



# Foundation Document Overview

## San Juan National Historic Site

Puerto Rico



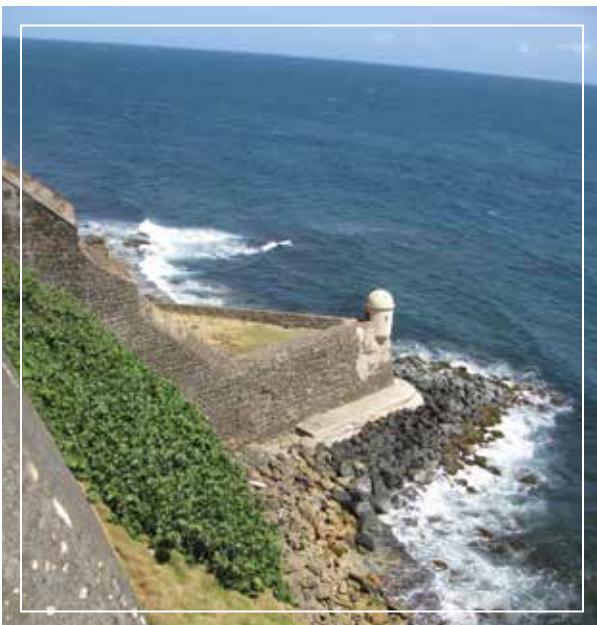
### Contact Information

For more information about the *San Juan National Historic Site Foundation Document*, contact: [SAJU\\_superintendent@nps.gov](mailto:SAJU_superintendent@nps.gov) or 787-729-6777 or write to:  
Superintendent, San Juan National Historic Site, 501 Calle Norzagaray, San Juan, PR 00901

## Purpose



*Representing 500 years of history and the importance of the island's strategic location in the Caribbean, SAN JUAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE preserves, protects, and interprets the oldest and largest Spanish fortification system in the United States.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why San Juan National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- San Juan National Historic Site preserves and protects an internationally significant example of a complex system of fortifications built by the Spanish Crown to defend its empire and interests in the New World.
- San Juan National Historic Site is a premiere example of military engineering and architectural design and is one of the best preserved examples of Spain's grand colonial coastal and land defense system in the Americas.
- The fortifications have been adapted architecturally and functionally over the past 500 years to serve as a center of Spanish and U.S. political, social, and military global influence.
- Designated in 1983 as a world heritage site, San Juan National Historic Site is a potent symbol of cultural heritage linking the history of Puerto Rico to the Hispanic culture and provides a common identity with other Latin American countries.
- Because of Puerto Rico's strategic location, control of San Juan's fortifications enabled military powers command of and access to the Caribbean and the commercial routes to and from the Americas.
- For over 500 years, the fortifications of San Juan have remained an important element of the community and cultural landscape of Puerto Rico.



# Fundamental Resources and Values

- Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.
- **Castillo San Felipe del Morro and Esplanade.** Named in honor of King Philip II of Spain, El Morro's size and position at the entrance to San Juan Bay makes it the most renowned fortification in the San Juan defense system. The fort's primary mission was to defend the harbor by preventing a seaborne penetration into the bay. The esplanade is the open terrain behind the fort, which was shaped into a slope that denied cover and concealment to advancing enemy infantry and gave the defenders an unobstructed field of fire. El Morro and its esplanade are the primary attraction within the park.
- **Castillo San Cristóbal and Outer Defenses.** Constructed after a land attack by the Dutch in 1625, Castillo San Cristóbal was started in 1634 to defend the land approaches from the unprotected eastern side of the islet of San Juan. Castillo San Cristóbal and its outer defenses represent a continuum of history and are exemplary of the evolution of fortification development over five centuries.
- **Fort San Juan de la Cruz (El Cañuelo).** Fort San Juan de la Cruz, commonly called El Cañuelo, is a small auxiliary fortification in the harbor defense system poised on the west side of the opening to San Juan Bay, directly across the harbor from Castillo San Felipe del Morro. El Cañuelo commanded the mouth of Bayamón River, and was capable of cross-firing its cannons with Castillo San Felipe del Morro, preventing enemy landings on the mainland area west of the harbor.
- **Natural Topography.** The topography of the park, consisting of high cliffs, rocky coastline, and reefs, has been an important aspect of military strategy in the history of the forts. These protective natural features deterred enemy advancement for over a 2-mile distance from approach by land or from the sea.
- **Garitas.** The forts and city walls are dotted by garitas—small, circular sentry boxes that provided protection for guards who watched over the city and forts. The historical garita has become a national symbol for all of Puerto Rico, representing its culture, pride, history, and identity.
- **City Walls.** San Juan's city walls encompass approximately 2.5 miles of massive stone masonry that enclosed the old city and unified the city's fortification system. Together with Castillo San Felipe del Morro and Castillo San Cristóbal, the city walls represent the extensiveness of the fortifications in Old San Juan.
- **El Polvorín de Santa Elena.** El Polvorín de Santa Elena is a gunpowder magazine at the southwest side of the Castillo San Felipe del Morro esplanade. The magazine served a key supporting function for the fort's defensive fire power.
- **Military Viewshed.** The military viewshed encompasses broad, sweeping views extending out from the forts toward San Juan Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, as well as between the fortifications within the San Juan defensive system. This viewshed afforded fort defenders protection from enemy attack from land and sea and was a critical component of the fortification design.
- **Preservation Program.** San Juan National Historic Site's preservation program is dedicated to maintaining and preserving the park's vast fortification system of fortresses, defensive walls, and associated structures. Staffed by masons specially trained in traditional masonry, the program has become a world-renown authority in this area.
- **San Juan Gate.** For hundreds of years, the San Juan Gate served as the primary entrance from port to the city of San Juan, penetrating the massive city wall. The entrance provided ceremonial passage for dignitaries and allowed access for critical supplies brought to the fortified city.
- **Connections to the City of San Juan.** For almost 500 years, the forts and San Juan community have been economically interconnected, determining the city population and strongly influencing tourism, business interests, prosperity, security, economic stability, development, government establishment, and military presence in San Juan. Today, the location of the fort relative to the community of San Juan has created an interdependent landscape shaped by urban design and recreation opportunities.
- **Historic cannons.** The fortifications served as guardians and protectors of the Spanish Empire for about 400 years, during which the Spanish armed the fortifications of San Juan throughout the centuries to ensure dominion of the Caribbean. The 24 original cannons and the artillery at the park are prime examples of Puerto Rico's great military importance for Spain.



# Description



San Juan National Historic Site encompasses the historic fortifications of Castillo San Felipe del Morro (also known as El Morro), Castillo San Cristóbal, Fort San Juan de la Cruz (also known as El Cañuelo), and most of what remains of the fortress wall that surrounds Old San Juan, Puerto Rico. Called the “Gibraltar of the Caribbean,” this system of fortifications became one of the key frontier outposts of Spain’s West Indies dominions. The physical remains of the defenses encapsulate the history of the Spanish Empire.

Puerto Rico’s location at the western edge of the Caribbean Sea made control of the island the focus of several centuries of military and diplomatic schemes. For this reason the Spanish fortified the island’s major port of San Juan with a forceful system of defense. The fortification system of the park exemplifies important developments in military architecture and engineering spanning almost five centuries and represents the oldest fortifications of European design in the United States.

The major features and resources within the NPS-administered San Juan National Historic Site include Castillo San Felipe del Morro (1540–1790), the dominant fort poised on the cliffs overlooking the entrance to San Juan Bay; the 23-acre grassy area in front of Castillo San Felipe del Morro called the esplanade; Castillo San Cristóbal (1634–1790), fort at the east side of the park; El Cañuelo (1601–1609), a smaller fort directly across from Castillo San Felipe del Morro on the Isla de Cabras; and portions of the city’s fortress walls and bastions (1634–1800s) that extend from the forts and enclose the district of Old San Juan. With the exception of El Cañuelo, most of the historic fortifications are located in Old San Juan.

The park’s 75 acres provide the largest open green space in Old San Juan, and are host to a variety of recreational activities enjoyed by city residents and visitors, including kite flying, jogging, and dog walking.