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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form

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NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

United States Custom Houses in Puerto Rico

B. Associated Historic Contexts

United States Customs Service in Puerto Rico, 1898-1931

C. Geographical Data

Puerto Rico

Specific localities in which contributing customhouses are found are San Juan, Fajardo, Mayaguez and Ponce.

☐ See continuation sheet

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Planning and Evaluation.

Signature of certifying official — Date 12/20/87

Asst. Secretary of the Treasury (Management), Dept. of the Treasury
State or Federal agency and bureau

I, hereby, certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Signature of the Keeper of the National Register — Date 2/10/88

E. Statement of Historic Contexts

Discuss each historic context listed in Section B.

United States Customs Service in Puerto Rico, 1898-1931

Known to its early Taino Indian inhabitants as Boriquen, Puerto Rico was discovered in 1493 by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the new world. Columbus named the island San Juan Bautista. The first attempt at European settlement was initiated in 1508 under Juan Ponce de Leon, then governor of Higuey. With a group of settlers from Hispaniola, he established the first Spanish community, Caparra, on the southwest side of San Juan Bay, a fine natural port, near the site of the present capital. Caparra was moved in 1521 to the islet of San Juan at the entrance to the bay. The city eventually came to be called Puerto Rico ("rich port") and, still later, San Juan, while the island became known as Puerto Rico.[1]

As "the key to the Indies" and the "strongest foothold of Spain in America," Puerto Rico was also the first port of call for all Spanish ships heading toward the newly discovered islands of the West Indies. Although the policy would be relaxed for long periods of time in the 18th and 19th centuries, Puerto Rico, like Spain's other overseas possessions, could legally trade only with the mother country. For nearly three hundred years, San Juan was Puerto Rico's only legal port of entry. In 1813, Alejandro Ramirez y Blanco, the Spanish intendant, opened other ports at Aguadilla, Mayaguez, Cabo Rojo, Ponce and Fajardo and encouraged trade with the United States and other foreign nations,[2] laying the groundwork for the Spanish customs service that persisted until 1898. During Puerto Rico's brief period of autonomy in 1897-98, more ports of entry were added, and by the time Spain ceded ownership of the island to the United States following the Spanish-American War on December 10, 1898, there were ten ports in operation.[3] Besides the customhouse in San Juan (for which a 1784 plan exists),[4] Spanish-era customhouses are known to have existed in Aguadilla (by 1824)[5] and Ponce (1841-1842).[6] The present Mayaguez Custom House replaces a Spanish-period building on the same site which was damaged beyond repair by an earthquake in 1918.[7] Humacao and possibly Puerto Hermino also have Spanish period customhouses.[8]

For some time after the cession, Puerto Rico continued to be treated as a foreign nation for purposes of trade with the United States. The Foraker Act of April 12, 1900, enacted "temporarily to provide revenue and civil government" during the U. S. occupation (although it remained in force for 17 years) postponed the institution of free trade for two years while imposing a 15% tariff on all merchandise coming into the United States from Puerto Rico and vice versa. The act also allowed the Puerto Rican treasury to retain all income derived from federal customs or excise taxes collected at Puerto Rican ports.[9]

The civil affairs of the island were administered initially by the Division of Customs and Insular Affairs, established within the Office of the Secretary of War on December 13, 1898. The division was charged as well with "all matters pertaining to the customs of the Islands of Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Phillippines." The name of this agency was changed in 1900 to the Division of Insular Affairs and then, in 1902, to the Bureau of Insular Affairs. The War Department's jurisdiction over the civil affairs of Puerto Rico ended with the act of April 12, 1900, which provided for a territorial form of government and divided the responsibility for overseeing the activities of insular officials among various federal agencies. The insular Treasurer would report to the Secretary of

See continuation sheet 8.1.

[X] See continuation sheet

8.1 Historical Background

the Treasurer. In 1909 the Bureau of Insular Affairs was once more made responsible for the complete administration of civil affairs in Puerto Rico. On May 29, 1934, the Division of Territories and Island Possessions, administered by the Secretary of the Interior, assumed the Bureau's functions.[10]

The War Department moved slowly to put American customs regulations and adminstrative methods into place, retaining for four years[11] both the regulations and the monetary system established under Spanish rule. Both the dollar and the peso were used as currency, creating nearly hopeless fiscal and administrative confusion. The custom houses came under the day-to-day supervision of U.S. Army officers, who undoubtedly had little previous experience to prepare them for their new role as customs collectors. The transition was probably further complicated by the violent and very destructive hurricane of 1899, San Ciriaco. Particularly during the first year, distressing financial irregularities sometimes resulted from the rather chaotic situation, and it was often impossible to sort out the effects of inexperience, dishonesty and general confusion. An audit of the Ponce customs operation in 1899 concluded that:

> "accounts were so mixed that the pesos and dollars could not be separated; that some of the early confusion should be excused because of lack of accommodations, the Headquarters of the Army, bankers, etc., being in the same buildings and grounds; that current Spanish methods obtained, but Mr. Cooke had caused dismissal of dishonest clerks; that carelessness, not dishonesty, is chargeable against Captain Hill /the Army officer appointed as Collector of Customs for the port/."[12]

The U. S. retained many of the 400[13] Puerto Rican employees of the Spanish-era customs service, and the first U.S.-appointed Director of Customs was Salvador Brau, more widely known as a poet and dramatist. (Brau later served as Puerto Rico's official historian.) When the American forces landed in San Juan, Brau, the head appraiser for the Spanish customs office in that city, was found alone in the customhouse, all the other employees having fled the invasion. When asked why he had remained behind, Brau replied, "I have custody of the money collected. How could I flee and leave the money unprotected?" General Nelson A. Miles, the American commander, is said to have been so impressed with Brau's honesty and devotion to duty, that he designated him on the spot as Customs Administrator for the island.[14]

See continuation sheet 8.2.

8.2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There was a good deal of shuffling of ports in the early stages of the American occupation. The official correspondence of Captain James A. Buchanan, the Collector of Customs for Puerto Rico, helps to illuminate the organization of the American customs system. Presented with a list of only four ports at which customs were to be collected, Buchanan notes that there had been ten such ports under the Spanish, including Vieques, which was presumably not included in the list at hand.[15] In another communication, he asserts that "all the ports named in President's order of January 20, 1899, /unnamed in Buchanan's letter, however/ have existed for years except Jobos, at which place has never been a customhouse." Jobos was stricken from the list.[16] Buchanan also reported that Naguabo, two miles from Humacao, had not paid expenses and would be closed.[17]

The Monthly Summary of Commerce of the Island of Puerto Rico, prepared by the Accounting and Statistical Branch of the Division of Customs and Insular Affairs for July and August 1899, indicates that the following ports were in use: Mayaguez, Ponce, San Juan, Arecibo, Arroyo, Fajardo, Aguadilla, Humacao, Vieques and Guanica.[18]

The island of Culebra, at first under the collector at San Juan, was finally staffed with a single employee.[19] Naguabo was closed February 2, 1899,[20] while Vieques was discontinued as a port of entry on September 15.[21] Guanica, which does not appear in the summary for FY 1901-1909, may have been closed around the same time.[22] (It was at some point reopened, since it was among the ports included in the customs building program of the 1920s).

The Foraker Act had provided that all monies derived from federal customs and excise taxes imposed on goods entering or leaving Puerto Rico, after deducting the costs of collecting the customs, would be deposited to the insular treasury for use in financing the civil affairs of the island. As the existing Spanish-era facilities deteriorated or were damaged by recurring hurricanes and earthquakes, the question arose as to whether the Puerto Rican legislature could legally authorize the expenditure of funds for new construction or for major repairs and additions to existing customhouses. Little was done concerning construction of new customs facilities, however, until a catastrophic earthquake on October 10, 1918, brought matters to a head.[27] Customs revenues were dropping because of inadequate warehousing and office

See continuation sheet #8.3

8.3. Historical Background

facilities at the very time the island most needed the money. Customs staff were working in unsafe buildings, where buildings still existed at all, and sometimes in open-sided tents, while goods were left unprotected from weather or theft.[28] Something obviously had to be done.

Even so, progress toward constructing or repairing the much needed custom facilities was painfully slow. In the wake of natural and economic disaster, the Puerto Rican treasury had no funds to spare for the work, even if it should be determined that they could legally appropriate monies for such a purpose.[29] The Solicitor of the U. S. Department of the Treasury maintained that they could not. In his opinion the new building was not properly a part of the cost of collecting duties on imports and, besides, the land on which the buildings would be erected would belong to the United States, not Puerto Rico. Citing the example of the public building act of June 30, 1906, which authorized the construction of the San Juan Post Office, he suggested that the contemplated customs buildings should be designed to accommodate also "such other government agencies as may require quarters from time to time."[30]

Thus, not only was Congressional action required, but it was also necessary for the Puerto Rican legislature to authorize, one by one, the transfers of ownership of land from the appropriate municipal sources to the federal government.[31] In all, five different acts of Congress between January 10, 1922, and May 17, 1928, would be necessary to complete the customhouse building program for new facilities at San Juan, Arecibo, Aguadilla, Guanica, Fajardo and Arroyo.[32]

The total amount of the appropriations was $700,846.41, of which some $500,000 had been expended by January 1930.[33] The new governor, Theodore Roosevelt, expressed his concern that, at a time when the island's revenues were falling precipitously as a result of the Depression and another destructive cyclone, Puerto Rico should be held to what he considered an unfair and perhaps illegal bargain:[34]

> "In all justice, I do not think... the items for constructing the Customs Houses... should be assessed against our customs revenues, for I do not think they come within the intent of the Act.... This too is the Attorney General's opinion.... (However,) the expense for the erection of the Customs Houses was authorized by Congress and approved by Governor Towner. The fact remains, however, that no such action should have been taken, and in our present situation the matter is one of desperate concern....

8.4. Historical Background

> "...All of this comes on us when we can least afford it, for now we need government activity to reestablish us economically.
>
> "When President Hoover issued his statements calling on the Governors of the States to undertake public works under contemplation in order to offset the unemployment problem, I could not help thinking grimly of poor little Porto Rico, with the majority of her people either partially or entirely unemployed and no revenues to undertake anything."

The construction program, however, was virtually complete by the time Roosevelt's protest was written— although the debts incurred were far from paid. The results, so dearly bought, were nonetheless impressive: new customhouses at Aguadilla, Arecibo, Arroyo, Fajardo, San Juan, and Mayaguez, as well as major repairs and additions to the historic building at Ponce. The completion of this building program marked in a very tangible way the end of the first, transitional phase of the history of the U. S. Customs Service in Puerto Rico. All of the buildings continue in use today, with few changes. Four— at Fajardo, Mayaguez, Ponce and San Juan— are still in service as customhouses.

The architects whose names are most closely associated with the Customs Service building program in the 1920s are Rafael Carmoega, chief architect for the insular government, and Albert B. Nichols, architect and building inspector for the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Department of the Treasury field office in Puerto Rico. In his post with the insular government, Carmoega exerted a major influence on early twentieth-century Puerto Rican architecture; Nichols, today virtually unknown except for his work for the Customs Service, was important in introducing the picturesque Spanish Colonial

Revival style as it was practiced in the United States to the island of Puerto Rico. Not only did the Customs Service benefit from the services of two extremely able and professional architects— one a native Puerto Rican, the other an expatriate from the mainland— but their works also continue as major architectural resources from their era for each of the respective towns and in which their buildings were erected.

8.5. Historical Background

Rafael Carmoega was born in Rio Piedras, near San Juan. After receiving his degree in architecture from Cornell University in 1919, he served for two years as a draftsman in the insular government.[35] In a letter supporting his application for memberhip in the American Institute of Architects in 1927, Carmoega lists among the buildings designed by him or under his direction: the Capitol Building at San Juan, the Psychiatric Hospital at Rio Piedras, buildings /unspecified/ for the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, the School of Tropical Medicine at San Juan, the Leper Colony at Rio Piedras, buildings for the Insular Sanatorium at Rio Piedras, high schools at Aguadilla and Utuado, residence for A. Higuera at San Juan, residence for R. Carmoega at San Juan, numerous graded and rural school buildings and in collaboration with F. Roldan, A.I.A., the maternity wing for the Spanish Hospital at Rio Piedras.[36]

Carmoega has generally been credited with the design of the Custom House at Mayaguez (completed 1924), but perhaps only because his signature appears as the architect of record in the approval block on the drawings. Since Carmoega did not list the building among his designs in his submission to the A.I.A. only three years after the customhouse was completed, it seems likely that the Mayaguez design may have been the work of one "R. Trevelano," whose signature appears in both the "Designed by" and "Drawn by" spaces on the drawings.[37] Carmoega drew or directed three sheets of drawings for repairs to the Ponce customhouse which were prepared for the Department of the Interior's Division of Public Buildings in August 1930.[38]

Albert B. Nichols appears to have been working in the office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury when he declined in 1911 to transfer to San Juan to serve as construction superintendent for the post office being built there. He could not, he said, afford to work for less than $2,400 per year; the War Department, however, felt his inexperience warranted no such salary.[39] The drawings for the customhouse at San Juan and Fajardo bear his name, and an unsigned, undated set for repairs at the historic Ponce Custom House are similar in style to those more certainly attributable to his hand. The drawings seem to represent the changes that are known to have been carried out on the building in 1924.[40]

8.6. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

FOOTNOTES

1. Arturo Morales Carrion, Puerto Rico: A Political and Cultural History. N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc. 1983. pp. 5-7.

2. Arturo Santana, "Puerto Rico in a Revolutionary World," in Puerto Rico: A Political and Cultural History, pp. 65-71.

3. Note on Organization of Customs Service in Puerto Rico by U.S., Dec. 1898 (record card), Records of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, C83-4, National Archives.

4. Drawings of Puerto Rican customhouses are among extensive records in the Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain. This was the official archives for Spain's American colonies. Among the drawings are:

Aduana, San Juan de Puerto Rico. Plan, 1825 (Santo Domingo 2427)
"Plano en que se manifesta el actual estado de la Aduana de esta Plaza de Sn. Juan de Puerto Rico," 1784, by Juan Fran. Mestre (Santo Domingo 502)
Aduana, Aguadilla, 1824. Elevation. Santo Domingo 2426.

A full list is in: Leonardo Rodriguez Villafane, Catalogo de Mapas y Planos de Puerto Rico en el Archivo General de Indias. (San Juan 1966)

5. See above.

6. "U.S. Customhouse at Ponce, Puerto Rico, Designated "Historic by Assistant Secretary of the Treasury," March 23, 1972. News release, Bureau of Customs, Department of the Treasury, Washington, n.d.

7. Hearing before the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, 67th Cong., 1st Sess., on H.R. 6557, "Repair Customs Buildings in Porto Rico," May 27, 1921.

8. Interview with Felix Julio Del Campo Blanco, Historian, State Historic Preservation Office, San Juan, Puerto Rico, June 1987.

9. Morales Carrion, op. cit., p. 155-157.

See continuation sheet #8.7

8.7. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

10. Kenneth Munden and Milton Greenbaum, Records of the Bureau of Insular Affairs Relating to Puerto Rico, 1898-1934: A List of Selected Files, Washington: National Archives, 1943, p. vii.

11. W.W. Barre and Alexander Schlegel, May 4, 1899. National Archives, BIA Records, C-351 (record card).

12. ibid.

13. Hayden L. Moore, The Book of Puerto Rico, "The United States Customs Service in Puerto Rico." Moore was Collector of Customs of Puerto Rico from 1917 to 1932.

14. "Puerto Rico se une a la celebracion del 175 Aniversario de la Aduana," Revista Diplomatica, October 1964. U.S. Customs Service 175th anniversary issue.

15. National Archives, BIA records, C83-4 (record card).

16. National Archives, BIA records, C217, Feb. 8, 1899 (record card).

17. Ibid.

18. Monthly Summary of Commerce of the Island of Puerto Rico. Prepared by the Accounting and Statistical Branch of the Division of Customs and Insular Affairs for July and August 1899, Washington: Gov't Printing Office, 1900.

19. National Archives, BIA records, C315 (record card).

20. National Archives, BIA records, C83-13 (record card).

21. National Archives, BIA records, C467-2 (record card).

22. It is not included in the Monthly Summary of Commerce for 1899. July and August 1899.

23-25 Omit.

26. JR #22, P.R. Leg., Dec. 4, 1917.

See continuation sheet #8.8

8.8. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

27. Ibid.

28. Hearing before the Committee on Insular Affairs, H.R. 6413.

29. Ibid.

30. Hearing before the Committee on Insular Affairs, H.R. 6557, May 27, 1921.

31. For examples, see National Archives, BIA records, C380 (Arecibo and Fajardo); C376 (Aguadilla); C350 (Guanica); C554 (Arroyo); C50 (Fajardo). (All on record cards.)

32. Theodore Roosevelt, Governor of Puerto Rico, to Secretary of Treasury Mellon, Jan. 9, 1930.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Membership application, Aug. 12, 1926. American Institute of Architects, Archives. RG 803, 1927C.

36. Rafael Carmoega to Antonin Nechodoma, Nov. 22, 1926. AIA Archives, RG 803, 1927C.

37. Drawings in the files of San Juan Custom House, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

38. National Archives, BIA records, RG 121.

39. Letter, A. Pratt Andrew, Asst. Sec'y, Supv. Arch. Office, Dept. of Treasury, tp Sec'y War, Dec. 28, 1913. National Archives, RG 121, Box 968, San Juan, P.R., P.O. (1905-1911).

40. According to visual inspection.

F. Associated Property Types

I. Name of Property Type Custom House

II. Description

See continuation sheet F.1.

III. Significance

The four United States customhouses constructed in Puerto Rico before 1931 and still owned and used by the U.S. Customs Service (Puerto Real, Fajardo; Avenida Gonzalez Clemente, Mayaguez; Ponce Playa, Ponce; Calle Puntilla, No. 1, San Juan) form a coherent group of historically and architecturally significant properties. Taken together, they present an arrestingly complete picture of the first, transitional phase, from 1898 through 1931, of thea American Customs Service presence in Puerto Rico: Ponce (1841-42; 1924), a product of the early Spanish era, rehabilitated by the United States; Mayaguez (1922-24), the work of a noted insular architect trained in the United States; San Juan and Fajardo, designed by a talented American expatriot skilled in the

See continuation sheet F-2

IV. Registration Requirements

The considerations used in selecting these customhouses for nomination include distinctive architectural character and scale, age, the quality of construction, and location in a seaport city. They are buildings of long community and commonwealth identification with the U.S. Customs Service and remain U.S. government property. The qualifying properties have been long in government use as customhouses and with changing conditions and program, they must continue to exhibit integrity while acknowledging that some alterations and modernization is consistent with their continuing use. However, they must exhibit overall freedom from debasement, from inappropriate additions and major changes that would obliterate their visual association with their historical character. Their locations must continue to relate to port facilities and must still possess that quality of dignity and permanence reflecting traditional federal buildings.

[x] See continuation sheet

[ ] See continuation sheet for additional property types

F.2. DESCRIPTION

Customhouses are a long established government building type used to control and tax incoming and outgoing goods and people. They are found at land border crossings between countries and in ocean ports that carried on an international trade in the historical period of this study. Generally they were located on or near the waterfront, and this is true of the buildings studied in this nomination. Architecturally, the buildings have a formal character and dignity typical of government structures. They were intended to impress the community and users, especially in the capital and major port of San Juan. They have decorative features that set them apart from routine commercial structures. Materials of construction are more permanent and of higher quality than normal commercial building, reflecting their government purpose and the threats of natural disasters so prevalent in Puerto Rico. They reflect the architectural customs of the Spanish tradition in Puerto Rico, including patios and ample provision for natural ventilation in a tropical climate.

F.2.

Spanish Colonial Revival style used on the mainland. As components of a comprehensive building and rehabilitation program undertaken by the Customs Service after World War I, their completion at the beginning of the Great Depression was fortuitous, for they not only fulfilled a genuine need for improved customs facilities, but also made important architectural contributions to the towns and cities in which they were erected.

G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.

In field work, a search was made for all extant customhouses in Puerto Rico, and those of the historical period were identified, visited and photographed. Substantial assistance and information were received from the State Historic Preservation Officer and other institutions. Drawing files in the San Juan District Customs Office were most valuable. Customs officials were interviewed and provided important information. Research was carried out in the General Archives of Puerto Rico. In Washington, extensive literature search was made in the Library of Congress, and a survey was made of pertinent materials in several record groups in the National Archives, including the records of the Public Buildings Service. The single historic context was determined by the fact that the properties which the Customs Service wished to register fell within a well-defined time period, functional history and architectural period. Determinations of integrity for the listing of related properties was determined from a study of all existing buildings of their type.

☐ See continuation sheet

H. Major Bibliographical References

☒ See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional documentation:

☐ State historic preservation office
☐ Other State agency
☒ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other

Specify repository: San Juan Custom House, San Juan, Puerto Rico

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H.1. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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See continuation sheet H.2

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2. Archival and Other Primary Sources:

American Institute of Architects Archives, RG 830, Membership Correspondence. American Institute of Architects Library, Washington, D.C.

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Instituta de Cultura Puertorriqueno. Staff interview.

Records of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, RG 350, and Records of the Public Buildings Service, RG 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Records of the United States Customs Service, San Juan Custom House, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C.

State Historic Preservation Office, Files and staff interviews, San Juan, Puerto Rico.