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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM**

74

**1. Name of Property**

historic name: *Puerto Rico Island Penitentiary*

other names/site number: *"Presidio Insular", "Penitenciaría Estatal," and "Oso Blanco"*

**2. Location**

street & number: *South of SR # 21*

N/A not for publication

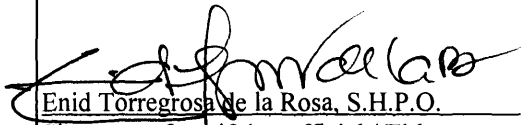
city or town: *Río Piedras*

X vicinity

state: *Puerto Rico* code: *P.R.* county: *San Juan* code: *127* zip code: *00926*

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant    nationally X statewide    locally. (    See continuation sheet for additional comments.)



Enid Torregrosa de la Rosa, S.H.P.O.

January 22, 2003

Signature of certifying official / Title

Date

Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property    meets    does not meet the National Register criteria.  
(    See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I, hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register

See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register

See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register

removed from the National Register

other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Gilson H. Beall* 3/7/03

*Jan*  
 Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

**5. Classification**

Ownership of Property	Category of property	Number of Resources within Property:		
		Contributing	Noncontributing	
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)			
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>	building
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
		<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>	Total

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

*GOVERNMENT/ Correctional Facility*

**Current Functions**

*GOVERNMENT/ Correctional Facility*

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**

*Mixed / Art Deco, Mediterranean Revival*

**Materials**

foundation: *concrete*  
 walls: *concrete with cement plaster finish*  
 roof: *concrete with cement plaster finish*  
 other: *ceramic glazed tiles, terracotta, and marble*

**Narrative Description:**

*(See continuation sheets.)*

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**8. Statement of Significance**

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**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

**Areas of Significance**

*Architecture*  
*Social History*

B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

**Period of Significance**

*1933- 1953*

C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

**Significant Dates**

*1933*

D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

**Significant Person**

*N/A*

A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

B removed from its original location.

C a birthplace or a grave.

D a cemetery.

E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

F a commemorative property

G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Cultural Affiliation**

*N/A*

**Architect/Builder**

*Roldán, Francisco*  
*Higuera, Antonio*

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(See continuation sheets)

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

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*(See continuation sheet)*

**Previous documentation on file (NPS)**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Location of Additional Data**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Others

**Name of repository:** *General Archives of Puerto Rico, Archive of Architecture and Construction University of Puerto Rico, and Department of Correction*

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**10. Geographical Data**

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**Acreege of Property:** five (5) acres

**UTM References**

*(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)*

Zone Easting Northing  
1 19 809500 2035773  
2 \_\_\_\_\_

Zone Easting Northing  
3 \_\_\_\_\_  
4 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

**Verbal Boundary Description**

*See attached sketched location plan.*

**Boundary Justification**

*(See Continuation Sheets)*

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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Name: *Gloria Milagros Ortiz, Santiago Gala (Architects) and José Marull (Historian)*  
organization: *Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office* date: *November 22, 2002*  
street and number: *P.O. Box 9066581* telephone: *(787) 721-3737*  
city or town: *San Juan* state: *Puerto Rico* zip code: *00906-6581*

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**Property Owner**

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name: *Government of Puerto Rico, Department of Correction and Rehabilitation*  
street & number: *Call Box # 71307* telephone: *(787) 749-0470*  
city or town: *San Juan* state: *Puerto Rico* zip code: *00936*

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San Juan, Puerto Rico*

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**NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION**

Summary Paragraph

*The Puerto Rico Insular Penitentiary is a four-story, reinforced concrete, Art Deco/Neo Moorish correctional facility with a rectangular floor plan of symmetrical composition, an entrance portico and an interior central court. The walls are finished with smooth cement plaster and decorated with glazed ceramic tiles. The exterior façades are articulated by a rhythmic sequence of recessed and embossed bays and meet at the at each corner of the building with four turrets suggesting a fortress-like image. In contrast, the interior façades are open to the court by means of light, uninterrupted arcades exposing the corridors that provide horizontal circulation throughout the building. This prison is located in Monacillos, a suburban ward of Río Piedras in the Municipality of San Juan. The building lies in a five acre promontory bounded in the west by PR #18, on the north by PR # 21 and to the south by Buena Vista Creek. The property is in excellent condition, though urban sprawl has replaced its original rural setting. Two exterior staircases and a total of three administrative, medical and boarding facilities built around the Penitentiary inflict a minimum impact on the original design.*

The Puerto Rico Insular Penitentiary, commonly known today as the “*Penitenciaría Estatal*” (State Penitentiary) or “*Oso Blanco*” (White Bear) is a monumental rectangular, four story concrete building with a large enclosed central court in an Art Deco style with Neo Moorish details. The property is located in a prominent five acre plot on a promontory in the Monacillos ward of the Río Piedras area of San Juan facing road PR# 18 on the northwest, which connects San Juan to the southern part of the island (Figure #1, floor plan), road PR# 21 to the north and road PR# 1 to the east. Located at the west façade, the building’s entrance is emphasized by a portico symmetrical in design and sequence, and of monumental character (Figures 2 and 3). The articulated facades are a mixture of massive concrete austerity and a restrained intent of embellishment using glazed ceramic tiles and terracotta in selected areas. Except for the first floor level of the south interior wall, which is closed, all of the courtyard’s surrounding walls are open arcades on the first level and open galleries on the remaining upper floors.

Footings, walls, and floors are built of reinforced concrete and exposed surfaces finished with smooth cement plaster. The facades are divided in 24 by 35 vertical bays with repetitive windows that reflect the distribution of the inner prison cells. Two projecting panels that subdivide both lateral and front facades interrupt the repetitive rhythm of the vertical bays.

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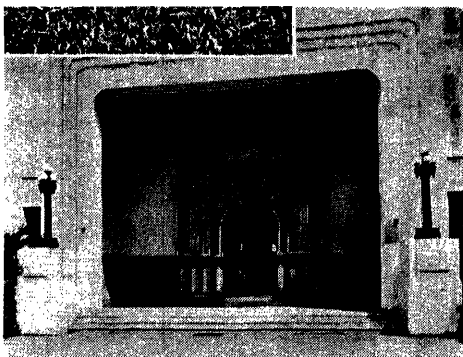
***Puerto Rico Insular Penitentiary  
San Juan, Puerto Rico***

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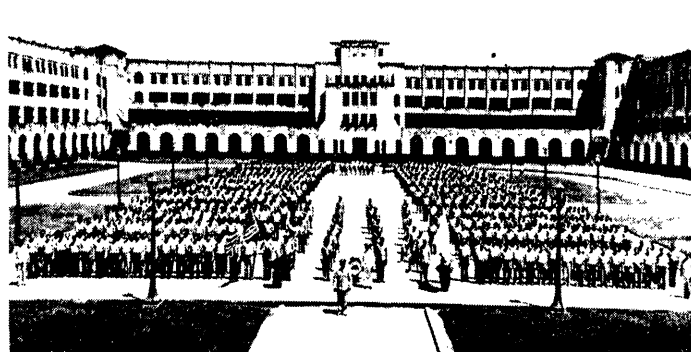
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The facades meet at the four corners with massive towers that impart the building with a strong fortress type expression. Medieval type buttresses in the lower section of the towers visually emphasize this quality (Figures 4 and 5). The reinforced corners are topped with three round arches that are grouped together by an orthogonal plane lavishly ornamented with glazed tiles of Moorish influence and a sentry box observation station that resembles Old San Juan's Spanish guard posts (Figure 6). The building mass is divided horizontally in two sections with the upper three floors resting upon the base-like podium of the first floor (Figure 7, western elevation).

The building unfolds as a sequence of architectural spaces, and thus, sensations. A wide opening on the portico frames a recessed entrance with a dramatic and imposingly ornamented archway that rests on four columns on each side. The entrance features ornamental terracotta sculptures in relief of two standing women representing Law and Justice. A panel above the lobulated archway, set back between the two figures, reads in Spanish: "ODIA AL DELITO Y COMPADECE AL DELINCUENTE", which translates as, "hate crime and pity the delinquent" (Figure 8). An interior vestibule with a security booth and control doors lead to the principal stairwell). There is a strong sense of containment in this space notably contrasting with the following space in the sequence: the interior open courtyard. This interior courtyard is the largest of its kind in Puerto Rico measuring approximately 340 feet long by 225 feet wide.



Entrance portico



View of the interior courtyard. c. 1950

The open arcades and galleries on each floor define the main hierarchical space—the open courtyard—and connect all parts of the building and provide excellent horizontal circulation (Figure # 9). The central court and galleries provided cross ventilation to the individual cells. Vertical circulation was originally provided by stairways located in the central volumes of the west and east sections of the building. At a later date, additional stairs were constructed in each

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of the patio corners. New modern stair towers have been added at the central section of the exterior façade in the north and south wings. Ornament in the interior of the building is applied to the principal stairwell space and on the columns around the courtyard. Glazed ceramic tiles in geometrical designs with Moorish influence within a square panel decorate the upper central part of each column in the first floor level (Figure # 10).

Three buildings have been constructed, on facing the southern façade and two on the eastern façade of the old insular penitentiary building. An intensive therapy unit, connected by a narrow passageway to the southern façade, is a two story concrete building constructed in 1975 that had a capacity to service 92 persons. An infirmary building, connected to the eastern façade, is a four story concrete building constructed in 1983 with a capacity of 67 persons. In the same year (1983) a one story concrete building was constructed in the proximity of the eastern façade to the north of the infirmary building and served as administrative offices of the Penitentiary

Two buildings facing the northern façade were constructed in 1987 - a one story concrete building used as kitchen; and a two story concrete and zinc roof building used as annex (annex 352) houses 448 inmates. Further to the northeast there are ten smaller concrete buildings that were constructed within the grounds of the old Penitentiary.

Although changes have occurred to the building and its surrounding site, it has retained its preferential location, standing high above the surrounding roads and developed areas. It has also retained its feeling, workmanship, and association. Changes, such as, additional stairways, two detached auxiliary buildings to the north and south, have not impaired or affected its imposing physical footprint nor diminished its historic or monumental character because of their position and scale. However, the eastern façade's integrity was affected by construction of the infirmary with its four floors and being attached to the eastern façade.

The monumental scale of the patio and external massing with its impressive vestibule, spatial sequence and ornamental details are almost intact, conserving, in general, the character defining features that make the building eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.



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**NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

*Summary Paragraph*

*The Puerto Rico Insular Penitentiary, is significant at State level for its importance in the areas of architecture and social history. The building, inaugurated in 1933, was designed by architect Francisco Roldán and constructed Antonio Higuera for the Puerto Rico Department of the Interior. The Insular Penitentiary was the crucial in the implementation of the Government of Puerto Rico's prisoner rehabilitation program on the Island. The property is eligible by criterion C under the area of architecture as the first modern penitentiary built in Puerto Rico and for the unique way it combined traditional Hispanic references and novel outlines representing a progressive public image for Puerto Rico.*

Background to the development of the model penitentiary

In 1833 the Spanish Colonial Government built "La Princesa", the first penitentiary of the Puerto Rico, in the Puntilla district south of the city of San Juan. Due to its location and because of the rapid development that occurred in the Puntilla district later in that century the space for expansion of facilities was limited. Although old penitentiary in the Puntilla were expanded in 1879 to accommodate more inmates, by in the 1890s the facilities were overcrowded<sup>1</sup>.

Aware of need of new facilities to replace the old penitentiary the American civilian government, approved in its first year (May 1, 1900 to May 1, 1901) an act that called for the creation of a modern penitentiary in Puerto Rico<sup>2</sup>. However, at that time no funds were approved for the construction of new facilities.

James S. Harlan, the Attorney General of Puerto Rico, in his 1902 report picked up the call for a new penitentiary. He commented on the inadequacy of the old penitentiary:

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<sup>1</sup> Maria de los Angeles Castro, Arquitectura de San Juan de Puerto Rico (Siglo XIX, (Río Piedras: Editorial Universitaria, 1980), 308.

<sup>2</sup> First Annual Report of Charles H. Allen, Governor of Porto Rico, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), 25.

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*I have recently inspected the penitentiary at San Juan. All persons convicted of felony are sentenced to confinement therein; but the capacity of the building is not nearly equal to the demands of the law. At the date of my visit 705 prisoners should have been present, whereas 200 had been transferred to the district jail, because of the crowded conditions of the main institution. The penitentiary is without an infirmary, and the sick are cared for at the district jail. The sanitary conditions of the penitentiary building are very unwholesome, but perhaps as good as the structure and surrounding circumstances permit. The floors are old, rough and decayed.<sup>3</sup>*

In 1907 the Puerto Rican legislature approved the sum of \$120,000 “for the purpose of erecting a model penitentiary”. The new penitentiary, which would house 1,000 prisoners, was to be built in the Puerta de Tierra area, east of the city of San Juan “just north of the military road and west of land now reserved for the marine hospital”<sup>4</sup>. That next year a competition between nine architects for the design of the new penitentiary was conducted and a design was selected.<sup>5</sup>. Although a design was selected, the project was not made because the Government of Puerto Rico considered the budget insufficient to construct a “building as the law required”. An attempt was made to for additional funding but these failed along with the rest of the appropriations.

Governor Horace M. Towner (1923-1929) in his first speech (June 23, 1923) to Puerto Rican Legislature revived Interest in a new penitentiary. Towner called for the construction of a state penitentiary among other public works of great magnitude<sup>6</sup>. The Legislature responded, in a special session, approving Act. No. 13 “To authorized the issuance of bonds of the People of Porto Rico in the amount of \$6,000,000.00 for the construction of Public Improvements, to provide funds for the payment of said bonds and for other purposes”<sup>7</sup>.

The penitentiary was conceived as an individual component of a group of interdependent welfare institutions that included a Psychiatric Hospital and an Insular Tuberculosis Sanatorium. These

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<sup>3</sup> Third Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico, (Washigton: Government Printing Office, 1902), 73.

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Commissioner of the Interior of Porto Rico (June 30, 1907) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907), 320.

<sup>5</sup> The competition was won by Horace Trumbauer of Philadelphia. Annual Repor of the Governor of Porto Rico for the fiscal year 1907-1908, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), 169.

<sup>6</sup> María Luis Moreno, La Arquitectura de la Universidad de Puerto Rico Recinto de Río Piedras , (Río Piedras:Editorial de Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2000), 30, 31.

<sup>7</sup> “Memoire for the construction of the Puerto Rico Island Penitentiary, at Río Piedras, Puerto Rico” in Specifications for the construction of a building for the Puerto Rico Island Penitentiary, July 1926.

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institutions were located in undeveloped lands in the Monacillos Ward of the Municipality of Río Piedras, outside the dense urban center of San Juan. The prison was part of a larger public works construction project development. The master plan of the complex had been designed by Bennet, Parsons & Frost using open land development ideals in which axial connections tied the structures together maintaining an environment that stimulated contact with nature. The surrounding agricultural lands were to be worked by the inmates helping to provide for their own sustenance. All of these institutions, along with the Department of Agriculture's Experimental Station were to share facilities common to all four, such as roads, sewage disposal, ice, and laundry facilities.<sup>8</sup> The building's original budget of \$750,000 was later reduced leaving only \$525,000.00 to purchase the land, building roads, architect services and the construction of the building<sup>9</sup>.



Aerial photograph of the Penitentiary, 1938

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<sup>8</sup> In a document titled "Plans in Preparation for the Improvement of Porto Rico", the firm Bennet, Parsons & Frost points out the qualities of the welfare project: *"Another mile further out in the open country, the Insular Government has acquired 600 acres for a [...]. The sanatorium was constructed several years ago. Sites for the other institutions have now been fixed so as to bring them into a large composition by means of a large entrance plaza opening from the main highway. The grouping of these welfare institutions, together with a psychiatric, to which both the insane and the criminal are related, is from the medical and sociological viewpoint a most desirable arrangement and probably is not excelled by similar institutions in any state of the Union. An important feature of this plan is the development of the grounds for orange groves, pineapple plantations and vegetables gardens to be maintained by the occupants of the buildings. Altogether a community of 3,000 persons will be formed when this project reaches its full development showing the importance of having an adequate plan prepared in advance of its growth."* (AACUPR).

<sup>9</sup> Memoire for the construction of the Puerto Rico Island Penitentiary, at Río Piedras, Puerto Rico" in Specifications for the construction of a building for the Puerto Rico Island Penitentiary, July 1926. In Report of the Attorney General of Porto Rico 1923 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925), 9, as mentioned in Fernando Picó' El día menos pensado, 29.

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Architect who designed the Penitentiary

The renowned Puerto Rican architect Francisco Roldán designed the Penitentiary in 1926. Although little is known about his personal background Roldán was recognized by his contemporaries as an outstanding illustrator (Roldán “el moderno”) whose work appeared in several local publications (*Revista de las Antillas, El Gráfico, El Diluvio* and *Puerto Rico Ilustrado* magazines). His artistic work, of Secessionist inspiration, coincided with his years as a draftsman and later as architect for the Puerto Rican Department of the Interior. Along with a team of other known architects –such as Pedro de Castro- Roldán worked on the design of institutional buildings in Puerto Rico during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1920 Roldán left the Department along with de Castro to work with Czech architect Antonin Nechodoma whose Whrightian approach to design and ornament was influential in most of his subsequent projects.<sup>10</sup> Throughout his private practice, Roldán produced his most remarkable examples such as González Padín Building, *El Mundo* Building, the Puerto Rican Athenæum (in the San Juan Municipality), Arecibo Municipal Hospital, the Maternity Clinic for Auxilio Mutuo Hospital and the State Penitentiary (at the Río Piedras Municipality). The Penitentiary was Roldán’s last known built work on the Island before his hasty and enigmatic exodus to New York.

Construction of the Puerto Rico Insular Penitentiary

The work on the Puerto Rico Insular Penitentiary began in 1927 under the direction of Antonio Higuera, project contractor. Although the original contract for building of the penitentiary was for \$460,000 (due to the budget cuts) and only contemplated three floors, the plans were changed to include an additional fourth floor after additional funds were made available that year. During the construction of the building completion was delayed by of the San Felipe Hurricane in 1928. However, the Government of Puerto Rico continued construction using prison labor and by 1930 the first three floors were completed. The next year a labor force of 173 prisoners that were lodged at night in the partially completed building executed work in the penitentiary and surrounding agricultural lands<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico to the Secretary of War, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 408.

<sup>11</sup> Report of the Attorney General of Porto Rico, (San Juan, August 14, 1931), 12.

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The year previous to the inauguration of the penitentiary (1932) the newly appointed Attorney General, Charles R. Winter reported the new penitentiary was fully equipped to accommodate the remaining 800 prisoners held in the old penitentiary. The Department of the Interior was working on making the facilities able to support the penal population and had not turned over the new penitentiary to the Department of Justice.

*However, 250 prisoners were lodged in that penitentiary who are working on the building and on the grounds and working in other Government agencies nearby. The Department began the work of preparing and planting the land around the new penitentiary in vegetables and fruit trees and at the present there are 50 cuerdas [acres] under cultivation and 30 additional cuerdas [acres] in process of cultivation. Up to the end of the fiscal year, 29,243 pounds of sugar, 10,779 pounds of yucca, 8,846 pounds of cabbage, 16,191 pounds of sweet potatoes, 3,223 pounds of tomatoes, 19,630 pounds of yautía, 991 pounds of beans, 858 pounds of peppers, 1,698 pounds of eggplant and other vegetables had been harvested and used in feeding the prisoners. The aim of the Department is to make the new penitentiary self-supporting.*

*The new penitentiary is fully equipped and ready to accommodate the remaining 800 prisoners who are now in the old penitentiary. As soon as the Department of the Interior turn the institution over to the Department of Justice, the prisoners will be transferred there.<sup>12</sup>*

In May 14, 1933 at the inauguration ceremony Governor James R. Beverly, Attorney General Charles E. Winter and Commissioner of the Interior Francisco Pons among other important public officials. In his speech, Winter addressed the two essential needs this novel penal system and its emblematic building would fulfill: humane reform and regeneration of the delinquent and the institution's self sufficiency: Winter expressed that according to sustained modern criminology theory, this institution will be considered a place of mental and physical regeneration for inmates where sound moral habits will be taught and academic, industrial and agricultural instruction are provided to those who need it. The Puerto Rico Insular Penitentiary, with a projected capacity of 1,500 inmates, was expected to reduce the economic burden on the Government by using prison labor harvest crops from the adjoining agricultural lands that would supply food for the nourishment of the inmates; and the manufacture of the majority of the

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<sup>12</sup> Report of the Attorney General of Porto Rico, (San Juan, 1932), 16.

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furniture, clothing, shoes and hats necessary for the inmates' use as well as other Governmental institutions such as hospitals, offices, and asylums.<sup>13</sup>

In his report (1933) Winter indicated the efforts being made to make the penitentiary able to meet the requirements of modern criminology and a self-supporting institution.

*This institution is equipped with modern devices to meet the exigencies of present criminology. It is located on an area of 112 acres of which approximately 70 acres will be dedicated to the raising of vegetables and other products. The main building, which consists of a four-story structure and other additional dependencies, including the land, cost the Insular Government the sum of \$733,822.82, and \$46,000 were expended in the purchase of equipment. With a view of making every possible economy all the necessary furniture was made by the prisoners at the Penitentiary shops. Every effort is being made to make this institution a self-supporting one. To achieve this end the prisoners are being taught industrial trades so that positions within the institution now filled by outside might be filled by them in the future. The farm products will be used in the maintenance of prisoners. This will substantially reduce the expenses incurred by the Government in the operation of the Penitentiary.*<sup>14</sup>



Roadway to main entrance of Penitentiary.  
c. 1939



Partial view of northern and western façade. c. 1939

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<sup>13</sup> "Fue inaugurada oficialmente la nueva Penitenciaría de Puerto Rico," *El Mundo*, 16 May 1933, 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Report of the Attorney General to the Governor of Puerto Rico for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1933*, (San Juan: negociado de Materiales, Imprenta y Transporte, 1933), 16, 18.

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The first floor of the building was dedicated to administration offices, two schoolrooms, psychiatric hall, workshops, dinning hall (with capacity of 500) kitchen and bathrooms. The institution's workshops were located in this floor as well. The 332 cells were distributed in the second and third floors while the 12 wards, isolated one from the others, were located in the fourth floor. The wards were reserved for the prisoners of good conduct.



Toy making shop. c 1939



Cabinet making shop. c. 1939

Penitentiary importance in the Penal System in Puerto Rico

The Penitentiary played an important role in the Penal System in Puerto Rico. It was through this institution that all the prisoners were evaluated and classified. Initially the prisoners were classified in first, second and third class (*Primera, Segunda* and *Tercera*) based on their good conduct. This system gave special benefits including wages for work done inside and outside the institution to those in the first class (the best behaved prisoners). Also, these were inmates could be sent to rural penal camps in Guavate (Cayey), Zarzal, Punta Lima (Naguabo), Limón (Mayagüez) Sabana Hoyos and La Pica (Jayuya). Later, this classification changed to reflect the institution's need to determine the security threat (maximum, medium and minimum) posed by inmates. Even today the Penitentiary continues serving as the main prisoner-processing center in the Puerto Rico penal system. In addition to the classification, individual evaluation of the criminal behavior of each inmate was attempted in order to implement an appropriate rehabilitation program. The Attorney General of Puerto Rico expressed this ideal in 1946,

*Our greatest endeavor is individual treatment of the offender. Each offender is a problem by itself and should be the object of careful study and investigation to determine*

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*the causes that led him to violate the law and to ascertain the method and treatment applicable to his case.<sup>15</sup>*

Medical and psychological support was also provided to the inmates in the new facilities. A physician and a minor surgeon and dentist were provided for the penal population. In 1933, the Attorney General sought legislation to establish a psycho-pathological clinic to diagnose mental conditions in individuals accused of a crime in order to fix criminal responsibility and for the examination and treatment of those inmates with criminal tendencies. Psychiatrist from the Psychiatric Hospital of Health Department provided assistance to the prisoners of the institutions until 1941 when the Legislature create the position of the Psychiatrist.

Although brigades of inmates continued the practice (from the Spanish Colonial period) of working in government construction project in the Island, most of the work was done within the institution<sup>16</sup>. As stated in the first article of Puerto Rico Insular Penitentiary's Regulations of 1933 (*Reglamento para el Regimen y Gobierno de la Penitenciaría de Puerto Rico en Río Piedras*) the institution will provide education in school, industrial and agricultural (general and vocational) to those who may need them so that they will be able to rejoin society as productive citizen once they have completed their term of incarceration. Considering the general illiteracy problem that was faced by a large part of the population in Puerto Rico at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was critical to use the education to help change of patterns of behavior within the inmate population to turn them away from criminal activity.

In the first year, vocational education in the Penitentiary was started with the following shops: photography and finger prints; carpentry; cabinet-work; barber shop; laundry; mechanic; electricity; plumbing; printing office and binding; hat-making; broom and brush manufacture; and cloth weaving<sup>17</sup>. The first crop from the farms was affected by the San Ciprián Hurricane (1932) that destroyed all the crops of trees, vegetables, and seedlings in the farm of the Penitentiary. After the hurricane a new crop, planted in 37 acres, provided a small harvest of sugar cane, fruits and vegetables. One year later (1934) a toy making shop was opened while the existing shops' production of articles ascended to \$19,410.26, while the value of the farm produce was of approximately \$4,500. Among products generated were the license plates for automobiles. Later in 1941 four rooms were dedicated within the institution to the general

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<sup>15</sup> Report of the Attorney General of Puerto Rico (1946), 62.

<sup>16</sup> Fernando Picó, *El día menos pensado*, (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1994), 113.

<sup>17</sup> "Fue inaugurada oficialmente la nueva Penitenciaría de Puerto Rico," *El Mundo*, 16 May 1933, 2.



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education of the prisoners and also “shops and an academy of music for the industrial and musical instruction”. Also that year the production of the manufactured articles by the shops ascended to \$35,335.62 while the value of farm production was approximately \$7,346.71.

In 1946 with help of the Department of Education and of Justice; education program in the Penitentiary was substantially improved when several recommendations made in 1945 by the Committee of Officers of the Department were carried. These included the appointment of a Principal, amplification of the library, organization of a curriculum committee by noteworthy teachers of the Island, and an extension of a course in Hygiene.<sup>18</sup>

The report (1946) praised the vocational education program as the most varied offered to the inmates of the Island because the establishment offered the best facilities in its physical plant, and because the sentences were longer.

*At this institution there are now, shops of woodwork, haberdashery, shoe-making, electricity, plumbing, broom and brush manufacture, typewriter repairing, duco painting toys, photography and binding; and the institution; moreover, has a farm where sugar cane, bananas and other minor crops are grown , for the consumption of the inmates... The total output of the shops in shoe-making, woodwork, haberdashery, toys and brooms amounted nearly to \$37,848.81, and that of the farm to \$9,997.48, in vegetables and poultry.<sup>19</sup>*

Inmates interested in acquiring some training at the shops and farms could register in learning those trades that would help making a living upon their discharge.

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<sup>18</sup> Report of the Attorney General of Puerto Rico (1946), 38

<sup>19</sup> Report of the Attorney General of Puerto Rico, (1946), 44.

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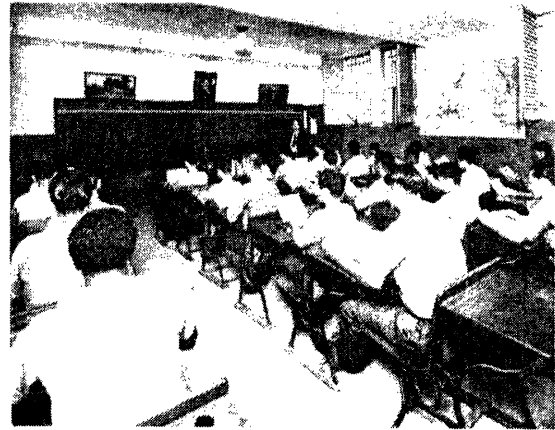
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Prisoners tending the Penitentiary farm



Classroom in the Penitentiary, c. 1939

In the 1950s and 1960s the education efforts continued as the education level of the inmates improved diplomas were given for ninth grade and fourth year of high school<sup>20</sup>.

The period of significance for this property is limited to the 1953 to conform to National Register 50 year cut off date for those properties without exceptional importance.

The institution in crisis in 1950

The Penitentiary faced severe crowding problems by 1950 when the inmate population reached a total of 2,648. The large population could not all be employed in jobs in the work brigades in government projects or in the shops or farms of the institution. On October 25, 1950 there were 1,267 inmates employed (997 in the institution and 270 outside) and 1,184 unemployed that were unemployed. All of the cells were filled to capacity and even 400 prisoners had to sleep in the hallways or in the platforms of the stairways<sup>21</sup>. This situation coupled with the lack of sufficient personnel led to one of the largest and famous escapes in the penal history of Puerto Rico. After a strong riot one hundred ten prisoners escaped the Penitentiary. Since this escape occurred two days before the Nationalist insurrection of 1950 and so it became popularly associated to the Two years later (1952) there was a decrease in the population thanks to “the annexation of a new

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<sup>20</sup> Fernando Picó, *El día menos pensado*, (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1994), 112.

<sup>21</sup> Helen V. Tooker, “El Presidio tiene 4 serias deficiencias”, *El Mundo*, 29 October 1950, 11.

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building with a capacity for 400 inmates, the transfer of more inmates to camps, and by wider use of the parole system”<sup>22</sup>.

However, it is indicative of the problems faced by the administration with the increasing prisoner population that by 1956 the Secretary of Justice reported that the shops converted the carpentry, brooms, weaving, polishing and cabinetwork workshops as dormitories to house 400 inmates. Also, it indicated that the shops converted to office spaces and visitors’ room<sup>23</sup>.

By 1970 the prisoner rehabilitation policy suffered the impact of an increased crime rate that affected the Island. As a result in this criminality rate due to primarily the drug traffic, the Government of Puerto Rico imposed longer prison terms, which resulted in doubling the inmate population.

Architectural Importance of the Penitentiary

The new prison displayed a novel architectural expression that was used effectively to represent the beginning of a new period in the penal history of Puerto Rico as well as the United States. In his speech for the inauguration, Commissioner of the Interior Francisco Pons describe it as a “modern” building in which unnecessary ornament is suppressed and structural lines are employed in every possible way in order to achieve an gracious whole. The austere fortress-type building emphasizing punishment and confinement, is softened by the use of highly decorative architectural elements such as, terra cotta tiles and relieves, glazed ceramic tiles and open interior spaces, expressing the concern for the body and mind rehabilitation. It is precisely by means of contrasts that Roldán achieves to make the new prison building representative of the change in philosophy of the new penal system. The building, is an early example of the Art Deco style, popularized in the *Exposition Internationale Des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* held in Paris, France in 1925, creatively combined with Neo Moorish elements, typical in Roldán’s work. It was a completely fresh and modern type of building and construction in Puerto Rico at that time in the outskirts of the urban area of San Juan.

As stated above, the Penitentiary’s design was greatly influenced by the Art Deco movement like most of architect Roldán’s latter works. The imagery of this movement, popularized around the

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<sup>22</sup> Report of the Attorney General of Puerto Rico, (1952), 88.

<sup>23</sup> Informe del Secretarios de Justicia, (San Juan, 1956), 37.

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world by the Paris Exposition of 1925, which strongly emphasized the future rather than the past, was quite theatrical and, in fact, adopted by the movie industry. Art Deco became a mediator or compromise between conservative and radical design. Streamlined curves, contours, and ziggurat like iconography were employed as a sculptural and expressive device that affected the building's massing and ornamental treatment. The State Penitentiary building contains details in the overall massing which resemble the type of treatment used in other Art Deco structures. The repetitive nature of the structural vertical bays as expressed in the exterior elevations reminds the viewer of industrial structures. Fenestration, achieved through deep cuts into the massing of the building, is combined with the use of recessed surfaces creating rich contrasts of light and shadow. Equally, the series of layers or planes receding in the corners of the towers and principal vestibule and the more solid volume of the facade in opposition to the transparent interior arcades and patio reinforces the resemblance of the structure to a fortress. This similarity is further delivered as a metaphorical image of the intent to create a more "Puerto Rican" architectural expression by adding the corner sentry boxes reminiscent of Old San Juan's fortifications ---Spanish guard posts. The incorporation of large scale and imposing human figures in the entrance portico, typical of Art Deco architecture, further highlights the large monumental scale of the overall massing of the Penitentiary. Architect Roldán achieves additional contrast by applying ornamental decorations like glazed ceramic tiles with Moorish-influenced geometrical patterns to the structural elements of the building in the same manner he does in other works.

Its monumental image and prominence, historic character and significance have not been impaired nor diminished enduring seven decades later, as the unique building it was intended to be, and definitely a historic landmark.

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**GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Verbal Boundary Description

See attached site map.

Boundary Justification

The Puerto Rico Insular Penitentiary's original 112 acre extension has been reduced by the construction of new correctional facilities (where it had its agricultural lands) and the expansion urban sprawl that occurred in the 1950s. The composition of the Insular Penitentiary at its period of significance (1933-1953) with its main building and its agricultural lands has been altered by these new developments. For this reason only the main building is being nominated. Excluded are the three buildings constructed between 1979 and 1983 (adjunct to or in the immediate vicinity of the main building) and the fence facing northern façade are considered non-contributing.

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Photographer: Alexander Fernández Bales  
Date: May, 1996  
Location of negatives: Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office

Description of Photographs:

1. Floor plan and situation map of the Penitentiary.
2. View of the western façade looking southeast.
3. View of the entrance portico looking southeast.
4. View of the northwestern corner looking northeast.
5. View of the tower in the northern façade looking east.
6. Close up of the sentry box observation station looking east.
7. Drawing depicting details of the western façade.
8. Close up of the text in the panel in the entrance portico looking southeast.
9. View of the interior patio looking northwest.
10. Close up of interior courtyard decoration looking southwest.