historic site in their neighborhood or community. All photos must have captions that explain their importance to the viewer, and each should be placed on a poster board in an attractive way. Each person or group should share his/her project with the other groups. As an introduction, each group should describe what aspects of the site first caught their interest. Then the class should discuss whether the essays as a whole create a comprehensive picture of the community's history, and consider why or why not.



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### References and Endnotes

#### Reading 1

*Reading 1 was compiled from The Forts of Old San Juan (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service).*

#### Reading 2

*Reading 2 was adapted from The Forts of Old San Juan (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service); "The Historic Fortifications of San Juan: La Fortaleza and San Juan National Historic Site" (Nomination to the World Heritage List by the United States of America, 1982); and Albert Manucy and Ricardo Torres-Reyes, Puerto Rico and the Forts of Old San Juan (Riverside, Conn.: Chatham Press, 1973).*

<sup>1</sup>Albert Manucy and Ricardo Torres-Reyes, Puerto Rico and the Forts of Old San Juan (Riverside, Conn.: Chatham Press, 1973), 29.

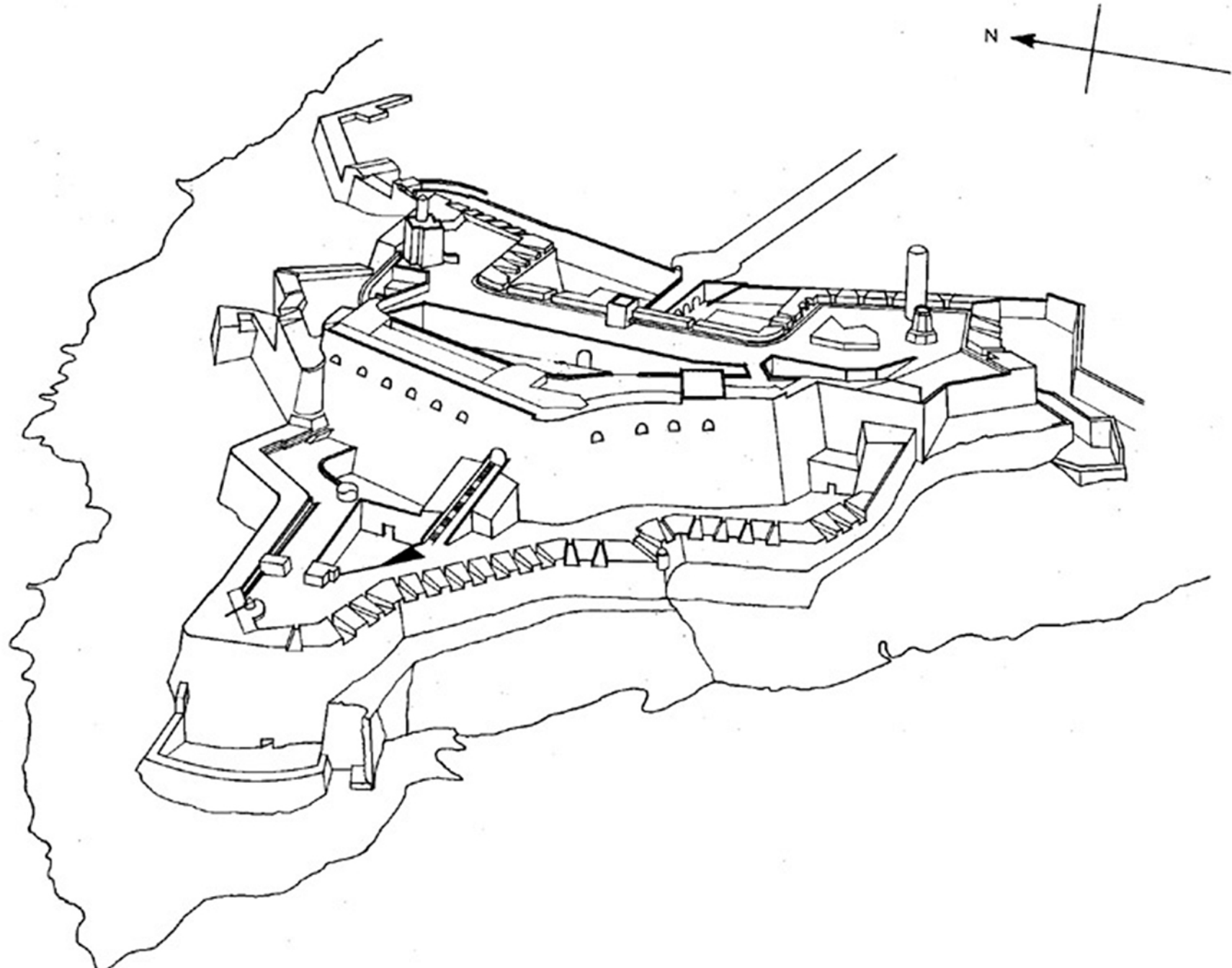
<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 23-4.

#### Reading 3

*Reading 3 was adapted from The Forts of Old San Juan (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service).*

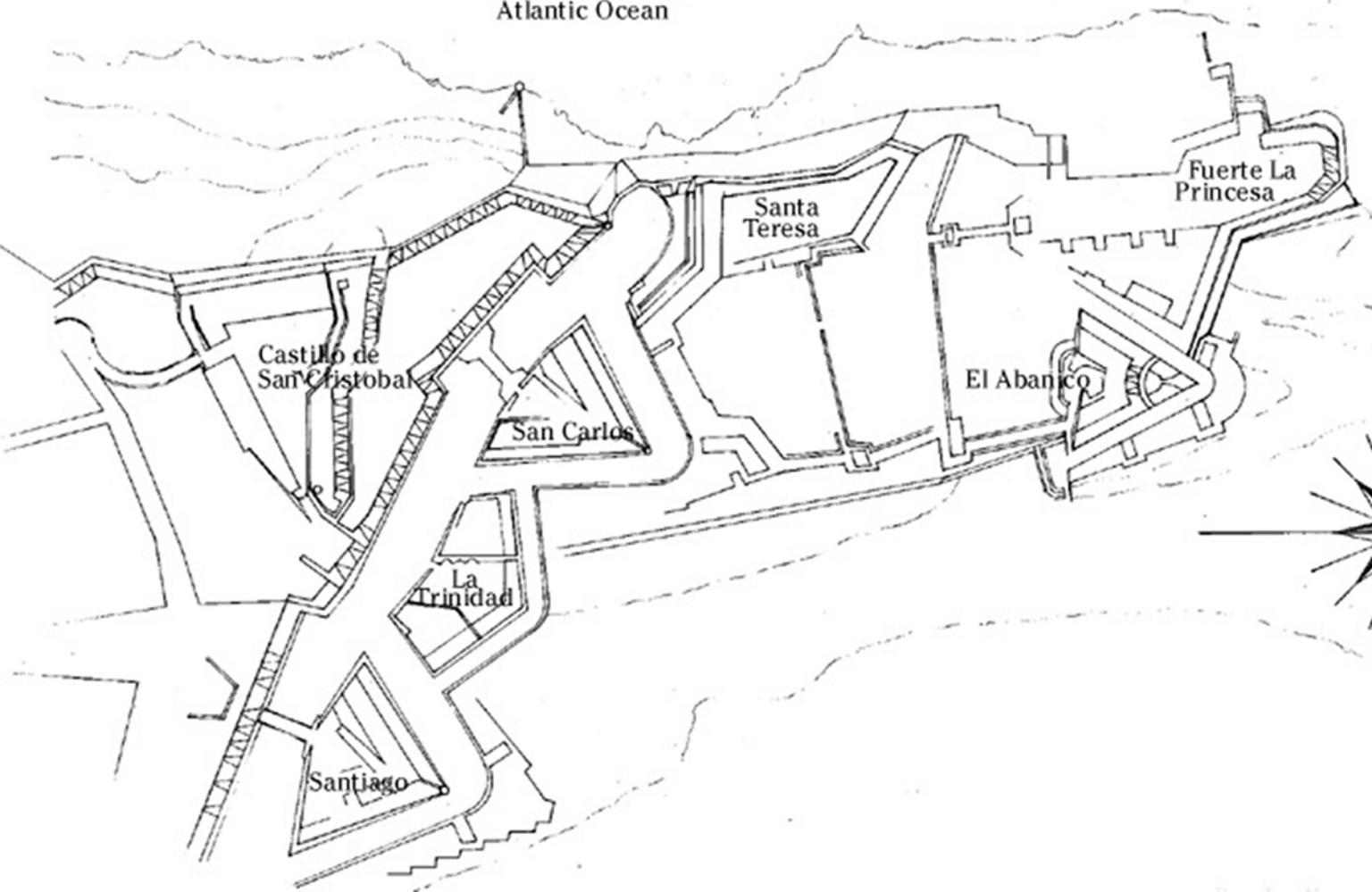








Atlantic Ocean



Castillo de  
San Cristobal

Santa  
Teresa

Fuerte La  
Princesa

El Abanico

San Carlos

La  
Trinidad

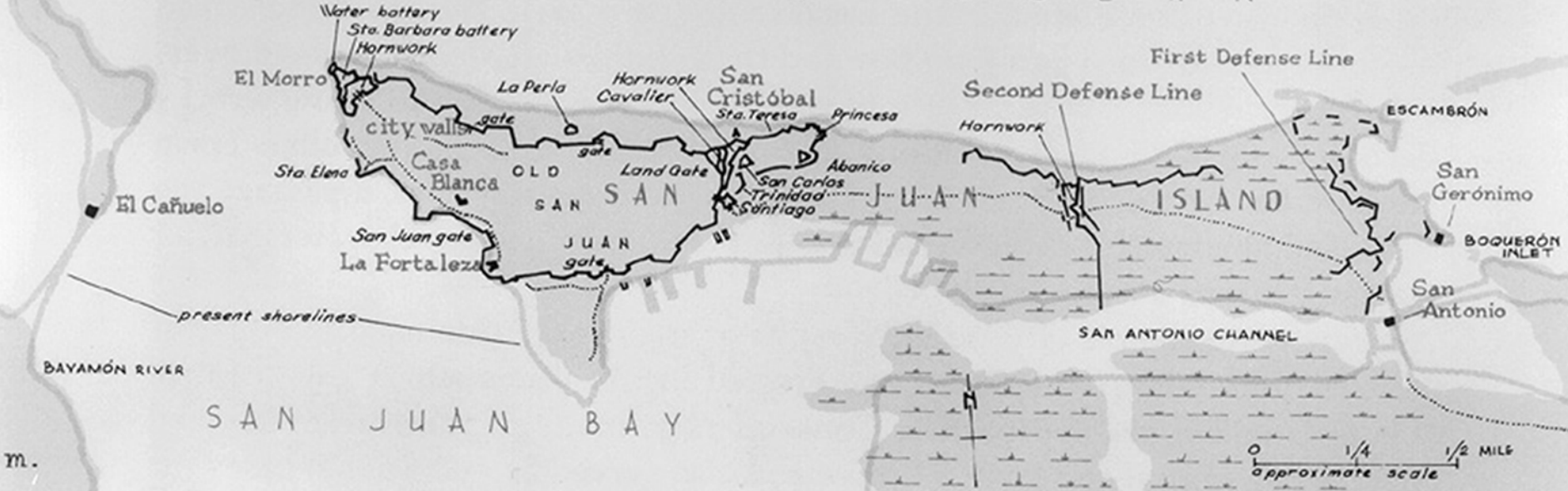
Santiago







A T L A N T I C O C E A N



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