

This Day in History... October 18, 1898

US Takes Possession of Puerto Rico

On October 18, 1898, US troops raised the American flag over Puerto Rico, marking the start of US possession of the island.

The Taino tribe, part of the Arawak Indian group which migrated up the Orinoco River in Venezuela and settled on the island sometime around 700 AD, populated Puerto Rico. The Taino called the land Borinquen, which means "Land of the Noble Lord."

In 1493, Christopher Columbus landed on Borinquen during his second voyage to the new world. He named the island San Juan Bautista. In 1508, Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León was sent to conquer the Taino. He founded the first settlement, called Caparra, in 1508. A year later, the settlement was moved to a nearby island and named Puerto Rico, which means "Rich Port." A second settlement was established in 1511, on the southwest part of the island, named San Germán.



Issued for the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in Puerto Rico.

A dispute arose between Columbus's son Diego and Ponce de León about titles and trading privileges related to the island. Spanish authorities denied Diego's claim and named Ponce de León governor. A system of slavery was installed that persecuted the Taino.

By 1510, there were rising tensions between Taino and Spaniards. The Taino had believed the Spanish had divine powers and were immortal. To test it, the chieftain Urayoán had his warriors drown Diego Salcedo, a Spanish soldier. They waited for three days to see if Salcedo would rise back to the surface, and when he did not, they rose in revolt against their mortal Spanish oppressors. The revolt failed, and Ponce de León ordered many Taino put to death. The rest of the natives fled to the mountains. In 1511, Ponce de León left on a voyage that eventually led

to the discovery of Florida. In 1521, the island and the city switched names – the island became known as Puerto Rico, and the city became San Juan.

The exact population of the Taino before the arrival of Columbus is unknown, but estimates range from 500,000 all the way to 8 million. Within 15 years, their number had fallen to less than 100,000 throughout the Caribbean, through disease, starvation, and massacres. By 1565, only 200 Taino were reported to still live, though Spanish colonial authorities did not declare the people extinct until 1802.



The Puerto Rico flag includes red stripes symbolizing the blood of warriors, white stripes for victory and peace, a white star on a blue triangle symbolizing the island surrounded by blue sky and water, and the triangle representing the three branches of government.

The Spanish maintained control throughout the 19th century, despite several armed attempts by France, England, and the Netherlands to take over. Puerto Rico's defense was helped greatly by the presence of Fort San Felipe del Morro, commonly referred to as El Morro. The fort was built in 1539, and is still standing.

The early 1800s ushered in abolition movements in most European Colonial powers. Spain abolished slavery in 1820, but allowed it to continue in its colonies. Efforts by people such as José Julián Acosta resulted in the end of slavery in 1873 in Puerto Rico.

By the mid-1800s, more than half a million people lived in Puerto Rico. The vast majority were illiterate and living in poverty. Tensions boiled over in 1868 when hundreds of men and women in the town of Lares rose in revolt. It became known as the "Lares Uprising," or the "Lares Cry." While the uprising was quickly put down, it



Stamp pictures La Fortaleza (the Fortress), located in San Juan, Puerto Rico.



Stamp commemorates the 450th anniversary of San Juan, Puerto Rico – the oldest continuously inhabited city in America.

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helped inspire social reforms such as the Moret Law in 1870, which led to the first freeing of enslaved people. The Lares Cry also influenced the formation of local political parties, which tried to establish a political identity for Puerto Rico that resembled Spain. In 1897, Spain approved the Carta Autonómica, which granted administrative and political self-government to Puerto Rico.

Combined with the issues of Cuban independence, United States expansionist movements brought America and Spain into conflict at the end of the 19th century. Inflamed by “yellow journalism” (biased reporting) by publishers such as William Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, sentiment in America led President William McKinley to declare war on Spain in 1898. The bulk of the fighting occurred in Cuba and the Philippines, but American forces also invaded Puerto Rico at Guernica and engaged Spanish forces there.



The first US stamp overprinted for use in Puerto Rico.



An overprinted US #281 stamp for use in Puerto Rico.

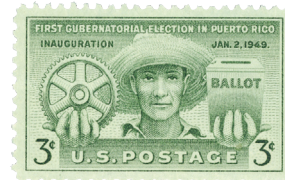
American forces first landed in Puerto Rico in July 1898. They faced little resistance and suffered just seven deaths, securing the island by mid-August. After the armistice was signed, America and Spain held an official hand over ceremony on October 18, 1898, with US General John R. Brooke serving as military governor.

The short war and American victory resulted in the freedom of Cuba, the surrendering of Guam and Puerto Rico from Spain to the United States, as well as the sale of the Philippines by Spain to the US for \$20 million. The treaty details were first discussed in San Juan, and eventually signed in Paris.

After the war, the US Congress passed the Foraker Act, which established a civilian government and commerce between the US and Puerto Rico. In 1915, a Puerto Rican delegation traveled to Washington and petitioned President Woodrow Wilson to grant Puerto Rico more independence. This resulted in the Jones Act in 1917, which established Puerto Rico as an American Territory, “organized but unincorporated.” It granted United States citizenship to all Puerto Ricans – and also made them available for the military draft. More than 20,000 Puerto Ricans were drafted and served in World War I.

The Puerto Rican economy grew rapidly until the onset of the Great Depression. The Depression, followed by World War II, resulted in the migration of many Puerto Ricans to mainland America. Changes came in politics, as well. President Harry Truman named Jesús Piñero as the first Puerto Rican-born governor in 1946. A year later, Congress passed a law that allowed Puerto Ricans to hold elections for their own governors. In 1950, Puerto Rico’s status was upgraded from Protectorate to Commonwealth. This move angered some citizens who wanted full independence. This discontent was shown in the Jayuya Uprising, where dissidents in seven cities and villages engaged local forces (mostly police).

In recent years, the island has held several plebiscites or referendums to determine Puerto Rico’s relationship with the United States. In 2024, the referendum asked citizens whether they thought Puerto Rico should become independent with free association (29.6%), become a state (58.6%), or become fully independent (11.82%). However, many voters were unhappy with the lack of options for commonwealth status or a continuation of the status quo.



Issued to commemorate the 1948 election of Luis Muñoz Marín as the first governor of Puerto Rico.



Stamp from the second issue which used a different spelling.

Postage Stamps of Puerto Rico

The US military arrived on Puerto Rico in July 1898. The acting governor authorized provisional mail service one month later. US stamps bearing the overprint “PORTO RICO” were placed into use. The overprinted stamps were issued in 1¢, 2¢, 5¢, 8¢, and 10¢ denominations.

In 1900, the 1¢ and 2¢ provisional stamps were reissued with a “PUERTO RICO” overprint. Later that same year, the Puerto Rico mail system was integrated into the US Post Office Department and the use of overprinted stamps was discontinued. Today, Puerto Rico is a self-governing commonwealth of the United States.

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