

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

For NPS use only

received

JAN 17 1984

date entered

# National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

## 1. Name

historic Caparra

and or common Ruinas de Caparra

## 2. Location

street & number State Road #2 Km. 6.32

not for publication

city, town Guaynabo

vicinity of Guaynabo

state Puerto Rico

code 72

county San Juan

code 0450

## 3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

## 4. Owner of Property

name Institute of Puerto Rican Culture

street & number 98 Norzagaray Street

city, town San Juan

vicinity of

state Puerto Rico 00905

## 5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Registry of Deeds

street & number Guaynabo City Hall

city, town Guaynabo

state Puerto Rico

## 6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Inventario de Monumentos Históricos has this property been determined eligible? yes  no

date 1977

federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records Institute of Puerto Rican Culture

city, town San Juan

state Puerto Rico 00905

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## 7. Description

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**Condition**

excellent

good

fair

deteriorated

ruins

unexposed

consolidated ruins

**Check one**

unaltered

altered

**Check one**

original site

moved

date

**Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance**

Caparra, Puerto Rico's first capital, was founded between 1508 and 1509 by Juan Ponce de León, who chose a naturally well-ventilated site at the outskirts of the Bay of San Juan. The site, had other advantages as well, including physical protection in the form of low mountains in the rear, good natural drainage and an adjacent water supply. It was also quite close to areas that could later be used for both farming and mining.

The first formal structure built at Caparra was the "Casa de Tapias". "Tapias" was a way of construction using horizontal bands bearing that name which is still employed in some parts of Europe. This method allows us to determine the height of the building, provided we know how many "tapias" were used, for they were usually about three feet high. The structure was relatively small in size ( approximately 2,960 square feet ). There were battlements incorporated into the design and the house was provided with means of self-defense. A low wall was placed in front of the door for protection.

By 1509 a second house, the "Casa de Piedra" or stone house, was built as an annex. This building was a larger and more impressive edifice. The final complex was designed to be a unified whole. Tiles were brought from Seville and arranged on the facade in interesting motif. It is believed that a patio was enclosed in the eastern part.

In 1512 a chapel was built close to the complex. It had a rubble base, its walls and roof were probably built from wood and straw which were the basic building material for the construction of the settler's homes. The simple chapel was Puerto Rico's first cathedral.

Caparra was abandoned between 1519 and 1521 due mainly because settlers were not convinced that the site chosen was the best location for the capital of the new island. Protection against indian attacks was inadequate and for another, the difficulties of crossing the mangrove area on the way to and from the bay had not been reduced.

In 1936 Don Adolfo de Hostos, then official historian of Puerto Rico, undertook the archeological excavation of the site and after completing his painstaking and careful study, proved that the remains of mounds of stone were indeed of the old Caparra capital. The houses, unfortunately, could not be excavated completely for a large portion of the construction lay buried under State Road #2.

In 1958 the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture undertook additional excavations and was entrusted the preservation and conservation of the ruins. The foundations of the ruins were consolidated and, in 1964, a small museum was built where ceramic, metal, glass and other objects discovered in the course of the excavations are kept.

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below				
prehistoric	archeology-prehistoric	community planning	landscape architecture	religion	
1400–1499	archeology-historic	conservation	law	science	
X 1500–1599	agriculture	economics	literature	sculpture	
1600–1699	architecture	education	military	social/	
1700–1799	art	engineering	music	humanitarian	
1800–1899	commerce	X exploration/settlement	philosophy	theater	
1900–	communications	industry	politics government	transportation	
		invention		other (specify)	

**Specific dates** 1508, 1509, 1512 **Builder/Architect**

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

"La Ciudad de Puerto Rico", as the island's first capital was called, was founded between 1508 and 1509 by Juan Ponce de León, Puerto Rico's first governor, in what is now Caparra. It was the second settlement that Ponce de León had established in the New World, for he had already founded the Salvaleón del Higüey settlement in neighboring Santo Domingo. Ponce, following a long urban tradition stemming all the way to Hippodamus's urban planning for the city of Miletus in about 466 B.C., chose a naturally well-ventilated site.

The site, although well-ventilated and excellent located, lacked an important element, namely, direct and easy access from the bay, a vital umbilical cord for any settlement in those days. The most important access to the bay lay along the mangrove region of the nearby area, which formed a formidable, impenetrable barrier. The settlers had to pass through this uncomfortable and dangerous area on the way to and from the bay. Due to this unsuitable condition, Caparra was probably doomed from the start.

From the beginning the city of Puerto Rico was also called Caparra or Capera. This second name was reportedly given to it by Fray Nicolás de Ovando in honor of his hometown, Roman-founded Capera (near modern Cáceres), in Spain.

The first formal edifice built at Caparra was the "Casa de Tapias", a way of construction using horizontal bands bearing that name. This method, still used in some parts of Europe, allows us to determine the height of a building (see Item No. 7 for description). By 1509, a second house, the "Casa de Piedra" or stone house, was built as an annex. As the building was to be physically and politically linked to the Spanish Kingdom, the monumental aspect of the structure was enhanced by decoration. In 1512 a chapel was built close to the complex that was to be Puerto Rico's first cathedral.

Ponce's ambition must have been to establish a center that would eventually grow into a full-fledged city with the essential urban components. In all likelihood, the city was to follow the regulations established by the royal crown closely and by 1512 a number of important public and administrative services were offered by the authorities. As a result of this desire to expand into a proper urban settlement, and in part due to an increase in the number of settlers from 175 in 1509 to 320 in 1512, a chapel was built close to the complex.

By 1518, however, the development of the settlement came to a dead-end. Settlers were not convinced that Caparra was the best location for the capital of the new island. For one thing, protection against sudden Indian attacks was inadequate and for another, the difficulties of crossing the mangrove area on the way to and from the bay had not been reduced. The settlers came down with all kinds of diseases as a result of the unsanitary conditions in the area. The group in favor of a move became quite powerful when the religious order of the Geronimos joined the appeal.

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

1. The San Juan Star; Article "Caparra a City on a Grand Scale", November 21, 1982
2. The Institute of Puerto Rican Culture 1955-1973, Dr. Ricardo Alegría

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 2.20 cds.  
Quadrangle name San Juan Quadrangle scale 1:20,000

UTM References Latitude 18°-24'-26" North, Longitude 66°-06'-53" West

A	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	B	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
C	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	D	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
E	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	F	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
G	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	H	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

**Verbal boundary description and justification** The property is bounded to the North West by property owned by various neighbors, to the South East to the San José of Villa Caparra Catholic School, to the South West by property owned by Luis Díaz de Galíndez and to the North East by property owned by Gabriel Abrahams. See enclosed Site Plan.

**List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries**

state	code	county	code
<u>N/A</u>			

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Armando Morales Parés- State Architect  
organization State Historic Preservation Office date January 9, 1984  
street & number La Fortaleza telephone (809)-721-3012, 721-4389  
city or town San Juan state Puerto Rico 00901

## 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature *Stewart B. Stewart*

title State Historic Preservation Officer date January 9, 1984

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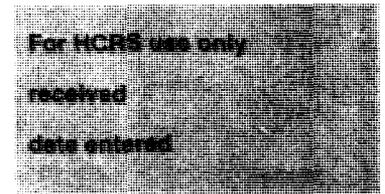
I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

*Stewart B. Stewart* date 2/28/84  
Keeper of the National Register

Attest: \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_  
Chief of Registration

**United States Department of the Interior  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**



Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 2

Letters were sent to King Charles V and all evidence suggests that a tense situation arose from this controversy, mainly because Ponce and some settlers were in favor of staying. The group against Caparra, however, was adamant. The capital had to be moved, and they said so quite insistently to a representative of the king. As a result, it was decided that the capital would move to the site they proposed, known as the "Ysleta" (Old San Juan today). The formal abandonment of Caparra took place between the years 1519 and 1521. Although Ponce de León family built a new house on the "Ysleta", they did not totally abandon the Caparra house. In fact, Juan Ponce de León never occupy the new house, known as "Casa Blanca" for he died in 1521 as a result of the wounds he had received in Bimini, Florida on his search for the elusive fountain of youth.