

**REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONER
OF THE INTERIOR FOR PORTO
RICO, TO THE SECRETARY OF
THE INTERIOR, U. S. A., 1902**

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VARIOUS

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ADJUNTAS-PONCE ROAD. NEW CONCRETE CULVERT.



REPORT
OF THE
COMMISSIONER OF THE INTERIOR FOR PORTO RICO.

EXECUTIVE MANSION, PORTO RICO,
San Juan, October 25, 1902.

SIR: I have the honor to herewith transmit the annual report of the commissioner of the interior for the island of Porto Rico.

Very respectfully,

WILLIAM H. HUNT,
Governor.

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

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR OF PORTO RICO,
OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER,
San Juan, October 29, 1902.

SIR: In compliance with your request, of date July 7, 1902, addressed to the governor of Porto Rico, I have the honor to submit my third annual report as commissioner of the interior for Porto Rico, together with the reports from the several chiefs or heads of the bureaus and divisions constituting the department of the interior of Porto Rico as organized upon the inauguration of civil government in the island, and since augmented or diminished as the administration of affairs has seemed to require. The only material change in the organization during the fiscal year just closed has been the addition, by act of the legislative assembly, of a bureau of docks and harbors, for the proper enforcement of harbor regulations, collection of fees and fines, and the eventual improvement of the several important ports of the island. The organization of this bureau, which is destined to grow in importance and value to the shipping interests as the commerce continues to increase in volume, was delayed a few months pending the completion and approval by the executive council of the rules and regulations provided for the government of docks and harbors, but late in June it was put into full operation under conditions that promise well for all concerned.

PUBLIC LANDS.

In my report for 1901 I referred to the status of the so-called "public lands" of Porto Rico, and after discussing briefly some of the provisions of the treaty of Paris and the civil code of Spain in relation

thereto, suggested the importance of a legal determination of the question raised, preliminary to other action. The matter was submitted by your Department to the honorable Attorney-General of the United States and his opinion obtained. It did not seem to me that this finding fully covered the points raised in my report, but as, at the time of its promulgation, Congress was considering the advisability of a speedy disposition of the question without particular reference to title except in so far as the lands reserved for Federal occupation should stand clear of counterclaim or dispute, the matter was allowed to rest. The Congress, on July 1, 1902, passed an act which authorized the President to make, within one year after the approval of the act, such reservation of public lands and buildings belonging to the United States in the island of Porto Rico for military, naval, light-house, marine-hospital, post-offices, custom-houses, United States courts, and other public purposes as he may deem necessary, and providing that all remaining public lands and buildings, not including harbor areas and navigable streams and bodies of water and the submerged lands underlying the same, be granted to the government of Porto Rico, to be held or disposed of for the use and benefit of the people of said island.

The enactment of that law gave great satisfaction to the people of Porto Rico, both on account of the evidence it offered of the continuation of a liberal policy toward the island and as presenting the means for a just and speedy solution of all matters relating to public lands and buildings. This Department has had all of the properties involved carefully located, described, and the history of each noted. The several Departments of the Federal Government will be asked to make known their wishes concerning properties at present occupied by or needed for their accommodation, and it is sincerely hoped that agreements may be reached and the whole matter placed before the President for approval at an early date.

The bulk of the property involved comprises lands of little present value, but which may, if the island continues to develop and prosper as conditions now prevailing warrant the hope, become saleable. They need to be located and their boundaries determined, which will be a difficult and costly work. There are, however, some lands within or near the cities and larger towns which will be immediately available. To the east of the city of San Juan there lies a considerable tract that was withheld from improvement by governmental decree or military occupation under the Spanish régime. These lands constitute the only territory for city expansion, of which there is sore need from both sanitary and business points of view, for the existing congested condition of the population in the old portion of the city defies the proper enforcement of sanitary regulations, and when, as is expected and desired, the whole Marina district shall be taken over for the establishment of a naval station, the custom-house, the many warehouses, wholesale establishments, the numerous factories, and the thousands of people now quartered there must find locations and habitations elsewhere.

The only possible outlet on the little island upon which the city of San Juan stands is the land above referred to. It is desirable, therefore, and, to all interests concerned, quite important that all questions be settled and Presidential action secured in time for the legislative assembly of Porto Rico to provide for the disposition of island property at the session to be held during January and February, 1903.

Report of Commissioner of Interior for Porto Rico, 1902.



MASONRY BRIDGE WITH CONCRETE ARCH, BAYAMON-CUMERID ROAD.



PUBLIC ROADS AND BRIDGES.

In previous reports I endeavored to emphasize the need of good roads and bridges as the key to prosperity in Porto Rico. Time has given ardor to my convictions, and the splendid results following the construction or substantial repair of roads wherever it has been possible to confer the benefit have lent enthusiasm to my desire to push the work ahead. Road building in Porto Rico is not, however, an easy task, nor a project to be quickly performed. The mountainous character of the interior makes difficult the location, costly and slow the labor of construction. Sudden and torrential rains cause great landslides, ruinous washouts, and vexatious destruction of bridges and culverts. The soil is treacherous, upsetting the most carefully planned engineering for its control.

Every road becomes a problem unto itself, experience in another locality counting for but little in its construction. No road is undertaken until the survey has been carefully made, the character of the soil and rock closely studied, and provision made for the building of a solid bed with complete and ample drainage and well-laid macadam. I do not believe better roads are built anywhere than in Porto Rico, and it is a matter for regret that the means and facilities at command, together with the conditions controlling construction, forbid rapidity of progress commensurate with the needs of interior communities.

The legislative assembly, at its last session, passed an act abolishing the board of public works and providing for the organization of a bureau instead. The same act repealed most of the provisions of the old Spanish laws not previously abolished by military orders, and under which the board had been compelled to operate, often at great disadvantage. The new law made provision for the complete organization of the bureau of public works on a basis that greatly facilitates its work.

There was also enacted at the same session of the legislative assembly a well considered road law, which provides for the division of the island into seven road districts, each to be in charge of three supervisors, and sets aside 25 per cent of the municipal taxes for the construction and repair of roads as determined by the board of supervisors. This law is intended to apply to country roads and trails not directly in charge of the insular authorities, and it is expected that the wise and economical expenditure of the revenues obtained for this purpose will prove of great benefit to the interior communities.

The report of the superintendent of public works, presented herewith (Exhibit A), states in detail the operations of the bureau during the past year, the synopsis of disbursements showing the total of expenditures to have been \$628,687.72. The balance of \$236,389.12, as stated in Appendix B of the report, is largely the sum of unexpended portions of allotments for the construction of roads under contract, and which will be completed at an early date. The affairs of this bureau have been honestly and efficiently administered. It is a bureau which, by reason of its close relations to the people, especially the agriculturists, is naturally depended upon to relieve adverse conditions, and in consequence of inability, physical or financial, to meet every expectation, reasonable or otherwise, encounters a great deal of criticism, in dealing with which there is ample opportunity for the exercise of patience.

PUBLIC HEALTH.

In presenting the report of the president of the superior board of health (Exhibit B), I would call attention to the gratifying improvement shown in all matters relating to the health, comfort, and convenience of the people. The difficulties of administration noted in my report for 1900-1901 continued throughout the year. But at the last session of the legislative assembly new laws, providing for a complete reorganization of the system and granting ample power for the enforcement of proper regulations, were enacted, and went into operation on July 1. The record of vital statistics shows a gratifying decrease in the number of deaths and freedom from epidemics of all kinds.

AGRICULTURE AND MINES.

The report of the chief of the bureau of agriculture and mines (Exhibit C) shows a substantial increase in the production of sugar and tobacco, excellent progress in the restoration of coffee plantations to their normal condition, and increasing activity in the planting and cultivation of tropical fruit trees. Agricultural development has been general and steady over the island, and the good results are apparent in increased business activity, active demand for labor, and better wages. The people prove, in appearance and demeanor, their appreciation of the better condition of affairs, and I confidently predict for Porto Rico an era of prosperity never before experienced in the island.

THE TELEGRAPH SYSTEM.

The report of the chief of the bureau of insular telegraph (Exhibit D) presents an interesting account of the development of that system from the date of its taking over from the United States Signal Corps, as noted in my last report, to the present time. The legislative assembly made liberal provision for extension of the lines, in the belief, evidently, that the commercial prospects of the island would warrant the outlay, and the growth of business, as shown by the statement of receipts and expenditures accompanying the report, is substantial proof of the wisdom of the course.

CONCLUDING REMARK.

Particular comment on the work accomplished by this department through its several bureaus and divisions is not practicable without repetition of the matter contained in the accompanying reports, each of which presents a clear and precise statement of the facts and circumstances concerning the operations of the bureau named. I am pleased to commend the reports *in toto* as embodying a story of substantial progress in the establishment and maintenance of good government in Porto Rico, obtained by administering to the first and greatest need of the people in the construction and repair of roads, to the end that they may feel encouraged to labor in the assurance of means to reach the markets with the products of the soil; by affording advice and instruction concerning what to plant and how to cultivate most economically and profitably; by the introduction of sanitary rules and regulations and encouraging the people in habits of cleanliness and