

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

received JAN 07 1988

date entered FEB 10 1988

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic U.S. Custom House, Ponce

and or common Aduana de Ponce

2. Location

street & number Calle Bonaire at Calle Aduana  
Playa de Ponce n/a not for publication

city, town Ponce n/a vicinity of

state Puerto Rico code PR county code 113

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	n/a in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name United States Customs Service

street & number 1301 Constitution Ave., NW

city, town Washington n/a vicinity of state DC 20229

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Centro Judicial

street & number n/a

city, town Hato Rey state Puerto Rico

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Ponce Architectural Survey has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date 1984  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records State Historic Preservation Office

city, town San Juan state Puerto Rico

## 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The oldest customhouse in Puerto Rico, this Spanish period building was remodeled by the United States in 1924, with small changes since then. With massive masonry walls and large arched entrances to a central courtyard, this two-story building reflects its Spanish origins, while the false partial gables with Spanish barrel tiles are typical of the United States Spanish-Revival work of the 1920s. Located in the Playa de Ponce, the waterfront and port of Ponce, two miles from the center of this second-largest city in Puerto Rico, the customhouse fully occupies a small city block. Its principal facade faces Bonaire Street and looks toward the ocean across a grassed area containing a Coast Guard beacon. It is located in an area of traditional warehouses, commercial buildings, mostly one-story and many from the Spanish period. There is a sidewalk around the four sides of the building, with the one on Bonaire Street wider and providing three mature trees.

The building is a simple rectangle 97' wide x 83' deep. The plan is typical of Spanish construction, with interconnected rooms around the outside perimeter that also open to a central courtyard. There is a wide arched vehicular passage leading from the front through the courtyard to the rear exit from the building. The original courtyard has been partially closed in on the first floor only on each side of the passageway to create two additional rooms. Between the front rooms and the courtyard, a fine masonry staircase rises on the left side off the central passage. The second floor repeats the first-floor layout of perimeter rooms with later modifications, but includes the full extent of the original courtyard or patio in the center. Originally there may have been a roofed courtyard gallery for circulation around the courtyard. At present, there are two short modern gallery sections bridging between the quarry-tile-paved roofs of the infilled first-floor courtyard areas. At the head of the stairs is a large public lobby that opens to the courtyard and to the front of the building. There is also a small circular iron stair to the roof from the southeast corner of the second-floor courtyard.

The facades are similar with regular door and window openings and with small balconies to the second-floor openings. There is a small partial false gable roof of Spanish barrel red-clay tiles around the four sides and around the courtyard. On the front (south) facade, facing the ocean, there are five bays with a large elliptical arch-headed passageway large enough for vehicular

See continuation sheet # 7.1

# 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below		
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> military
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> politics/government
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
			<input type="checkbox"/> science
			<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
			<input type="checkbox"/> social/humanitarian
			<input type="checkbox"/> theater
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates

Builder/Architect

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The United States Custom House, Playa de Ponce, Ponce, Puerto Rico, is the oldest extant customhouse in Puerto Rico. Constructed in 1841-42, the adobe building of the Spanish era was remodeled by the United States in 1924. It is historically and architecturally significant, not only for its antiquity and its importance in the Spanish period of customs administration in Puerto Rico, for which it is unique among U.S. Customs Service properties, but also for the role it played in the transitional phase of the American customs service in Puerto Rico, from 1898 to 1930. This period is bracketed at one end by the cession on December 10, 1898, of the island of Puerto Rico to the United States by Spain and on the other by the completion in 1930 of the major building and rehabilitation program undertaken by the U.S. Customs Service following World War I. The Ponce Custom House is an important example of the Spanish-Colonial architecture outside of San Juan Antigua.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When the Ponce Custom House was opened in 1842, customs administrative offices and warehouses were located on the first floor, while the second floor was devoted to dwelling units for the director of the customhouse and for the Port of Ponce captain. In 1845 the customhouse survived a terrible fire that destroyed most of the Ponce port vicinity.<sup>1</sup> During the Spanish-American occupation, General Nelson A. Miles established the headquarters of the American army in the customhouse, from which he directed the invasion of the southern part of Puerto Rico. Salvador Brau, noted Puerto Rican historian, served as the head appraiser for the Spanish customs service in Ponce; after the American occupation, he was appointed by General Miles as Customs Administrator of Puerto Rico, a post he held for many years.<sup>2</sup>

During the period of significance, Ponce was the second most populous city in Puerto Rico, with a population of about 70,000, and for most of the period, the second busiest port, after San Juan.<sup>3</sup>

Following a major earthquake in 1918, the U.S. Customs Service undertook a comprehensive program of rebuilding and new construction. The remodeling may have been under the supervision of Albert B. Nichols, architect and inspector of buildings in the Supervising Architect of the Treasury's San Juan field office. A sheet of drawings, unsigned and undated, for the remodeling are in the San Juan Custom House files, and it is felt that they may be Nichols' work. Three other sheets signed by Rafael Carmoega, Chief architect of the insular government and presumed to date from August of 1930, exist in the Public Building Service records.<sup>4</sup>

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet #

See Multiple Property Nomination: U.S. Custom Houses in Puerto Rico.

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreege of nominated property less than 1 acre

Quadrangle name Playa de Ponce, P.R.

Quadrangle scale 1:20,000

UTM References

A 

1	9	7	5	2	0	0	0	1	9	8	9	6	6	0
Zone			Easting					Northing						

B 

Zone			Easting					Northing						

C 

Zone			Easting					Northing						

D 

Zone			Easting					Northing						

E 

Zone			Easting					Northing						

F 

Zone			Easting					Northing						

G 

Zone			Easting					Northing						

H 

Zone			Easting					Northing						

Verbal boundary description and justification

See continuation sheet #10.1.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state n/a code n/a county n/a code n/a

state code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title James C. Massey, Exec. Vice Pres., and Shirley Maxwell, Associate

organization National Preservation Institute date July 27, 1987

street & number National Building Museum  
Judiciary Square, N.W. telephone 202-393-0038

city or town Washington state DC 20004

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

*see letter dated  
11/18/87 for signed  
signature*


As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

Federal  
State Historic Preservation Officer signature 

Assistant Secretary of the Treasury (Management), date 10/20/87  
title Department of the Treasury

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

 date 2/10/88  
Keeper of the National Register

Attest: \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

Chief of Registration

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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U.S. Custom House, Ponce, P.R

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7.1 ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION (cont.)

traffic. It is architecturally marked only by a plain, flat frame painted differently from the body of the building. There are plain board, double doors with a smaller pedestrian port in the right door. In the elliptical arch there is a simple fanlight window. Flanking the arched entrance are two large high windows on each side. The windows are two-leaf casements with exterior solid and louvered combination paneled shutters. Metal grilles are at each window. The walls have a simple low projecting base course, and the first floor walls are marked by horizontal incised coursing, all in stucco. There is a large molded string course between stories and on the second floor, five door openings, each with double-leaf doors that are half sash, which replaced the original louvered and paneled shutter combinations. Over the doors are sashed transoms, although the right group has been replaced by airconditioners. Each opening has a decorative wrought-iron balcony with scroll support dating from the U.S. remodeling of the building. Previous to these wrought-iron balconies, the building had cast-iron railings. "U.S. Customs" is lettered over the central window. At the top is a large double masonry molded cornice, surmounted by the small false partial gable in Spanish tiles, both from 1924. On the front only, there are three flag poles on the roof, and a large antenna system. On each side of the first floor passage entry is an alarm box and a plain light fixture.

The rear facade is identical to the front, except that the right first-floor opening is a plain board door rather than a window and that some of the second-floor doors still retain their original louvered and paneled shutter systems and have not had glass inserted.

The side facades are similar to the front and rear, except for the absence of the arched passageway. Both sides are in five bays, all windows, on the first floor, with the exception of a door on the east side. The second-floor openings and balconies match the front with airconditioners generally mounted in the transoms. On the west side one second-floor door has a modern boxed-out bar grille around it.

Construction of the original 1841-42 building is traditional heavy masonry walls two feet thick. One report cites the wall construction as brick, but it may also be mixed brick, stone and rubble, all plastered smooth both inside and out, for both exterior and interior partition walls. The ceilings are high: 15' on the first floor, 14' on the second. There are several large structural arch openings in the interior masonry walls. The exposed floor joists are heavy 4x10 beaded edge ausubo wood members laid 24" on center. These old joists support modern concrete slab second floor laid over wire mesh and composition board forms laid during the 20th century remodeling. Also added at this point was reinforced concrete framing adjoining the old walls on the first floor. It is now in deteriorated condition, while the original walls appear generally sound.

See continuation sheet #7.2.

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## 7.2. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION (cont.)

On the interior, the central passage extends from front to rear through the open courtyard, paved in quarry tiles. On the left side at the front of the building, are two Immigration and Naturalization offices. On the right front are two Department of Agriculture offices. Behind the offices on the left side of the passage is a fine enclosed stair with two runs and a landing. The remaining first-floor rooms are storage rooms and a shop with concrete floors, several 8' wide masonry openings with slat fanlights (sol trancos). Storage room windows are solid vertical board shutters without sash and with outside metal grilles. Two rooms flanking the passage in the center fill in an original part of the courtyard in a manner similar to the older construction.

On the second floor, the stair case from the entry passage opens on a large lobby from a two-arched staircase arcade. The lobby extends from the front back to the courtyard and is floored with diagonally laid gray and white marble tiles. The walls, as are old walls in the building, are plastered, and the ceiling has exposed 4x10 beaded ausubo wood beams. Old double four-paneled doors and a transom open to the courtyard. The window in the stairhall has been filled in with glass brick.

The offices on the second floor generally have been modernized with acoustical tile ceilings, fluorescent fixtures and vinyl floors. The old exterior doors remain, generally with glass replacing the shuttered sections, except for several windows on the rear lavatories and kitchen. Air conditioners are mounted in the transoms over the doors. On the southeast corner is a large inspector's office, with a counter for public business. It appears that some old masonry partitions have been removed or altered to create this space. Along the east side, small rooms have been partitioned off and in the rear northeast corner is the large Port Director's office, in its original configuration. Across the north rear are a men's lavatory, a women's lavatory and a kitchen, all with black and white floor tiles. The kitchen appears to be original to the building and has traces of the original masonry cooking stove and flue. The left rear north corner room now used for training is also floored in old black and white tiles. These rooms and others on the west side are believed to have comprised the old Port Director's apartment, although its exact extent and whether it extended to the south front is not known. One source (an old draft NR nomination) suggests that the original second floor was totally dedicated to two apartments during the Spanish period, with the customs collector residing on one side and the port captain on the other. It is thought, however, that during the U.S. period, it was more likely to have been used only by the Collector of Customs. The west side is partitioned off into offices with an interior circulation hallway and the southwest front is also partitioned into offices.

See continuation sheet #7.3.

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7.3 . ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION (cont.)

In the San Juan custom house files, there is one large sheet of remodeling plans for the Ponce Customhouse, possibly by Albert B. Nichols, although not signed. In 1985 Customs Service commissioned a set of fifteen measured drawings by architect Rene Acosta, Hato Rey, P.R. which are reproduced in a report by the architect on the rehabilitation needs of the Ponce Custom House. (Feasibility Study for the Rehabilitation of the U.S. Ponce Custom House, Ponce, P.R.)

8.1 . Historical Background (cont.)

The Ponce Custom House was designated an historic customhouse by the Secretary of the Treasury in 1972.<sup>5</sup> Despite its 1924 remodeling, it remains an important example of Spanish Colonial architecture outside San Juan Antigua.

FOOTNOTES

1. Abelardo Gonzalez Aviles, Draft National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "U.S. Customs, Ponce." March 15, 1984. For Centro Investigaciones Folkoricas de Puerto Rico, Inc. Ponce, P.R.
2. Eugene T. Rossides, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury. Remarks at Ponce, Puerto Rico, March 23, 1972. Department of the Treasury News Bureau of Customs News Release.
3. Hearing before the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, Sixty-eighth Congress, First Session on H.R. 6143, A Bill to Purchase Ground, Erect and Repair Buildings for Customhouse, Offices, and Warehouses in Puerto Rico. January 31, 1924.
4. National Archives, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Rec. Grp. 121; Box 855; "Ponce, P.R., Custom House"
5. Rossides. op. cit.

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10.1. Geographical Data:

Verbal Boundary Description:

The property is bounded by Calle Comercio, Calle Aduana, Calle Bonaire, and an unnamed street on the east side of the building, which occupies the entire described block.

Justification:

The building occupies the entire block and is Customs property, providing a natural boundary. Although there is a grassed area between the Custom House and the waterfront, it is occupied by the Coast Guard and is not related to the Customs theme in Ponce.



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PONCE

U.S. Custom House, Ponce, P.R.  
Calle Bonaire, Ponce Playa, Ponce, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
General view, looking northwest.  
Photo #1

U.S. Custom House, Ponce, P.R.  
Calle Bonaire, Ponce Playa, Ponce, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
General view, looking southeast.  
Photo #2

U.S. Custom House, Ponce, P.R.  
Calle Bonaire, Ponce Playa, Ponce, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
Main entrance, looking north.  
Photo #3

U.S. Custom House, Ponce, P.R.  
Calle Bonaire, Ponce Playa, Ponce, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
Passage and courtyard, looking north.  
Photo #4

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U.S. Custom House, Ponce, P.R.  
Calle Bonaire, Ponce Playa, Ponce, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
First floor, east side, store room,  
looking southwest.  
Photo #5

U.S. Custom House, Ponce, P.R.  
Calle Bonaire, Ponce Playa, Ponce, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
Second floor stair hall and stair arcade,  
looking northwest.  
Photo #6

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SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 88000073

Date Listed: 2/10/88

US Custom House  
Property Name

Ponce  
County

PR  
State

US Custom Houses in Puerto Rico MPS  
Multiple Name

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This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Amy Schlager  
Signature of the Keeper

2/10/88  
Date of Action

=====  
Amended Items in Nomination:

The specific date of this property as referred to in the text is 1924 and the Builder/Architect is "Unknown", or possibly Albert Nichols.

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DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)