

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

NATIONAL
REGISTER

1. Name of Property

historic name: Central Playa Grande

other name/site number: 12VPr2-101

2. Location

street & number: [REDACTED]

not for publication: X

city/town: Barrio Llave, Vieques

vicinity:

state: PR county: Humacao

code: 069

zip code: 00765

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: PUBLIC - FEDERAL

Category of Property: SITE

Number of Resources within Property: 1

Contributing	Noncontributing	
_____	_____	buildings
<u> 1 </u>	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
<u> 1 </u>	<u> 0 </u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

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7. Description

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Architectural Classification: N/A

Other Description: _____

Materials: foundation _____ roof _____
 walls _____ other _____

Describe present and historic physical appearance. See continuation sheet.

****Note:** The following is mainly an account of the history of one particular plantation, Playa Grande. Because of the fact that Playa Grande played an exceptionally important role in the history of the local sugar industry, it would be not merely difficult, but undesirable, to discuss the place without taking into consideration the ways in which its rise and fall were related to developments elsewhere on the island.

For approximately a century, from about 1835 through the early years of World War II, sugar was the main product of the island of Vieques, and sugar plantations were the dominant elements of the local landscape. It is impossible to say exactly when sugarcane was first grown on Vieques--a certain amount of it may have been planted by the French and British squatters who attempted, without long-lasting success, to colonize the island on various occasions during the 17th and 18th centuries--but we can be fairly certain that it was not cultivated on a sizeable scale until the eighteen-thirties, and even as late as 1845 the amount of land devoted to it (203 cuerdas = 197 acres = 80 ha) was considerably less than that (385 cuerdas) covered by banana groves. It had already become the most valuable local crop, however, for a cuerda of cane was worth far more than a cuerda of banana trees; and as the 19th century drew to its close, sugar assumed ever-increasing importance, at the expense of such other crops as bananas, coffee, cotton, maize, cassava, sweet potatoes or bay leaves. What had been a fairly diversified agricultural system was tending more and more toward the monocultural mode. Ultimately the time would come when only one other crop--coconuts--would bring in any substantial amount of cash; and it is likely that even coconuts would have been neglected had it not been for the fact that the land on which the coconut palms grew was unsuited to cane cultivation.

As a sugar-producer, Vieques was a latecomer among Caribbean islands. By the time sugar had begun to play a major role in the viequense economy, cane-growing had long since reached its apogee in the nearby Danish West Indies (the present U.S. Virgin Islands). In fact, by 1835 the sugar industry on St. Croix was already in a state of decline, while on St. Thomas it was practically defunct. Then, too, being a fairly small island, Vieques could never hope to produce a tremendous amount of sugar; its production was always dwarfed by that of its big neighbor, Puerto Rico (to which it was, and still is, tied politically). Nevertheless, there was a time when sugar-planting was not merely the most important, but the absolutely overriding, economic game on Vieques.

Precisely when the viequense sugar industry reached its high point, and precisely how and why it went into a decline is a matter for debate. Suffice it to say that by the early thirties it was an industry in very serious trouble, and that by the late thirties it was on the verge of collapse. By that time most of the canebreaks were under the control of just a handful of individuals and agrobusinesses. Though there had been a good many small plantations at the outset of the sugar boom, the latter part of the 19th century was marked by a process of gradual conglomeration--by the acquisition of small estates by a few powerful

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firms and families, who would integrate them into much larger farms, each of which would feed its cane to a particular central factory. That process continued, and even accelerated, during the early 20th century, so that by the mid-thirties there were only one functioning central. The canefields of the island's mid-section were largely controlled by a group known as the Eastern Sugar Associates. Those further west were owned principally by the Benitez Sugar Company, which also operated the one surviving factory, the Central Playa Grande.

The Playa Grande sugar factory

(Coamo series) soil, and is one of the island's most attractive areas from an agricultural standpoint.

It is uncertain precisely when the modern colonization of the Playa Grande area commenced. We do know, however, that at least a few people were living there by 1840 or thereabouts, for it was sufficiently populous to have its own local political official, a comisario comandante. The first person who is known to have held that title, Daniel Terrible, was probably the district's principal landowner as well.

Sometime around the middle of the 19th century, a Dane named Matias Hjardemaal acquired a portion--and perhaps all--of the Playa Grande basin, with the intention of establishing a sizeable sugar plantation there. Sugar was probably already being cultivated in the district, but on a rather small scale, it would appear. Shortly after establishing himself in the neighborhood, Hjardemaal began building a factory in which to process the cane raised on his estate. Little is known of his background but it seems safe to surmise that he had come to Vieques from the nearby Danish West Indies (the present U.S. Virgin Islands). It is possible to be somewhat more specific, in fact: in all likelihood he had come from St. Croix, the largest of the Danish islands, and the only one of the group on which any appreciable amount of sugar was then being produced. Under such circumstances, any factory constructed under Hjardemaal's supervision might be expected to have borne a fairly close resemblance to mid-19th century sugarworks on St. Croix. That would appear to have been the case.

Hjardemaal had his problems. Together with all of the other planters on Vieques, he was heavily dependent on migrant laborers from Tortola, in the British Virgin Islands, and the Tortolans were a restless lot. On a number of occasions during the latter part of the 19th century they rioted, and one such riot occurred in 1874 at Playa Grande. It was quelled successfully, without large-scale bloodshed, but created some very severe tensions nonetheless.

Just how long Hjardemaal hung onto his properties at Playa Grande is unknown, but it is clear that well before the end of the century they had passed into other hands--those of Jose (Pepe) Benitez Guzman, who was already in control of the neighboring Hacienda Resolucion, and who lost no time in merging the two estates so as to create one larger (and, for Vieques, downright gigantic) productive unit. By the time Jose Benitez died, he was the owner of most of the canefields in western Vieques. (The rest were owned largely by his brother, Pedro Regalado Benitez Guzman.) Under his management, the Playa Grande central had assumed ever-increasing importance. Once he had acquired Hjardemaal's factory, he abandoned

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his other central, the smaller and more antiquated plant at Resolucion. All of the cane from both estates were now being fed into the Playa Grande works, and they grew accordingly. Don Pepe also betook himself to the Playa Grande area. [REDACTED] he built a sizeable residence--a little mansion that came to be known as the "Quinta Los Jagueyes".

When Don Pepe died, his heirs, convinced that it would be unprofitable to split the plantation up among themselves, agreed instead to form a company, and to entrust the entire business to that concern. Thus it was that the Benitez Sugar Company was born.

For a while the enterprise prospered. Between 1913 (the earliest year for which statistics are available) and 1928, the number of tons of 96 degree sugar produced by the Playa Grande factory rose from 3,689 to 13,088. The biggest jump occurred between 1927 and 1928, and is reflective of the fact that in the latter year the plant at Playa Grande became the only functioning sugarworks on Vieques. It had long since managed to outdistance its few surviving competitors, the centrales at Santa Maria and Esperanza. The Santa Maria plant had already been shut down; now, with the closing of the Esperanza factory, Playa Grande had the field all to itself. The entire island's cane crop was being funneled into that one plant; in 1928, the crop totalled 112,957 tons, and, though no precise figures are available, it is likely that the amount of molasses produced in the processing of that quantity of cane amounted to more than half a million gallons.

The Central Playa Grande had become the hub of an extensive network of narrow-gauge railroads. A sizeable community had sprung up around the factory itself, and that town had spawned a number of satellite hamlets as well--tiny agglomerations of modest dwellings occupied by the agregados, the tenant farmers. The population of the plantation as a whole must have been well over a thousand, and a considerable part of that population is likely to have been living in the immediate vicinity of the central.

In 1928, however, prosperity was definitely not around the corner for the Benitez Sugar Company. By 1936, weakened by a whole string of adverse developments, the firm went bankrupt. Three years later, a sindicatura judicial, which had been administering the plantation, sold it to a Puerto Rican entrepreneur named Juan Angel Tio. But Tio's tenure was short-lived, for in 1942 Playa Grande was forcibly acquired, together with all the rest of western Vieques, by the U.S. Navy, and the Navy has controlled the area ever since. A buyer was found for the more valuable pieces of machinery with which the Playa Grande factory had been equipped: they were dismantled, crated, and shipped off to Florida, to be reinstalled in a factory at Okeelanta, near Belle Glade. All of the people living on the Playa Grande estate were resettled by the Navy in places elsewhere on Vieques. Since 1942, the district has been completely uninhabited.

In 1978, the Playa Grande sugarworks were investigated briefly, on behalf of the Navy, by a team of archaeologists headed by Marvin Keller, of Ecology & Environment, Inc.; and in 1979-1980, once again at the Navy's request, a group of specialists working under the general direction of Keller, Gary S. Vescelius and Carmine Tronolone inspected the site in somewhat greater detail, for the purpose of assessing its eligibility for listing in the National Register. Some of the ruins were mapped and many of them were photographed, a large amount of surface material was collected and examined, and various test excavations were made. That work served to demonstrate that 12VPr2-101 is a fairly rich place in

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archaeological terms--a promising source of artifactual and ecofactual information with which to round out a study of the recent history of Vieques. In the meantime, William R. Chapman, of the Virgin Islands Planning Office, had examined the ruins briefly in order to evaluate them from an architectural historian's standpoint; Vescelius had reviewed the historical literature relating to the place; and Andres Principe had interviewed a string of informants, each of whom had lived or worked on the site, with the aim not merely of learning something more about the history of Playa Grande but of probing local attitudes toward the ruins. In every case, those investigations led to the same main conclusion: 12VPr2-101 is an important cultural resource--one of architectural, archaeological, historical and social significance.

A few portions of 12VPr2-101 have been heavily disturbed, but many of the old walls are still standing. The structural remains have to be judged as ruins rather than as intact buildings; the criteria employed should be those of the archeologist rather than those of the architectural historian. From an archeologist's standpoint, the site retains a great deal of its integrity, and it has certainly not been disturbed any more heavily than most of the other sites on Vieques, including a good many spots already listed, or accepted for listing, in the National Register.

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8. Statement of Significance

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Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: STATE AND LOCAL

Applicable National Register Criteria: D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) : _____

Areas of Significance: AGRICULTURE
INDUSTRY

Period(s) of Significance: 1800-1899
1900-

Significant Dates: c 1860-1936

Significant Person(s): _____

Cultural Affiliation: SPANISH COLONIAL

Architect/Builder: Matias Hjardemaal & others

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

As the best surviving relics of what was formerly the main industry of Vieques, the ruins of the Central Playa Grande and its associated structures can definitely be ranked among the island's major historic resources. With the possible exception of the Esperanza factory [REDACTED], the Playa Grande plant, deteriorated though it may be, is in better shape today than any of the other old centrales. Furthermore, the Playa Grande ruins represent the biggest of all the local mills, and one that was established long before the time when the Esperanza plant was built.

Though portions of the factory have been bulldozed and otherwise damaged in recent years, and though most of the machinery with which the mill was equipped was sold off and shipped to Florida back in the early forties, a sufficient number of ruined structures remain at Playa Grande, in a sufficiently unaltered (albeit dilapidated) condition to merit study and conservation. The history of the Vieques sugar industry is not too well documented in written records, and archaeological investigations at the Playa Grande site ought to shed a good deal of light on some of the more poorly understood aspects of that history.

It should be noted, too, that the village that had grown up around the Playa Grande factory had come to rank, by the nineteen-thirties, as the largest community in all of western Vieques, and it is a place to which many Viequenses have a sentimental attachment, either as their own former home or as that of their parents or grandparents.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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Bonnet Benitez, Juan Amedee: Vieques en la Historia de Puerto Rico. San Juan: F. Ortiz Nieves, 1976; Pastor Ruiz, J.: Vieques Antiquo y Moderno, 1493-1947. Yauco (PR): Tipografia Rodriguez Lugo, 1947; Rivera Martinez, Antonio, A.: Empezo Vieques, Rio Piedras (PR): The Author, 1967; Beachey, R.W., The British West Indian Sugar Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957; Vescelius, Gary S., The Playa Grande Sugarworks, Reports of the Archaeological Survey of Vieques, Series B, Number 25.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository: _____

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10. Geographical Data

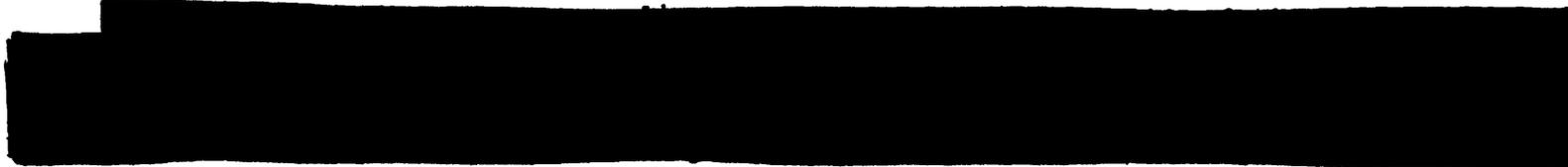
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Acreage of Property: 

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing



Verbal Boundary Description:



Boundary Justification:

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11. FORM PREPARED BY:

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Name/Title: Gary S. Vescelius/Archaeologist

Organization: Archaeological Services & Ecology and Environment

Street & Number: P.O. Box 7818 P.O. Box D

City or Town: Charlotte Amalie, VI 00801 Buffalo, NY 14225

Date: 5 July 1980

Telephone: (809) 774-3575 & (716) 632-4491

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Form Re-submitted By:
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Name/Title: Dr. John B. Murphy/Cultural Resources Manager

Organization: Naval Facilities Engineering Command Date: 23 January 1992

Street & Number: 200 Stovall Street Telephone: (703) 325-7353

City or Town: Alexandria State: VA ZIP: 22332-2300

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SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 92001236 Date Listed: 9-10-92

Property Name	County	State
<u>Central Playa Grande</u>	Vieques	PR

Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Janet E. Townsend
Signature of the Keeper

9-10-92
Date of Action

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Amended Items in Nomination:

The county location is incorrect and the period of significance is unclear. The nomination is amended as follows: The county is Vieques. The period of significance is A.D. 1840 - 1942.

Mr. J. Bernard Murphy, the Navy FPO, was contacted regarding these amendments.

DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)