



CONGRESSWOMAN JENNIFER GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN

PUERTO RICO - AT LARGE

Testimony on H.R. 2444 – *Fort San Gerónimo Preservation Act*
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
Rep. Jenniffer González-Colón
Thursday, May 27, 2021

Chairman Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher, thank you for the opportunity to testify on my bill, H.R. 2444, the *Fort San Gerónimo Preservation Act*.

H.R. 2444 would establish Fort San Gerónimo del Boquerón as an affiliated area of the National Park System. Located in San Juan, Puerto Rico, this two-level, stone masonry fort is part of the massive fortification system built by Spanish military engineers between the 16th and 19th centuries to protect the city.

Despite its small size, Fort San Gerónimo became a centerpiece of San Juan's first line of defense. It played a crucial role in the 1797 Battle of San Juan, when a squadron of British ships led by Sir Ralph Abercromby attacked the city for 13 days. Fort San Gerónimo bore the brunt of the assault and although severely damaged, stood up against the firepower and successfully thwarted the British, who retreated in defeat.

The 1797 British siege on San Juan was the last attack on Puerto Rico by a major European power, underscoring Fort San Gerónimo's historic significance and key strategic role.

The fort continued to be used as a Spanish military post throughout the 19th century. After Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory in 1898, the U.S. Navy used it a military post until 1921. It was then transferred into private property and was eventually acquired by the Government of Puerto Rico in 1949. Fort San Gerónimo is now managed by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture.

It is the sole surviving fortification on the Island representing the 1797 Battle of San Juan and has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places since 1983.

Yet, despite its importance, preserving Fort San Gerónimo has been challenging given the limited resources, along with degradation resulting from the impact of winds, waves, and more recently, Hurricane Maria.

In recent years, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture has partnered with Amigos del Fortín San Jerónimo, a local nonprofit that has done a tremendous job to rehabilitate and preserve the fort.

But more must be done.

By designating Fort San Gerónimo as an affiliated area, H.R. 2444 would authorize the National Park Service to enter into cooperative agreements with the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture to

provide technical and financial assistance for its preservation. This will support and strengthen ongoing efforts to rehabilitate the site without placing it under federal ownership.

Last year, the National Park Service published a study that found that Fort San Gerónimo is nationally significant, met suitability criteria, and that there was strong local support for the National Park Service to become involved in the site's protection. It concluded that there was potential for the fort to be considered as an affiliated area.

My bill would achieve just that, making Fort San Gerónimo the first affiliated area located in Puerto Rico. Besides providing critical resources to support its preservation, this designation would also bring national recognition to its role in San Juan's history and as part of the the oldest and largest Spanish fortification system in the United States

This would be timely this year, as we are commemorating the 500th anniversary of the founding of San Juan, the oldest continuously inhabited city established by Europeans in the U.S. The city's history would be quite different were it not for Fort San Gerónimo.

I'd like to thank the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture and the Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office for supporting my bill. I also want to recognize Amigos del Fortín San Jerónimo for their ongoing work to preserve the fort. I will be introducing letters from these three organizations for the record.

Lastly, I want to thank Mr. Juan Vera-Vega, the State Underwater Archeologist and Director of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture's Nautical Archeology Council, who will be testifying in support of H.R. 2444. Mr. Vera-Vega has worked on Fort San Gerónimo's preservation for the past 19 years and is truly an expert on the matter.

Thank you, I yield back.