

**REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONER
OF THE INTERIOR FOR PORTO
RICO TO THE SECRETARY OF
THE INTERIOR, U.S.A., 1900**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649235698

Report of the Commissioner of the Interior for Porto Rico to the Secretary of the Interior, U.S.A.,
1900 by Various

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VARIOUS

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COMMISSIONER OF THE INTERIOR FOR PORTO RICO

TO THE

SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR, U. S. A.

1900.

WASHINGTON:
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE.

1900.

General
gt.

REPORT

OF

THE COMMISSIONER OF THE INTERIOR FOR PORTO RICO.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR.

Washington, July 7, 1900.

SIR: I have the honor to invite your attention to section 24 of the act of Congress approved April 12, 1900, entitled "An act temporarily to provide revenues and a civil government for Porto Rico, and other purposes," which provides as follows:

That the commissioner of the interior shall superintend all works of a public nature, and shall have charge of all public buildings, grounds, and lands, *except those belonging to the United States*, and shall execute such requirements as may be imposed by law with respect thereto, and shall perform such other duties as may be prescribed by law, and make such reports through the governor to the Secretary of the Interior of the United States as he may require, which shall annually be transmitted to Congress.

I have to request that you will cause this matter to be brought to the attention of the commissioner of the interior with request that he will prepare and forward through you for my consideration, at a date not later than October 1, 1900, a report of the matters pertaining to Porto Rico, with which he is charged under existing laws. It is also desirable that he embody in his report a statement of the character, quantity, and location of Crown lands, the ownership to which the United States succeeded by virtue of the treaty of Paris, together with a statement of the quantity and location of all unreclaimed or swamp lands in Porto Rico. This report should cover the period from April 12, 1900, to date of its rendition. In this connection it is suggested that statistical statements embodied in the report should not be given from estimates where it is possible to obtain the same from original sources.

It is desirable that a report of the commissioner of the interior of Porto Rico be submitted to the Department within the time above specified in order that proper consideration may be given to the important subjects therein requiring attention in the annual report of the Secretary of the Interior to the President.

Very respectfully,

E. A. HITCHCOCK, *Secretary.*

The GOVERNOR OF PORTO RICO,
San Juan, P. R.

EXECUTIVE MANSION, PORTO RICO,
San Juan, P. R., September 19, 1900.

SIR: I have the honor to inclose reports from the commissioner of the interior of the island of Porto Rico, and of his subordinate officers, as required by section 24, act of Congress approved April 12, 1900, as well as in compliance with your letter of July 7, 1900.

Very respectfully,

CHAS. H. ALLEN, *Governor.*

THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR,
Washington, D. C.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR OF PORTO RICO,
 OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER,
San Juan, September 15, 1900.

SIR: In compliance with section 24 of the act of Congress approved April 12, 1900, entitled "An act temporarily to provide revenues and a civil government for Porto Rico, and for other purposes," and in response to the suggestions of your letter of date July 7, 1900, addressed to the governor of Porto Rico and by him referred to me for my information and instruction, I have the honor to submit (through the governor of Porto Rico) for your consideration a report of the matters pertaining to Porto Rico with which the commissioner of the interior is charged under the law.

By the provisions of General Orders No. 102, of date April 30, 1900, issued by Brig. Gen. George W. Davis, commanding the Department of Porto Rico, preparatory to the inauguration of civil government on May 1, 1900, as provided by the act of Congress approved April 12, 1900, there were assigned to the department of the interior the duties, responsibilities and records pertaining to patents, trade-marks and labels, public lands and forests, agriculture, mines and minerals, public works (including care of public buildings), health, charities, and archives of the insular government of date anterior to American occupation. The assignments, it will be noted, are numerous; the experience of a few months has shown me that the duties imposed by most of them are burdensome and exacting.

I assumed charge as commissioner of the interior on June 15, 1900, and gave immediate attention to the organization of the department and the assignment of employees. As now constituted, the several branches and duties are distributed as follows:

The board of public works, composed of three members, to which has been committed the care of public buildings, matters relating to harbor shores and lands, railroads, highways, bridges, streams, canals, irrigation, marsh lands, aqueducts, and the supervision and inspection of all works undertaken by the insular government, by provinces, by municipalities, and under private concessions which in any way affect the public domain.

The board of charities, composed of six members, only one of whom, the secretary and treasurer, receives compensation. This board has charge of the insane asylum, the boys' and girls' charity schools, the leper hospital, and, through local boards, the general supervision of the charity interests of the island.

The superior board of health, composed of five members, including the commissioners of education and the interior. The sanitary affairs of the whole island, either by direct action or through the health officials of the several municipalities, are in charge of this board. Its duties, under ordinary circumstances, would be multitudinous and important, but the serious conditions of poverty long prevailing and aggravated by the calamity of last year's hurricane render them serious and trying.

The bureau of agriculture and related industries, and the divisions of mines and minerals, patents, trade-marks and labels, archives and public lands and forests complete the organization of the department over which the commissioner, as administrative head, and in addition to his duties as a member of the executive council and the governor's cabinet, is required to hold supervision.

In the institution of the new department, involving the assignment of duties and distribution of records and papers under the civil government, the fact that elaborate, intricate, and cumbersome methods, with entries all in Spanish, have had to be replaced by a system affording better facilities for the prompt dispatch of business, by a force of employees unable, with rare exceptions, to speak or understand the English language, and with habits fixed by years of practice in the old way, has militated against rapid progress in the important work of the department. Upon the whole, however, I find no cause for discouragement, and my experience has given me such confidence in the capability and fidelity of the employees that I shall hope to present in future reports matters of value to the Government as well as to those interested in the prosperity of Porto Rico.

I have delved far enough into the public lands records to discover that a great deal of expert manipulation as well as detective ingenuity will be needed to untangle the mass of cross titles, duplication and lapping of grants and concessions, and unauthorized occupation of lands that have grown with the centuries of rule in the interest of the favored few. The archives of the island were found in a disordered condition; many expedients, or records of cases, have never been closed and are mixed with those disposed of. Rearrangement and classification are necessary prior to investigation.

During the early history of Porto Rico the governors and captain-generals held or assumed the right to make grants of land. Grantees appropriated extensions of their original boundaries, and their successors claim ownership. In 1818 a royal schedule was issued granting lands to all persons who would engage in agriculture, pay a small impost, and agree to clear and cultivate each year the tenth part of the total area up to one-half. Forfeiture of the lands to the State was the penalty for noncompliance with the terms of the grant.

Concessions were numerous, but in many cases the terms of the Government were not complied with. Many grants were abandoned. Some were returned to the State, but in numerous instances the lands were taken possession of by intruders. For the reasons stated, it is not possible at this time to determine the location or amount of all such lands.

Under Spanish domination there existed at San Juan, the capital, a "negociado" (office or division), which had charge of all uncultivated or State lands. In this department was a board of repartition. Each municipality was required to keep a record of all such lands lying

within its boundaries and to notify the board of the measurement of lands and the fulfillment of the terms of all concessions. There were similar sections and the same regulations relating to mines, water courses, lakes, lagoons, swamps, and marshes. There were State lands in the highlands and on the seashore. Concerning the latter, whatever the original concessions may have covered, it can be shown that the areas of numerous valuable sugar estates have gradually extended over adjacent territory at one time marshy, but through natural process or by drainage have become dry and cultivable. State forest lands exist in almost every municipality. The greater part of them has been cleared, and they are occupied by squatters or persons claiming ownership by virtue of deeds or inheritance from squatters.

In 1897 the Spanish Government, in order to have every legal owner justify his title and the State recover its own, and at the same time classify the lands, ordered a careful listing of the real property in each municipality; but, either because of the expense or for political reasons, the order was not carried out prior to American occupation. The need of such listing continues, and it must be accomplished before the numerous questions of ownership can be definitely determined. It will be slow work, at best.

I inclose, Exhibit A, a tabulated statement giving the location, quantity, and character of lands which the records of this department show to have belonged to the Crown prior to December 10, 1898. It does not correspond with a list submitted by Brigadier-General Davis and published as Appendix K in his report on the civil affairs of Porto Rico, 1899. Closer investigation made since the date of General Davis's report shows that the occupants of some lands listed in Appendix K have legal titles thereto, and recent discoveries have been added.

For your full information concerning the organization of the department of the interior of Porto Rico, and as relating to the duties assigned to the commissioner, likewise as matters of possible historical value in the institution of civil government for the island, as well as of probable public interest, I submit herewith reports from the presidents and chiefs of the boards and bureaus of the department. The terms of existence under civil administration have been too brief to admit of the accumulation of instructive or valuable statistical information; hence my request to them was for a general statement covering the scope, operations, and present conditions of their various divisions. Perusal of the contents shows me that all of the reports are comprehensive and instructive.

The report of the president of the board of public works (Exhibit B) presents valuable information relative to the importance of the board and the character and progress of the work assigned to it. Having knowledge of the physical characteristics of the island, the nature of the soil, and the antecedent requirements of agricultural development, and being acquainted with the customs, habits, and inclinations of the people, I recognize the fact that the first great, crying need of Porto Rico is good roads. At the time of American occupation there was but one really good road—that from San Juan to Ponce, with a branch from Cayey to Guayama—on the island. A few short stretches of completed road led out from the larger seacoast towns on the lines of a certain "approved plan" of roads, which had been elaborately conceived and attentively "studied" at large expense for years, but had advanced only as stated beyond the paper period. The whole interior

of the island—and for the purposes of this statement the interior lines may be considered as closely approaching the seashore—was and practically remains without other means of reaching a market, or communication between country and town, or town and town, than over dilapidated and dangerous trails, often, in the rainy season, impassable for days, for all the streams are torrential and there are many of them. The productiveness of the soil is so great and the necessities for existence in this climate so few and inexpensive that people can and do live and multiply in the mountain districts, but remain forever poor and ignorant—conditions that should be ameliorated if not wholly removed, but which, without roads over which produce can be carried to market and agriculture encouraged by being made profitable, can not be successfully accomplished.

A great deal has been said, and well said, about the education of the children of Porto Rico, and there should be no delay in the prosecution of the good work; but roads are needed to expedite it. The thousands of poor parents in the interior are not only unable to decently clothe their children, but can not provide suitable food. Anemia is the prevailing disease among old and young and is painfully in evidence wherever one travels. The emaciated and sallow body and the blood-diseased brain are poor receptacles for learning. Give the landowner the incentive to plow and sow and reap and the poor the opportunity to labor and earn wages more than sufficient to eke out a miserable existence upon; I verily believe then, and not until then, will educational efforts bear good fruit. Permanent roads will work the reform.

The military government promptly set about the building and repair of roads. Because much of the work was at first undertaken to relieve the demand for labor or food, and therefore without proper surveys or location of lines, a considerable portion was speedily undone by the rains and floods. Later the matter was taken up in a more deliberate and comprehensive way and now a number of substantial roads are under construction. They are, however, only a few of the many needed, as the very excellent map attached to Exhibit B clearly shows.

I realize that it would be folly to expect that the revenues of the island will be large enough to admit of an apportionment for roads sufficient to enable the construction of new roads to be pushed with any sort of vigor. Indeed, I apprehend that the road fund available from year to year will not be more than sufficient to properly maintain the roads now in existence and in process of construction. I purpose having the roads and trails most needed carefully listed and estimates of the probable cost of construction prepared and carry the matter before the legislature, with a proposition to float a loan large enough to build the roads now.

The report of the president of the superior board of health (Exhibit C) presents a general history of that organization and some observations on the character of its duties, which are far-reaching and of the utmost importance to the people, to whom many of the requirements of the board are so utterly opposed to the customs and habits of their lives that they are disposed to resent their enforcement. Nevertheless, the board is making substantial progress in a great work.

The report of the president of the board of charities (Exhibit D) gives an insight into the character and progress of the work of charity undertaken for the benefit of the afflicted adults and helpless orphan children of Porto Rico. I have taken deep personal interest in the