

The Fixed Regiment of Puerto Rico defends San Juan again

by Eliud Bonilla[®]

A group of historical reenactors, representing the Fixed Regiment of Puerto Rico, took to the streets of San Juan during the weekend of January 27-29, 2006. Over 30 volunteers from the island, as well as from the continental US, gathered to commemorate the defense of San Juan against the British attack of 1797.



Figure 1 Marching out of San Cristobal

The main purpose of this event was to share in a “living history” format the stories and exploits of the Spanish and Puerto Rican troops as they defended the city of San Juan against the British invasion of 1797. At various locations throughout Old San Juan, including Fort San Cristobal and Fort San Felipe del Morro, the public was treated to marching, drilling, musket fire as well as historical interpretation. In an elegant ceremony at the Museum of San Juan, a handmade replica of the regimental flag was presented by Dr. Luis Gonzalez Vale (Official Historian of Puerto Rico) and Mr. Bob Dodson (Superintendent of National Park Service in Puerto Rico).

This group of reenactors began organizing themselves in February of 2005. The “founding fathers and mothers” include José Torres (resides in Cleveland, Ohio), Miguel Hernández and Enrique Delgado of the "Puerto Rican/Hispanic Genealogical Society" (New York City), Héctor Díaz of the "Regimiento Fixo de Luisiana" (resides in Baltimore, Maryland) and Luis Iriarte and Denise Quiñones of the "1898 Sociedad de Amigos de la Historia de Puerto Rico" (San Germán, Puerto Rico).

The local news media also took note and members of the Fixed Regiment were interviewed on the evening TV news as well as a live broadcast of “La Diana” (morning regimental ceremony that includes the raising of the flags over the forts). The enthusiastic response from both tourists as well as local residents serves as a validation of the need to be proactive in rediscovering and sharing our history.

Personal Observations

This was my first historical reenactment event as a participant so I was not sure what to expect. I had practiced and drilled basic maneuvers several times with Héctor Díaz, Eric Cardona and José Hernández in Maryland throughout 2005. My regimental uniform was completed just two days before the event thanks to my dear mother’s excellent handiwork (most of our clothing is custom made for historical accuracy) and along with the rest of my gear, was packed and ready to go. After a good flight into San Juan, I drove to Fort San Cristobal and settled in as I began to meet my new comrades.

The reenactors came from all walks of life with the pleasant surprise of a healthy representation of young people. It gives you a sense of hope when young, smart, and enthusiastic people embrace such a noble effort. The one common characteristic that I found among all was a passion for our history.

I was fortunate enough to sleep in Fort San Cristobal, the centerpiece of the island’s defense system in the 18th century, thanks to the courtesy of the US National Park Service staff. Some of us spent the evening in healthy historical debates and cleaning/preparing our gear for the next day while the more adventurous still had energy to explore the multiple corridors and chambers of the fort (some even rumored to be haunted).



Figure 2 Fixed Regiment at Plaza de Colón

The days were packed with fun activities. Excitement filled the air as tourists and local

residents watched the Fixed Regiment march through the cobblestone streets of Old San Juan. I enjoyed observing people's vast array of responses to suddenly being transported to the 18th century. Many were curious of our clothing and marching formation, quickly approaching us with many questions. Others were shy in their demeanor, keeping their distance as they seemed to soak in the sights and sounds of our Commander giving a rousing speech, or the roar of musket fire. My favorite reaction has to be the one of a passing car with two small children in it. A little girl put her face against the window and let out a dramatic "Wow!" as a young boy bounced up and down in the backseat out of pure excitement. The driver, without missing a beat nor stopping the car, pulled out a cell phone with an integrated camera and took a picture of us! Since San Juan is a major destination for cruise ships, the reenactors had a chance to share our history, as well as pose for many pictures, with visitors from around the world.



Figure 3 Flag Bearer, Drummer, and Soldier

Illustrious and forgotten chapter in Hispanic American history

On April of 1797 British forces with over 60 ships, led by General Ralph Abercromby and Admiral Henry Harvey, lay siege to the city of San Juan, Puerto Rico. The governor of Puerto Rico at the time was Don Ramón de Castro, an experienced leader in military and civil matters. He had served years earlier under Bernardo de Gálvez's campaign against the British as an ally of the American colonies. In his very firm response to the demand to surrender, Don Ramón mentioned his military service and "glory obtained from the British nation ...at Panzacola" (Pensacola) in 1781. Those lessons learned in his younger days would serve him well as he developed and executed a series of effective

defensive and counterattack maneuvers. The Puerto Rico Fixed Regiment, together with militia and volunteers from all over the island, held off an attacking force while being significantly outnumbered. After a siege of over two weeks the British were forced to abandon their plans and withdraw.



Figure 4 Governor Don Ramón de Castro

Impact and repercussions

The successful defense of San Juan had a huge impact in the shaping of the Americas that we know today, even though it may not be obvious at a casual glance. While we usually tend to favor the study of grand and epic historical events, many significant changes come in subtle ways, even out of "forgotten" battles. Britain, Spain, Puerto Rico, and the United States of America would be different today if the battle for San Juan would have had a different outcome.

Today, Puerto Ricans can look back to the battle of San Juan as the place in history where their ancestors fought and won the permanency of their Hispanic culture. Historical documents show that the British had plans for populating Puerto Rico and, on more than one occasion in the 18th century, had offered Gibraltar in exchange for Puerto Rico. If we also recognize that San Juan had the largest and most complex fortification of all the Americas combined with its strategic location, it would have been highly probable that the British would have kept the island.

How would a British Puerto Rico have impacted the 19th century? It is hard to say but we see

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today many Caribbean island nations as part of the British Commonwealth. Would we have today the nation of “Rich Port” and the city of “Saint John” as its capital? For Spain the battle of San Juan could be viewed as its last defense of its Caribbean territories before finding itself on the defensive against the South American independence movements. Would the loss of Puerto Rico have accelerated the loss of other colonies, either by an emboldened Great Britain or by internal strife?

And what of the United States of America? In 1898 the USA declared war on Spain and as a result of its victories obtained three major Spanish possessions: Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines. Cuba and the Philippines were later granted their independence while Puerto Rico was kept originally as a territory and has evolved into a Commonwealth government associated with the USA (a very controversial topic in its own right today). How would have the war and diplomacy been conducted differently if Puerto Rico had been a British colony then? Would Puertoricans be today British, instead of American, citizens?

These are just a few dimensions of the impact that those brave defenders had over 200 hundred years ago when defending their city against the invaders. Who says that history is boring or irrelevant?



Figure 5 The author with family members

Additional Resources

If you are interested in learning more about San Juan 1797 events and the Fixed Regiment of Puerto Rico, or would like to join as a historical reenactor you can visit: www.sanjuan1797.com and <http://www.nps.gov/saju/britishattack.html>. An excellent book for in-depth study is “*The Eighteenth Century Caribbean & The British Attack on Puerto Rico in 1797*” by María M. Alonso and Milagros Flores Román.