



Amigos del Fortín de San Jerónimo

March 30, 2021

### **ASFJ Position on H.R. \_\_ to Establish San Geronimo as an Affiliated Area**

The “Amigos del Fortin San Jeronimo” (“Friends of San Geronimo Fort” “AFSJ”) has been notified with copy of draft of proposed legislation H.R. \_\_\_\_, to establish Fort San Geronimo del Boquerón as an affiliated area of the federal National Park System (“NPS”). AFSJ hereby respectfully submits its position on the proposed legislation as detailed below.

AFSJ is a volunteer-based, nonprofit organization established as a nonprofit corporation under the laws of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in September 2018. It attained federal nonprofit status under Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Tax Code in September 2018, as well as under the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico Internal Revenue Code, in May 2019. AFSJ is governed by a Board of Directors integrated by professionals from different fields including educators, attorneys, historians, journalists and archaeologists. AFSJ’s primary purpose and “raison d’etre” is ensuring the restoration, preservation, public enjoyment and awareness of the value of Fort San Geronimo (“the Fort”), the national significance of which has been recognized by its inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places since 1983. Dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Fort -considered one of Puerto Rico’s most important historic structures- had been closed and severely deteriorated during the past decades. Driven by the interest of preventing further deterioration of this historic landmark, in April 2019 AFSJ entered into a cooperative agreement with the government agency in charge of the property, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (“IPRC”), to jointly undertake a plan of action to achieve the rehabilitation, maintenance and public opening of the structure which was in need of urgent intervention.

The first battery of “El Boquerón”, originally built in 1532, and subsequently enlarged and rebuilt in 1791, was a key component of San Juan’s first line of defense under the Spanish Regime, and the site of crucial action in the defense of the Island during the unsuccessful British assault of 1797 on the Spanish colonial port city of San Juan, led by Lieutenant-General Sir Ralph Abercrombie. After the U.S. acquired Puerto Rico in 1898, the Fort became property of the U.S. Naval forces, later transferred into private ownership. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup>, Fort San Geronimo was returned to the

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Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and restored to its former glory under the leadership of the then head of the IPRC, Dr. Ricardo Alegria, who established a Museum of Puerto Rican Military History within the premises. Unfortunately, the Museum closed its doors. Following a period during which the Fort's operation and maintenance was delegated to the neighboring Caribe Hilton Hotel, until the end of the agreement with the IPRC. Thru the last two decades, the Council of Underwater Archeological, a subdivision of el IPRC, begins partial stabilization works and during this period this Council organized a controlled number of guided tours and activities with schools and community groups.

During the past 3 years, AFSJ, with the consent and under the supervision of IPRC, has continuously displayed efforts to accomplish the recovery of Fort San Geronimo. A comprehensive plan of repair and maintenance has been successfully launched and executed, thru AFSJ's volunteer recruitment, strategic partnerships and fund-raising activities. AFSJ and IPRC have been able to reopen the historic Fort and reinstate access to the public thru a top-quality educational program which includes scheduled guided tours, informational exhibits and representations by historical reenactors. Based on this auspicious foundation, plans for future action to achieve a full restoration and development of the public enjoyment potential of the Fort are well underway.

Among the AFSJ/IPRC partnership's most important accomplishments are: 1. Establishing a management plan for the Fort, with clearly-defined short-term and long-term goals; 2. Engaging in fund-raising efforts, including events and application for grants, that have rendered funds employed in the upkeep and repair of the Fort, with the objective of eventually attaining economic self-sustainability of the Forts' operation; 3. Executing regular maintenance and urgent repairs in the structure; 4. Instituted measures to improve security in the Fort; 5. Reopened the Fort for visitors thru special events since May 12, 2019 and with regular visiting hours Monday to Friday, since August 2019, having received over 4,000 visitors to date (despite having closed for 6 months due to the pandemic); 6. Established high qualitative interpretive program, including guided tours, workshops on Fort-related historical topics and set up of educational exhibits; 7. Created a successful volunteer program with a participation of over 50 volunteers; and 8. Established cooperative agreements with the Spanish Consulate, Department of Tourism Studies-UPR Carolina, and Polytechnic University School of Architecture, among others.

AFSJ's commitment to its mission and capacity to assume responsibility for the efficient administration of this historic resource has been demonstrated by Fort San Geronimo's positive and rapid turnaround since the establishment of the cooperative agreement.

Affiliated areas are defined by NPS as locations that "preserve significant properties outside the National Park System ... [and that] draw on technical or financial aid from the National Park Service" (National Parks: Index 2012-2016, p. 118). Fort San Geronimo clearly meets the criteria for the elements of national significance and other factors necessary for a proposed area to be considered as an affiliated area. Fort San Geronimo should benefit from NPS involvement in the management of this resource thru cooperative agreements with the non-federal managing entity IPRC

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AFSJ favors the establishment of the Fort as an affiliated area, insofar this classification should serve as an additional mechanism to convey much-needed resources and technical support to IPRC's and AFSJ's efforts to guarantee sustained protection and long-term feasibility of the historic site.

AFSJ considers one of the objectives of the affiliated area status should be to ensure continued support and reinforcement of IPRC's and AFSJ's successful joint management model implemented in the historic Fort. This partnership has proven to be a fruitful initiative that has earned wide recognition among both private and public sectors, creating awareness of the potential of replicating this model throughout the Island, as a viable alternative for the administration of historic structures threatened by economic disinvestment and are beyond the capacity of over-burdened and cash-strapped government agencies. Designation of the Fort as an affiliate area should contribute to the strength of this partnership approach, as it should allow the locally motivated management entities AFSJ/IPRC to work with NPS to protect, preserve and interpret this valuable historic resource.

It is in the best interests of the preservation of Fort San Geronimo that the proposed congressional action should not disturb, hinder, affect or alter the solid cooperative relationship in place between AFSJ and IPRC, and safeguard IPRC's prerogative to allow continuity of this initiative for the benefit of Fort San Geronimo.