

Introduction

How does one bring a new analysis to the history of a municipality? How do you explain the daily dynamics and escape the constant retelling of the grand political feats of great men, the past mayors and the bishops? How do you enliven that everyday outline usually told to us about such and such a specific year, the locations where things were founded, the names of the founders, the environment of the city, the names of the village, city, or town; place, hermitage, or shore? The concept behind this work is not to challenge that way of retelling history, but to see and analyze the municipality from another, more dynamic and historic perspective. This work is an attempt to study the human foundations that gave impetus to the rise of a municipality, without falling for the traps others have fallen for as they have solely searched for a singular point of foundation or origins. The subject of this study is the people in relation to the city.

The municipal boundary, or district, as it was then called, that we are studying here is that of San Mateo de Cangrejos, whose boundaries actually include Santurce, Isla Verde and Hato Rey. Which social classes lived in Cangrejos? What were the roles played by whites, Blacks, mixed-race people, Africans, and the enslaved in the social structure of Cangrejos? How did all of these different people get along with each other? What did they do for a living, and how did they live in the district? What was the demographic structure of Cangrejos's society?

This work looks at the city's development, as seen as a reflection of the district and of the region. This constitutes an effort to relate the ultimate development of the area with the dynamic that has been attributed to the capitol (San Juan), Cangrejos, and Río Piedras—the centers of

today's urban infrastructure. Ultimately, my aim is to show the unity among various areas and to look at how they have interacted. In doing so, I want to show the dynamic of the municipality where the average citizen is the author of, and not the witness to, history. By examining this primary network of social organization—the municipality—we will understand the power of the dominant classes.

The municipality is the basic administrative unit of the colonial administration. As such, the documentation it generates is relevant to our social history: “It is the documentation generated in the administrative cell of what was a small town where we can find true Puerto Rican history. The municipality forges, determines and reflects the character of the people who make and move history.” Of course, there are other institutions that also produce documentation, such as the church and central government agencies. But it is in the town where we find the social and economic structures in the flesh and observe the actions of the dominant group on the dominated group. The Cangrejos district is no exception to this rule.

With little wealth or population and no urban development, Cangrejos epitomizes the non-Hispanic Caribbean presence in Puerto Rico. Fugitives from slavery on the islands of St. Eustatius, St. Thomas, and Saint Croix are believed to be among the core population of the original Cangrejeros who were granted lands for cultivation. The laws that recognized the freedom of these self-emancipated people—which date from 1664, 1680, and 1693—effectively legalized this maroon society; they were similar to free Black societies found in Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean. Cangrejos epitomizes the potential of an organized Black society in Puerto Rico, with its own social, economic, cultural, familial, and demographic features. To a certain extent, Cangrejos is the border between Puerto Rico and the Caribbean.