

Isla Caja de Muertos Light
(Faro de la Isla de Caja de Muertos)
on Caja de Muertos Island
Ponce Harbor Vicinity
Puerto Rico

HAER No. PR-17

HAER
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11-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Luis Morales, August 1978

- PR-17-1 Photocopy of book illustration, undated ca. 1898; from Album de Puerto Rico, VIEW LOOKING SOUTH
- PR-17-2 Photocopy of measured drawing, ca. 1882; SITE PLAN OF CAJA DE MUERTOS ISLAND
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Location: On the summit of Isla Caja de Muertos, outside of Ponce Harbor, Puerto Rico
Position: 17° 53.7' N - 60° 31.5' W

Date of Erection: 1887

Present Owner: U.S. Department of Commerce
U.S. Coast Guard

Original Owner: Central Lighthouse Commission
Colonial Public Works Office
Harbor and Port Section
Government of Spain

Present Use: Unoccupied

Significance: The light was built in 1887 as a 3rd order lighthouse. It stands somberly at the highest point of a rocky, desertic island whose name describes its natural coffin shape. The structure has an unusual Lorraine cross double-arm "T" type shape which makes it unique within the lighthouse system.

The main entrance of the structure, 24.6 x 15.6 x 5.9 mts., opened to a small vestibule, 3.9 x 1.5 mts. The vestibule in itself is a section of a 12 x 1 mt. long corridor which led to the keeper's quarters. The entrance to the tower, which has a 3.9 mts. square base located in the center of the structure, is across the main entrance. On both sides of the tower base there were two 4.74 x 4.55 mts. rooms, one which served as the engineer's room and the other as a storeroom. North of the tower base the oil room, 3.6 x 1.5 mts., was located. Therefore, from west to east a structural connection is formed by the storeroom, tower base, oil room, engineer's room, and corridor. This section links the keeper's quarters. These were arranged into two parallel north to south oriented sections, identical in dimensions.

In order of disposition, first, came the living room 4.9 x 3.4 mts., followed by two sleeping rooms, 3.5 x 3.5 mts. each, and a kitchen-dining area, also 3.5 x 3.4 mts. The last three rooms connected to a 8.9 x 1 mt. long corridor which reached the bathrooms. Each living room had three windows; the kitchens two; the dormitories, storeroom, and engineer's quarters one each.

The tower is a massive cylindrical structure, 19 mts. high - including the lantern - and 2.5 mts. inside diameter. It terminates in rectangular bracket-supporters for the cement circular gallery and cast-iron balustrade that encloses the cast-iron, copper, and glass 3rd order lantern. A cast-iron spiral stairway also led to the lantern that had vertical bars.

The original illuminating apparatus was a 1885, lenticular 3rd order Sautter, Lemonnier & Cie. lens. The central drum had 1 mt. in diameter. It had 6 panels of which 3 were flashing ones. In each panel of the central drum there were 7 elements; each panel above the central drum had 11 prisms, and those below had 4. The flashes were produced by the central revolving drum mounted on a chariot activated by a clock work system. The clock cord descended through the central column in the stairway. The mechanism was protected by a circular iron and glass case. The original light characteristic showed a white flash every 3 seconds and had an 18 miles range. In 1923 the light characteristics were changed. In 1945 the light was electrified and changed into an automatic unwatched light which exhibited the original characteristics. The structure was abandoned and boarded up. The lens was replaced by a 500 mm. lens. No record has been found to indicate that major structural changes or alterations were ever introduced in the dwelling. The decorative elements are purely neo-classic, particularly the cornice and pediment.

Faro de la Isla de Caja de Muertos is a major light and a unique architectural structure within the Spanish lighthouse system. It is only slightly similar to Isla Culebrita Light, but is in itself, a major example of a variation within the central theme of utilitarian functions and aesthetic interpretation.

Transmitted by:

Kevin Murphy, Historian HAER, August 1984; from the National Register Nomination prepared by Dr. Benjamin Nistal-Moret, August 1979.