Puerto Rico had been inhabited for centuries by Taíno and other Arawak Indians when Christopher Columbus discovered the island on his second voyage to the New World and claimed it for Spain in 1493. The island is strategically located in the Caribbean and in 1539, King Charles V of Spain authorized construction of fortifications to protect the port of San Juan and control entry to the harbor. The fortifications consisted of a major defensive wall (muralla) connecting and forming the bases of a series of defensive structures—La Fortaleza, Castillo San Felipe del Morro, and Castillo San Cristóbal. Designed following well-established European military principles, La Muralla de San Juan measured 3 miles. The San Juan fortifications defended the Spanish city from international attacks for 300 years until the Spanish-American War when U.S. warships shelled the port in a day-long bombardment. Six months later, the war ended, and Spain transferred Puerto Rico to the United States under of the Treaty of Paris.

Recognized as a National Historic Site in 1949, the San Juan fortifications remained a U.S. military post until 1961 when the properties came under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service (NPS). The San Juan National Historic Site—San Felipe del Morro, San Cristóbal, Fortín San Juan de la Cruz (on an adjacent island), and portions of the muralla—is exemplary in the use of historic construction methods of European colonial military architecture in the Caribbean, and, along with La Fortaleza (the San Juan Commonwealth Governor’s Residence) were inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1983.

THE PROJECT
Centuries of hurricanes, earthquakes, military bombardments, and wave erosion caused serious deterioration of the walls and their foundations. Anticipating the celebration of the Columbus Quincentennial in 1992, the NPS proposed a major program to stabilize and repair the masonry fortification walls.

THE 106 PROCESS
NPS was the federal agency carrying out this project and responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on...
For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to www.achp.gov

THE SUCCESS
After years of inappropriate interventions, today the NPS is committed to an ongoing effort to understand the historic walls, mortars, and plaster coats through laboratory investigations and use of modern technologies, thereby developing case-specific solutions. Instead of reacting to failures, the NPS has a maintenance methodology for the differing wall typologies to preserve the centuries-old masonry fortifications of the World Heritage site. The San Juan National Historic Site preservation program has been taught and used internationally to assist historic site stewards in understanding the centuries-old resources and how to use modern technologies to maintain them.