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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO VISUAL PROGRAM

SET 246

Puerto Rico

COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE

THE ARSENAL AND CONVENT OF SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS

The Arsenal on the Puntilla, old San Juan, was a navel station constructed first of wood in 1791, and then as a permanent structure of masonry in beginning in 1800 with the construction continuing for the next ninety years. It was used as a base for thirty vessels of shallow draft to patrol the lagoons and channels in the mangrove swamps around San Juan. By 1848, the north facade was added, which included an arch and four Italian columns. This addition was designed by the architect Manuel Zayas, who in 1854, added a dome and navy barracks against the west wall. A warehouse for boats was built on the east side, facing the harbor. In 1880, the buildings for the General Commander were constructed.

From a description of the Arsenal and its grounds, written by Pedro Cobreres, architect of the State in 1885, the following buildings had been completed: ten buildings of mason work, two small houses of wood, a shed or covered passageway and by then, three piers, two of wood and one of stone.

The grounds and the buildings of the Arsenal became the last Spanish soil in Puerto Rico in 1898, after the Spanish American War. The United States peace commission had arranged for the Spanish soldiers that had remained in Puerto Rico, to be evacuated from the Arsenal where the Spanish flag flew proudly until the last soldier departed.

The Cultrual Institute of Puerto Rico began a restoration of the Arsenal in 1969, creating a museum and carefully not altering the original structure.

The Convent of Saint Thomas Aquinas and the church of San José adjacent to it are among the oldest Christain places of worship still in use in the Western Hemisphere. The convent was begun as a monastery by the Dominican fathers in 1523 on land donated by Ponce de Leon. It is recorded that by 1530, the building had grown sufficiently to house 25 friars and provide shelter for the woman and children of San Juan during the attacks of Caribe Indians. Construction continued throughout the next century, but except for sporadic donations, there was little money for maintaining and refurbishing the structures, as the Dominican fathers were responsible for the islands hospital and schools.

The convent with its two floors of arcaded galleries was converted into barracks in 1810, when the Dominican order was dissolved in Puerto Rico. From 1898 to 1966, it housed the Antilles Command of the U.S. Army. Recently a restoration was completed as the original structure had been damaged from years of use. The original wooden beams of the roof and stairs of the cloister were replaced with



cement imitations. Today the convent is the headquarters of the Institute of Culture of Puerto Rico and houses in one of its arcaded galleries a small museum.

Sources:

"Que Pasa". The Official Visitor Guide to Puerto Rico. Tourism Company of Puerto Rico. February 1985.

Castro, Maria de los Angeles. "Arquitectura en San Juan de Perto Rico (Siglo XIX)". Editorial Universitaria, 1980.

Slide Description:

- 246 A An old post card that shows the "Puntilla", the site where the Arsenal is located, The dome of the chapel can be seen in the background.
- 246 B In this view of the Arsenal, the chapel is seen to the right.
- 246 C A view of the opposite side of the same alley. The Museum of the Saints is located here.
- 246 D A view of one of the lovely arches that add grace to the 18th century architecture.
- 246 E A corner at the main patio and the entrance of the Arsenal Museum.
- 246 F Another view of the same patio - notice the beautiful "farol" or lantern.
- 246 G General view of the main patio showing the central fountain.
- 246 H The Convent of Saint Thomas Aquinas, restored. Today it is the home of the Cultural Institute of Puerto Rico.
- 246 I Another view of Convent.
- 246 J This two story arcaded gallery houses a small museum today and acts as a reminder of the rich colonial past of this Caribbean island.

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