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**Abstract:** Shrieking parrots, thundering waves, and other wild noises of the  
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**THE HISTORY: Caribbean Commonwealth**

Shrieking parrots, thundering waves, and other wild noises of the forest and ocean were probably the only sounds on Puerto Rico 3,000 years ago. No human voices echoed through the island's valleys or drifted across its beaches.

No one is really sure when the first people landed on Puerto Rico. But at least 1,000 years ago, American Indians canoed north from what later became Venezuela. Island by island, the Indians traveled farther until they had explored and settled many Caribbean islands of the West Indies.

The first Indians to live on Puerto Rico were part of a group known as the Arawak. They formed beautiful pots from clay and painted them red and white. The Arawak made their homes on the island until around A.D. 600. Then they disappeared, although no one is sure why. Some experts believe that they died or fled war or disease.

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By A.D. 1000, another group of people called the Taino were living on Puerto Rico and other islands of the West Indies. The Taino set up villages ruled by a cacique, or chief. The Indians built round houses by lining up the trunks of palm trees in a circle, then topping them with cone-shaped roofs. At night the Taino slept in hammocks. During the day, they hunted, fished, and farmed.

One of the Taino's most important crops was the yucca plant. The Indians ground the roots of this plant into flour for making bread called cassava. Taino farmers also grew corn, potatoes, beans, peanuts, peppers, cotton, and tobacco. For meat the Taino hunted iguanas and small, furry animals called hutias. Along the coasts, fishers gathered sea turtles, clams, snails, and a variety of fish to eat.

The Taino called Puerto Rico Borinquén, which means "land of the brave lord" in their language. And Taino, their name for themselves, means "gentle." As the name suggests, the Taino were peaceful people.

But in the 1400s, their peace came to an end. The Taino's way of life was destroyed with the arrival of two new groups — the Carib Indians and the Spaniards. Like the Taino, the Caribs came to the West Indies from South America. They settled on nearby islands and frequently attacked the Taino — sometimes capturing Taino women and destroying villages.

Spain laid claim to Puerto Rico in 1493, when explorer Christopher Columbus landed on the island. Fifteen years later, Juan Ponce de Leon established a Spanish colony, or settlement, on Puerto Rico.

At first, the Taino welcomed the Spaniards. But the Spanish colonists forced the Taino — even children — to work long hours without pay. Taino dug for gold in Spanish mines on the island, planted and harvested the colonists' crops, and built roads and houses for them.

The Taino wanted to get rid of the Spaniards, but they had to be careful. They had never met people so different. And the colonists carried powerful weapons that were new to the Taino. Even so, the Indians began fighting back.

Although the Taino outnumbered the Spanish settlers, the Indians carried only stone axes into battle. The axes were useless against the Spaniards' powerful swords and guns. Ponce de León and his men killed hundreds of Taino, including Gueybaná, one of the most powerful Taino caciques.

After the battle, few Taino remained on Puerto Rico. Many had already died from overwork or from diseases brought by the Spaniards. Others joined their old enemies, the Caribs, who were fighting the Spaniards on nearby islands. But a few Taino stayed and married Spanish settlers.

Without the Taino to do their work, the Spaniards shipped people from Africa to Puerto Rico. The Spaniards forced the Africans to plant and harvest sugarcane, the colony's most important crop. Like the Taino before them, the African workers were slaves. By 1531 just over 400 Spanish settlers and more than 2,000 African slaves were living on Puerto Rico.

The Spanish king allowed Puerto Rican settlers to trade only with Spain. This trade made the port city of San Juan an important stop for Spanish ships. But after Spain conquered other parts of America, Spanish ships did not stop very often on Puerto Rico. The traders could make more money from other colonies, which had more gold and silver.

But Puerto Rican colonists still needed food, clothes, tools, and other supplies to survive. So they illegally traded sugar, ginger, and other farm products in exchange for supplies from the French, British, and Dutch ships that anchored in Puerto Rico's ports.

The French, British, and Dutch wanted more from Puerto Rico than just sugar and ginger. They wanted some of the land that Columbus and other explorers had claimed for Spain. They also hoped to destroy Spain's power in the West Indies. In the 1500s and 1600s, France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands attacked Puerto Rico again and

again.

To protect the port of San Juan, Spanish soldiers helped the colonists build a fortress overlooking San Juan Bay. Finished in 1540, the fortress was called La Fortaleza. Soon after, the Spaniards began building a second fort at San Juan named El Morro. Even with the new forts, Spain nearly lost Puerto Rico to the British and the Dutch. But the Spaniards proved stronger, and by 1625 they had driven away the attackers.

Because Spain was a Catholic country, the Catholic Church played an important part in the lives of Puerto Rico's colonists. Monks and nuns ran the churches, cared for the sick, and taught reading, writing, and religion to some of the colonists' children.

During the mid-1700s, Spain's leaders encouraged settlers to move to Puerto Rico by giving away free land. Many Spaniards accepted this offer, and the colony's population began to grow rapidly. By 1765 nearly 45,000 people — including 5,037 slaves — lived in Puerto Rico's 24 towns. But the island still had only two schools. And because few roads led to outlying areas, only 5 percent of the land could be farmed. So the king of Spain ordered new schools and roads to be built. In addition, San Juan's forts were strengthened.

By the late 1700s, Puerto Rico's population had grown to more than 150,000 people. Some of the new residents had arrived with the Spanish navy and stayed to live on the island. Others came to find work. Some newcomers were former slaves who had run away from nearby Caribbean islands owned by other European countries.

With a mixture of Spanish, Taino, and African roots, Puerto Rican culture was changing. Taino words had crept into the Spanish language used by Puerto Ricans. African traditions and Caribbean music were also part of the Puerto Rican way of life. And Puerto Rico had become wealthier than it had ever been before.

Many Puerto Ricans were unhappy with Spanish rule. They wanted more control over their lives than the king of Spain permitted. Merchants sought freedom to trade legally with other nations. Many people wanted to lower the taxes they paid to Spain. Most Puerto Ricans wanted the freedom to elect their own government officials. And they wished for better schools and hospitals and for more roads and bridges.

Around 1800 the countries of Spain, France, and Great Britain fought each other often. Because of these wars, the Spanish government did not have enough ships and soldiers to control its colonies. Spain began to allow Puerto Rico to trade with other nations, including the United States. The Spanish king also granted Puerto Ricans other freedoms.

In 1815 the king began to encourage people from outside Spain to settle in Puerto Rico. The new settlers, or immigrants, were given free land and did not have to pay taxes. This meant they could afford to plant vast fields of coffee beans, cotton, and cacao beans (for making chocolate) on plantations, or large farms.

The new plantation owners needed more and more slaves to work in their fields. By 1850 the number of African slaves on the island had risen to 51,000. On neighboring islands, such as the British West Indies and the French Antilles, slavery had been outlawed. Puerto Ricans who opposed slavery tried to persuade the Spanish government to free Puerto Rico's slaves too. In 1868 Spain freed the children of Puerto Rican slaves. Spain ended slavery altogether in 1873, paying plantation owners for their loss of free laborers.

In the late 1800s, Spain still did not allow Puerto Ricans to elect their own government officials. But in 1897, Puerto Ricans finally won the right to vote. The next year, they elected Luis Muñoz Rivera to lead the new government.

Just as the new government took office, Spain clashed with the United States and the Spanish-American War began. Within a few months, U.S. forces landed on the southern coast of Puerto Rico. On December 10, 1898, Spain surrendered Puerto Rico to the United States.

The United States government gave Puerto Ricans even less freedom than Spain had given them. At first the U.S. military occupied the island and ran the Puerto Rican government. But by 1917, Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens. That same year, the United States began allowing the people of Puerto Rico to elect some of their own government officials.

U.S. companies controlled much of the island's economy. For example, American businesses owned most of the island's sugarcane plantations and the mills that made the cane into sugar.

The companies paid very low wages to Puerto Rican workers. The sugar was sent to the U.S. mainland, where it was sold for huge profits — which benefited the companies but not the island's workers. Puerto Ricans earned so little money that by the 1920s, Puerto Rico was known as the Poorhouse of the Caribbean.

To improve the economy, the Puerto Rican government began a program in 1947 called Operation Bootstrap. Through this program, the government supplied more electricity so new factories could open.

Operation Bootstrap offered loans to businesses and encouraged foreign companies to move to Puerto Rico, creating more jobs for Puerto Ricans. Because of Operation Bootstrap, business grew and Puerto Ricans made more money.

At the same time, the U.S. government permitted Puerto Ricans to choose their own governor. In 1948 Luis Munoz Marin, the son of Muñoz Rivera, was elected to the post. Munoz Marin and several groups in Puerto Rico worked to reshape Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States. They also wrote a constitution, or set of basic laws, for Puerto Rico.

On July 1, 1952, the U.S. government approved the constitution for Puerto Rico. On July 25, Puerto Rico became the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. But the new constitution and official name did not permanently settle questions about the future of the island.

Since the 1950s, Puerto Ricans have disagreed over what is best for the island. Some Puerto Ricans have wanted their island to become a nation independent of the United States. Others have argued that Puerto Rico should remain a commonwealth. Still others have favored making Puerto Rico a U.S. state.

In November 1993, Puerto Ricans voted on which of the three options they preferred. With most of its voters participating, Puerto Rico supported the commonwealth choice over the options of statehood or independence. In 1998 Puerto Ricans once again went to the polls to vote on the commonwealth's independence. Although about 46 percent voted in favor of statehood, 50 percent were undecided, so Puerto Rico remained a commonwealth.

As a commonwealth, Puerto Rico hopes to keep its ties to the United States, while preserving a strong sense of Puerto Rican culture. And Puerto Ricans will continue to discuss the best ways to improve life on their island.

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PHOTO (COLOR): The Arawak, who probably disappeared around A.D. 600, left little behind. Some of their work, such as these rock carvings, remains on islands throughout

the West Indies.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): In Taino villages, houses made from palm tree trunks surrounded central squares.

PHOTO (COLOR): Researchers discovered this Taino ballpark (below) at the town of Utuado. In the game played here, players used any part of their bodies, except their hands, to keep the ball in the air.

PHOTO (COLOR): The Taino made drawings on rocks uncovered near the ballpark (above).

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The Taino delivered their crops to a village storage center after each harvest.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Skillful warriors, the Carib Indians fought many wars against the Taino.

PHOTO (COLOR): A year after Christopher Columbus (holding flag) first arrived in America, he landed on the island of Puerto Rico.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Enslaved Indians search for gold in one of Puerto Rico's streams, as Spanish guards keep watch.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Between 1509 and 1512, Juan Ponce de León governed Puerto Rico.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Slave traders traveled to Africa and kidnapped people to sell as slaves to Spanish landowners in Puerto Rico.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The British, led by Sir Francis Drake, attack a Spanish treasure ship. Great Britain wanted the riches the Spaniards gained from Puerto Rico and other American colonies. In 1595 Drake and his men unsuccessfully attacked El Morro.

PHOTO (COLOR): El Morro was the strongest fort in the West Indies for hundreds of years.

PHOTO (COLOR): Spaniards used cannons to defend the forts of San Juan against enemy attacks.

PHOTO (COLOR): In the late 1700s, coffee plantations flourished in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico's mountains provided the perfect climate for this high-elevation crop.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Plantation owners who struck it rich built large, fancy homes surrounded by impressive gardens.

PHOTO (COLOR): Rafael Cordero ran a free school in his home from 1820 to 1868. Many of his students were the sons and daughters of poor plantation workers and slaves.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Luis Muñoz Rivera

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): When the United States took over Puerto Rico, the U.S. military marched through San Juan.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Poorly paid Puerto Rican workers lived in dirty, crowded neighborhoods like this one in the early 1900s.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Paper plants and other factories provided jobs to Puerto Rican

workers in the late 1940s.

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By Joyce Johnston

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