

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, Mayaguez

and or common Aduana de Mayaguez

2. Location

street & number Ava. Gonzalez Clemente, esq. McKinley n/a not for publication

city, town Mayaguez — vicinity of n/a

state Puerto Rico code PR county n/a code 097

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	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> government
	n/a 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 U.S. 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 Survey and Planning Project of Mayaguez has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date July 1984  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records State Historic Preservation Office

city, town San Juan state Puerto Rico

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## 7. Description

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

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

The customhouse is an impressive one-story building in a fine, formal, Beaux-Arts style with a full Tuscan portico across both the front and the back of the temple-like structure. Classically correct, the customhouse was designed under the direction of the noted Puerto Rican architect Rafael Carmoega and built in 1924, making it the first customhouse constructed during the U.S. period in Puerto Rico. The interior complements the exterior with fine classical ornamentation in the central customs hall and surrounding corridors that lead to offices on both sides. The building received only minor changes in a 1960s remodeling.

The customhouse is attractively set in a small city block, only 79'x 167', in the playa or waterfront section of the city in an area of one-story warehouse buildings, many from the Spanish period, and a block from the ocean. The customhouse straddles the full north-south width of the block, with fenced-in lawns on the east and west faces. Its primary front is to Avenida Gonzalez Clemente, the principal street along the long waterfront. The present customhouse replaces a fine two-story Spanish-period customhouse on the same site that was damaged beyond repair in 1918. The distinguished customhouse with its ample grounds contrasts with its drab warehouse and waterfront surroundings.

The customhouse is a rectangle 79' wide overall and 70'2" deep overall, including its front and back porticos. On the nine-bay front is an eight-column seven-bay Tuscan portico with a simple modillion cornice over the entablature, which is topped by a balustrade and a raised center panel. The entablature is lettered in concrete, "United States Customs House." The panel above is lettered, "By the Authority of the Congress of the United States, this building was erected A.D. MCMXXII for the use of the Customs Service of the Island of Puerto Rico." Although this indicates 1922 as the date of construction, a marble placque on the front of the building indicates the date of construction as 1924 and cites Carmoega as architect and Higuera and Besosa as contractors. The 1924 construction date is confirmed by published sources.

The portico both projects and is recessed on the front. The recess is flanked by six-foot bays at each end of the facade adorned by a molded plaque high on the wall. The base is low and paved with quarry tile. Within the recess to the portico are seven arched apertures containing three doorways in the center and flanked by two sets of windows on each side. All seven arches are in three parts, as in a Diocletian window. The doorways have double, two-leaf, wood six-light sash doors. The windows have three divisions following the Diocletian

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"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates 1924

Builder/Architect

Rafael Carmoega

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

#### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The United States Custom House at Ava. Gonzalez Clemente, between Calles McKinley and Aduana, Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, constructed 1922–1924, is significant architecturally and historically for the role it played in the first, transitional phase of the American customs service in Puerto Rico, from 1898 through 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 as a condition of the Treaty of Paris ending the Spanish American War, 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. It is a fine example of the early-20th century, Classical architectural style of public building produced by the office of the noted insular architect, Rafael Carmoega.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The customhouse was erected on the site of a Spanish-era adobe building irreparably damaged by an earthquake that caused great loss of life and property throughout much of Puerto Rico in 1918.<sup>1</sup> The Government of the United States had acquired the old building and the land on which it was located under Article VIII of the treaty between the United States and Spain promulgated April 11, 1899 (30 Stat., 1758). The tract of ground was reserved for customs purposes by proclamation of the President on June 30, 1903, under an Act of Congress approved July 1, 1902.<sup>2</sup> These legal circumstances, coupled with the terms of the Foraker Act affecting the use of customs revenue by the Puerto Rican government, would severely complicate the attempt to rebuild following the earthquake, particularly since the Puerto Rican treasury was debilitated by the effects of the earthquake. Consequently, customs officials at Mayaguez found themselves working for several years in a wall-less shed with a leaky galvanized roof and no warehousing facilities. There were no better quarters to be found in the badly damaged town.<sup>3</sup>

Congressional authorization for the building came on January 10, 1922. Although the result is a sturdy, one-story, concrete-block building, its design is far from merely utilitarian. The customhouse is an impressive, formal, Beaux-Arts structure with full Tuscan portico and classically correct details.

See continuation sheet #8.1.

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

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

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property less than 1 acre

Quadrangle name Mayaguez, P.R.

Quadrangle scale 1:20,000

UTM References UTM not marked on current 1964 USGS map.

Lat.: 18 12' 30" N

Long.: 67 09' 06" W

A 

1	1	9																	
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 n/a code n/a county n/a code n/a

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title James C. Massey, Executive Vice President and Shirley Maxwell, Associate  
National Preservation Institute

organization National Preservation Institute date July 27, 1987

street & number National Building Museum telephone 202-393-0038  
Judiciary Square, NW

city or town Washington state DC 20001

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

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

*See attached  
11/15/87 for SHPO  
Signature*

For NPS use only

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

[Signature] date 2/10/88  
Keeper of the National Register

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

Chief of Registration

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
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## 7.1. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION (cont.)

arch, with wood casement windows of four lights at the sides and a double casement with four lights in each leaf in the center. The windows and doors are covered with decorative wrought-iron grilles, including fancy strapwork in the arches. The rear facade echoes the front but without the recess into the building and without the lettering featured on the front. The pattern of the seven arched apertures varies from the front and contains a window, door, three windows, door, and window. The sides complement the architectural motif of the front and the rear with a uniform entablature, cornice and balustrade line at the top with a five arch arcade and Tuscan pilasters below. Within the arches the original double set of traditional shutters the outer shutters louvered and the inner shutters paneled, without window sash, has been replaced by modern metal windows with window mounted airconditioners. Arches have been filled in with glass brick, replacing the Diocletian-division wood sash windows found on the front and rear. There are plain metal grilles to the windows. Except for the window changes to the sides and the addition of a tall rooftop antenna, the exterior appears unchanged from the original. The windows could be replaced with replicas of the originals plus glazing without undue damage to the historic fabric.

The structure of the building is reinforced concrete, including footings, columns, beams, walls, floors and roof. The roof slab is supported by pressed-steel I-joists, 8" and 10" deep, laid at a spacing varying from 15-3/4" to 23-1/2". These pressed-steel joists are similar in profile to a traditional I section but with the flange edges turned at right angles to increase the stiffness.

The plan of this one-story building is straightforward. Across the front center is the public lobby or customs hall, with halls at either side extending to the rear of the building, which together with ample door and window openings provided excellent ventilation in the pre-airconditioning era. Indeed, even today this public space remains unairconditioned. Framed by the public lobby and the halls is the general customs office, with cashiers' windows for public business. To the rear of the general office is a walk-in vault and behind, on the rear facade, one room, originally for records, and a large public lavatory. On the north and south sides of the building, opening off the front-to-back halls, are three offices on each side. There are small private lavatories opening off the front rooms in the projecting end bays of the front facade, each with a small window opening to the colonnade. Most floors are terrazzo with marble borders and bases; however, the rear rank of rooms have cement floors and quarry tile floors, except for the rear north room which, though marked on the architect's drawings to be constructed this way, is actually laid in old marble tiles, which

See continuation sheet #7.2.

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7.2. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION (cont.)

could possibly have been salvaged from the original customs building on the site. The central general customs office has its original mahogany counter around the three opening sides facing the public customs hall and the side halls with worktop and drawers below it. The original decorative metal-grille cashier's windows and partition above the counter have been replaced with glass. This was and is topped at a height of eight feet by a mahogany wood cornice that may be original. The high area above this extending to the 18' ceilings, was originally open, creating both excellent ventilation and a most attractive enhancement of the overall central area as one large, airy, light space. However, this has now been closed in with a partition with a dropped acoustical tile ceiling within the office, providing a fully enclosed and airconditioned space. The public lobby and surrounding halls are richly ornamented in classical-order decorations including pilasters with sunken panels, coffered ceiling panels, large, double, dentil cornice and striking pedimented doorways. The doorways to the outer range of offices have double doors, each with three panels, including a glazed central panel. There is a transom over the doors, and heavy molded trim around the doorway; outside of this is a broad flat panel surmounted by the pediment on large consoles. The walls in the custom house are plaster, and the ceiling panels are in a rough, stippled plaster. On the north side, the two front offices retain their original trim, and the north rear room has been subdivided with a lowered ceiling, creating a storage loft above. The south offices and the center rear office have been modernized with lowered acoustical tile ceilings. There are blueprints of all ten sheets of architectural drawings for the construction of the customhouse, dated 1922 and signed by architect Carmoega, in the San Juan customhouse files. The original tracings were not located.

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

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## 8.1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (cont.)

The design of the Mayaguez Custom House has been traditionally attributed to Rafael Carmoega, a prolific Puerto Rican architect of the 1920s who served as chief architect for the insular government. Carmoega's signature does appear as the architect of record in the approval blocks on the ten sheets of plans and elevations for the customhouse, located in the files of the San Juan Custom House. However, on each sheet both the "Designed by" and the "Drawn by" blocks are signed (as nearly as can be deciphered from the blurred photocopies available) by one "R. Trevelano," suggesting that the design may actually have been produced by an employee under Carmoega's supervision. All the drawings are on sheets labeled, "Prepared by the Department of Interior, Division of Public Buildings, San Juan, P.R." Furthermore, Carmoega's application for admission to the American Institute of Architects in 1926 lists his firm name as Chief Architect, Government of Puerto Rico, and notes that he has been in practice for six years after serving two years as a draftsman for the Puerto Rican government. The list of properties designed by him or under his direction in a supporting letter to the prominent architect, Agustin Nechodomo, in 1927 does not include the Mayaguez Custom House, although it does include many other public buildings that would presumably have been done under the auspices of the Puerto Rican government. Carmoega's application form also reveals that he was born in San Piedras, a suburb of San Juan in 1894, that he was a graduate in 1919 of the Cornell University school of architecture, and that much of his work was done in Rio Piedras. In addition to designing his own residence in San Juan, he also designed one for "A. Higuera," presumably a partner in the firm of Higuera and Besosas, contractors for the Mayaguez Custom House.

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

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10.1. Verbal Boundary Description:

The property is bounded by Avenida Gonzalez Clemente, Calle Aduana, Calle Manue Pirallo and Calle McKinley, occupying the entire block.

Justification:

The Custom House and lot occupy a complete small block and are Customs property, providing a natural boundary for the nomination.

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U.S. Custom Houses in Puerto Rico

Photographs

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MAYAGUEZ

U.S. Custom House, Mayaguez, P.R.  
Avenida Jose Gonzalez Clemente,  
Mayaguez, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
East facade, looking west.  
Photo #1

U.S. Custom House, Mayaguez, P.R.  
Avenida Jose Gonzalez Clemente,  
Mayaguez, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
General view, looking northeast.  
Photo #2

U.S. Custom House, Mayaguez, P.R.  
Avenida Jose Gonzalez Clemente,  
Mayaguez, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
East loggia, looking southeast.  
Photo #3

U.S. Custom House, Mayaguez, P.R.  
Avenida Jose Gonzalez Clemente,  
Mayaguez, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
Lobby, looking south.  
Photo #4

U.S. Custom House, Mayaguez, P.R.  
Avenida Jose Gonzalez Clemente,  
Mayaguez, P.R.  
Photo by James C. Massey June 1987  
Negative filed with National  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
North hall, looking east.  
Preservation Institute, Washington, DC  
Photo #5