

The Earthquake of the Century

The Devil's Scream

It is a clear morning, on the day of San Fermín. In Puntas de Rincón, a young woman meanders down a hill path that leads to the beach, to gather almonds and sea grapes. Halfway there, she glances at the calm sea that she has always known. Suddenly, she stops in her tracks sensing that something is not right. She can no longer hear a single sound. She clicks her fingers to verify her hearing. As her eyes search the countryside for the cause of this unnatural silence, the ground beneath her begins to tremble. A horrible sound fills the silent scene. This deafening noise, which she will later call "el Grito del Diablo" (the Devil's Scream), is heard everywhere. It even seems to be passing through her entire body. The ground under her feet swells and she falls, but cannot fully stay on the ground. An overhead tree leans towards her. She scrambles on her hands and knees to a clear area. The ground begins to shake in waves, as if it were water. It feels as if she is riding on hard and rocky trampoline. Suddenly, it stops. Then it begins again. After it is over, the bruised and frightened young woman gets up and looks around her.

Fallen trees are everywhere. Rocks and tree limbs cover the path. Then, another strange noise attracts her attention. She looks towards the shore and sees the water moving out, towards the horizon. She runs closer for a better look. For a great distance, the bottom of the sea is visible. Fish, turtles and reefs glisten in the sunlight. She begins to laugh hysterically at this ridiculous scene, when a faint and steady rumble quickly interrupts her mirth. In the distance, a white wall of water is forming and is moving towards the beach. As the rumble gets louder, she runs back to the hill. When she turns to see if she will be engulfed, the giant wave crashes into the shore. Frozen with fear, she watches as the wave inundates the land near the beach. The water moves towards her and soaks her ankles before returning to the shoreline. A smaller, second wave follows, but it dies just over the shoreline.

About a mile to the South, Punta Jigüero juts out into the Mona Passage. A lighthouse sits on this rocky point, to warn ship traffic away from shallow waters. The quake and wave have caused damage to the lighthouse and it slightly leans towards the South and will need extensive work. In the nearby town of Rincón, the Church bell tower and interior are also damaged. The surrounding sugar cane fields show huge cracks. In Puntas de Rincón, at the foot of the beach hill, the young woman shakes off her paralysis and runs home to tell the greatest story of her life: how she survived the Puerto Rico Earthquake of 1918.

That woman's name was Amelia and she was my grandmother. By the time that she told me this story, she had already done so many times. She told it to my father when he was a youngster on her lap and she continued to tell it until she died, almost ninety years later. Towards the end of her life, she said that she was grateful that God had spared her from living through another earthquake. She hoped that her future relatives would also be spared from the Devil's Scream, for she was as sure that it would be heard again in the hills of Puntas de Rincón.

Despite being one of the closest points to the center of the quake, the overall damage to the Rincón town area was slight and there were no reports of deaths. This is in stark contrast to the death and destruction that the earthquake and its ensuing tsunami caused in other areas, especially in Mayagüez, the largest city on the West coast of Puerto Rico.

On Friday, October 11, 1918, at 10:15 A.M., Puerto Rico was visited by the strongest earthquake ever officially recorded. The epicenter was located in the Mona Canyon (between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic), just northwest of Aguadilla. This earthquake was measured at about 7.5 on the Richter Scale and was accompanied by a tsunami ("tidal" wave) that rose to about twenty feet

Within a ten-minute interval, two major tremors occurred. The first one seemed to have vertical movement, pushing the earth upwards. The second appeared to be a horizontal shift, causing the ground to make waves as if it was water. Thousands of houses and many churches, factories, sugar refineries, public buildings, chimneys, bridges and other structures suffered severe damage that totaled over four million

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dollars. It also severed many of the underwater telegraph cables that kept Puerto Rico in touch with the rest of the world. The death toll of this quake was calculated to be at 116.

Mayagüez, which had a population of 17,000, experienced the worst damage. Seven hundred masonry homes and over a thousand wood homes were obliterated. The Municipal Building, Post Office and the Church were severely damaged. During the reverse action of the tsunami, shoreline homes were dragged into the sea. Many segments of the coastal railroad tracks were twisted beyond repair and its seawalls and roadways were destroyed or damaged. The quake created huge cracks in the earth, through which water and sand spewed. The water levels and currents in all major lakes and rivers increased, making typical crossings almost impossible. Landslides and rockslides occurred in the interior hills and mountains. Cave-ins occurred in the interior areas and on Mona Island.



Mayaguez - Destruction of Catholic & Post Office

Damage was reported on the entire Island and Vieques. Besides Mayagüez and Rincón, the quakes and tsunamis caused damage in the towns of Aguadilla, Moca, Arecibo, Añasco, San Sebastian, Isabela and Humacao. These quakes were sensed as far away as Haiti and the Virgin Islands. In the Capital city of San Juan, where damage was not so severe, all 49,000 residents remained in a state of alarm for weeks. In Ponce, a city of 35,000, major damage to several buildings was reported.



Mayaguez - Damage to Church after 1867 quake

On October 24, 1918, at 11:43 P.M., another strong tremor shook the Northwest area of the Island. Continued aftershock tremors caused many to think that there would be more earthquakes and tsunamis. This theory was proven when another earthquake occurred on November 12, 1918, at 5:45 P.M. Many citizens abandoned their homes and camped out in the hills, some for weeks. This quake was sensed in Saint Thomas, Virgin Islands and in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. From that point on, the earth continued to shake, especially at night. Occasionally, stronger tremors would be sensed. This seismic activity continued for about a year.



1811-19 of the Ocean Wave Map - Published 1918

The Devil's Scream of 1918 was not the first major earthquake in Puerto Rico. On November 18, 1867, a 7.5 (Richter Scale) earthquake was sensed in most of the upper Antilles Islands. The epicenter was in the Aneгада Passage, between Saint Croix, Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. It created a tsunami that ran almost 500 feet into the lower parts of the Yabucoa coastal areas. The earthquake caused damage on the eastern part of Puerto Rico and further inland. This quake occurred just twenty days after the Island was severely battered by Hurricane San Narciso.

In the Virgin Islands, Admiral J. S. Palmer, Commander of the U.S. Navy North Atlantic Squadron, was on board the U.S.S. Susquehana, anchored in the serene waters of the Port of Saint Thomas. When the quake struck, Admiral Palmer also heard the Devil's Scream, which he described as similar to the scraping noise of a large ship running aground on a rocky bottom. His ship jolted as the tremors passed through the hull. After the quake, a thick cloud of dust hovered over the town. When he was able to climb to the bridge, he made a quick sweep with his telescope and paused at a sight that he had never seen, a huge three-tiered tsunami, three miles out, heading directly for his ship and the town. He ordered that a second anchor be dropped. When the first wall of water struck the bay, the smaller ships and shoreline buildings (as well as their occupants) were totally engulfed by the tsunami. When the water turned back towards the sea, they began to surface and hit the Susquehana. As the water continued to retreat, a whirlpool appeared in the center of the bay and everything that was floating began to move towards it. Admiral Palmer ordered the launch of all the undamaged lifeboats, to save the living souls that were still in the water.



U.S.S. Susquehana in the Port of Saint Thomas

Another American warship, the U.S.S. Monongahela, was at anchor off Fredrickstead, Saint Croix, when the double tremors yanked the ship off its anchorage. The ship's Captain, S.B. Bissell, reported that soon after the quakes, the sea retreated towards the horizon and that when it returned, in the form of a 30 foot wall of water, it swept his ship into the first street of the town. The water then receded from land, leaving the Monongahela on the beach.



Mayaguez - Destruction of Church after 1867 quake

Not very far from the Susquehana, the Captain of the U.S.S. DeSoto, W. H. Boggs, also had his hands full. His ship was also swept by the tsunami and crashed into a recently constructed steel pier belonging to the Liverpool Line. The ship rocked violently, while the crew fought the internal flooding and made emergency repairs. Trapped in the receding waves, it was spun around about twenty times. The ship then slowly circled around the whirlpool that had formed in the middle of the bay, until the crew was able to regain control.



Mayaguez - Interior of Church after 1867 quake

The strongest known earthquake in Puerto Rico (8.0 on the Richter Scale) occurred on May 2, 1787. On the northern coast, the impervious fortresses of San Cristóbal and San Felipe del Morro were damaged. Churches in Mayagüez and Bayamón were severely damaged. The monasteries of La Concepción, El Rosario and a church in Arecibo were destroyed. Its calculated epicenter was the Puerto Rico

Trench, located north of the Island. Spanish colonial records indicate that in 1670, another damaging earthquake occurred, affecting the town of San Germán and its surrounding areas.

Scientists and other experts say that Puerto Rico and its surrounding islands are due for another seismic shift. Puerto Rico sits on a potentially volatile area. The 1997 volcano eruption on the island of Monserrat (about 200 miles Southeast of Puerto Rico) is an example of how things can change in the area. In 1997, a U.S. Geological Survey Earthquake Hazard Assessment of Western Puerto Rico was made. The results indicated several regions of major distress and others with moderate distress.



On November 11, 1998, at 3:30 A.M., a minor earthquake hit the western end of Puerto Rico. The Department of Geology at the University of Puerto Rico reported that the quake measured 3.9 on the Richter Scale. The center of the earthquake was between the municipalities of Mayagüez, Las Marías and Añasco at a depth of approximately 16.7 kilometers beneath the Earth's surface. There were no reports of injuries or damage.



In March of 1999, a U.S. Geological Survey Workshop, called *Seismic and Tsunami Hazard in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands*, took place in San Juan. The workshop concluded with the issue of a report, which states: "We stress here that tsunami hazards are a real threat in the Puerto Rico region and adequate mitigation measures must be taken to reduce the exposure of infrastructure (lifelines, communication, emergency response), commercial interests, and the general populace to this hazard." Earthquake awareness should be an important priority of the island's central government and municipalities. Knowing what to do if an earthquake strikes should be an important priority of all households and businesses. Keeping track of seismic activity is easier for scientists and citizens than it was in the times of the last Devil's Scream. Today, we can log-on to a [Puerto Rico Seismic Data Site](#). Information regarding [Earthquake Hazards and Preparedness](#) is also readily available on the Web. For more about Rincón, go to [Rincon-PR.com](#).



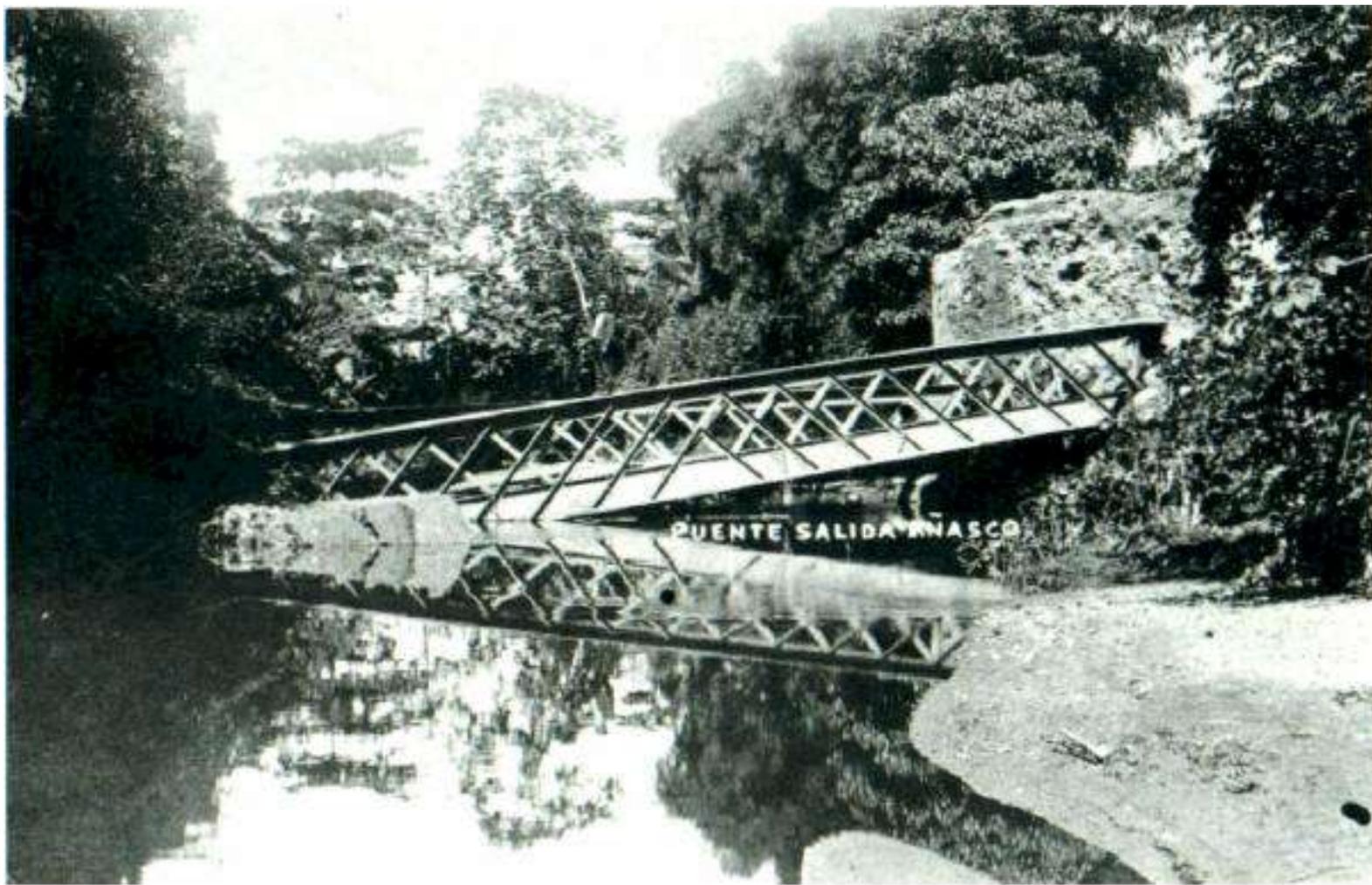
Will the Devil's Scream be heard again in Puerto Rico? The island should be sufficiently prepared, as it is for the hurricanes that frequently visit the Island.

Derechos Reservados © 2002, Peter Aviles





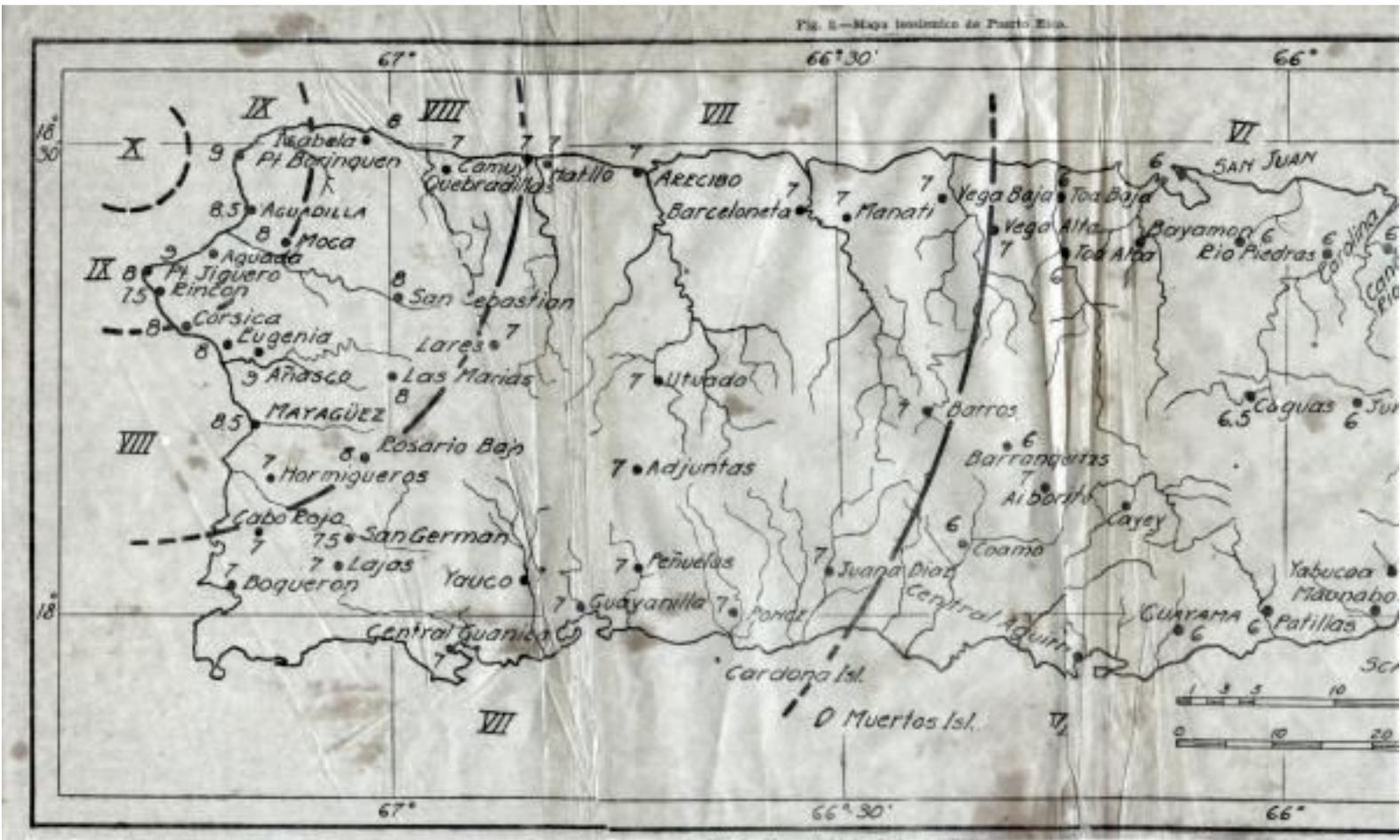
Wood homes smashed together by the earthquake.



Añasco Road Bridge – Knocked Down by Earthquake



Shoreline home pulled into sea by tsunami.



10/11/18 Puerto Rico Seismic Map - Published 1919



Damage to Catholic Church in Isabela.



Mayaguez - Destruction of Casino & Post Office.



Mayaguez - Damage to Church after first quake.



10/11/18 Antilles Seismic Wave Map - Published 1919



Shore house pulled into sea by tsunami.



Mayaguez - Additional damage after second quake.



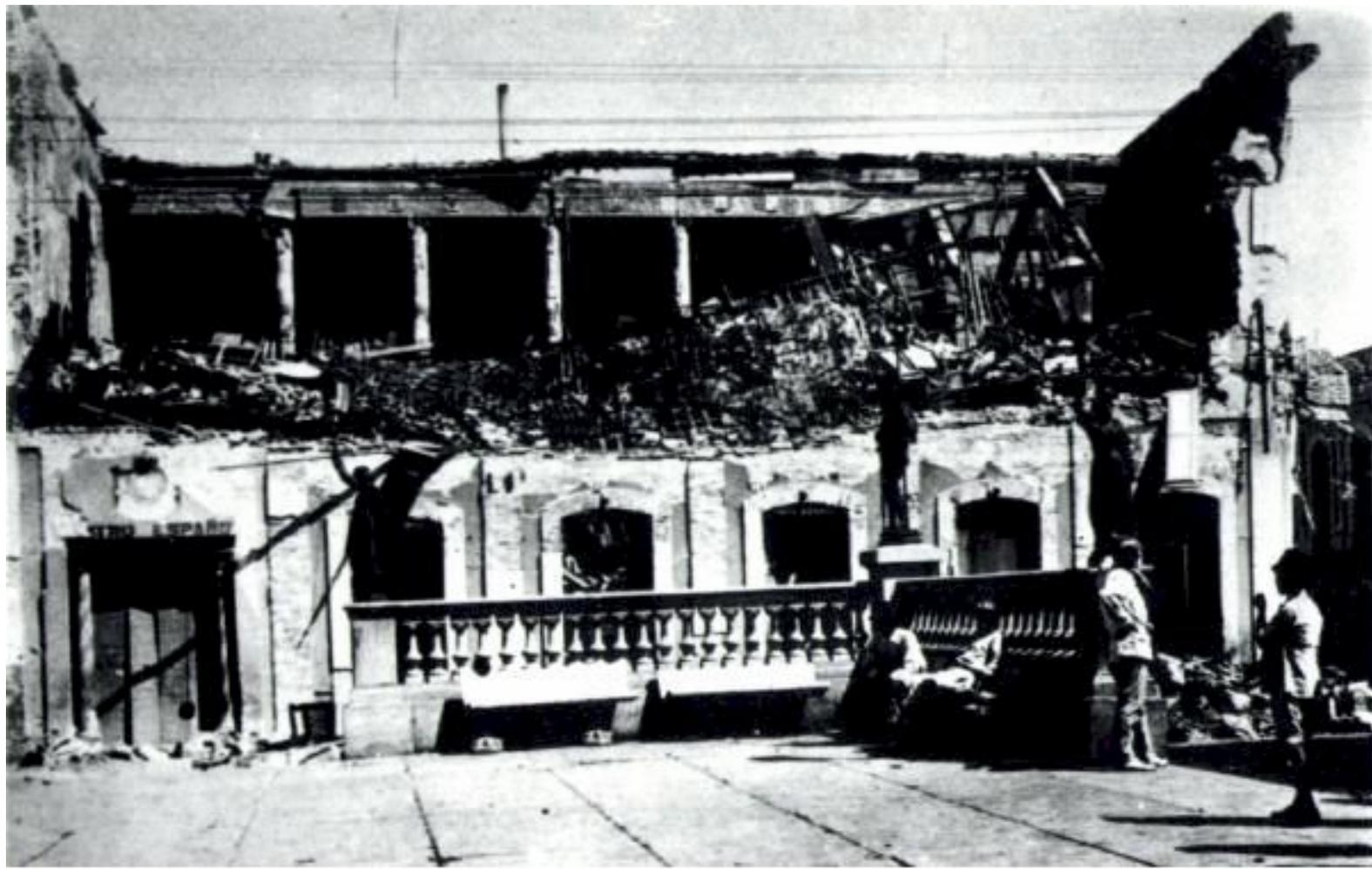
Mayaguez - Destruction of Church roof and interior.



Mayaguez - Destroyed home of Father Montes.



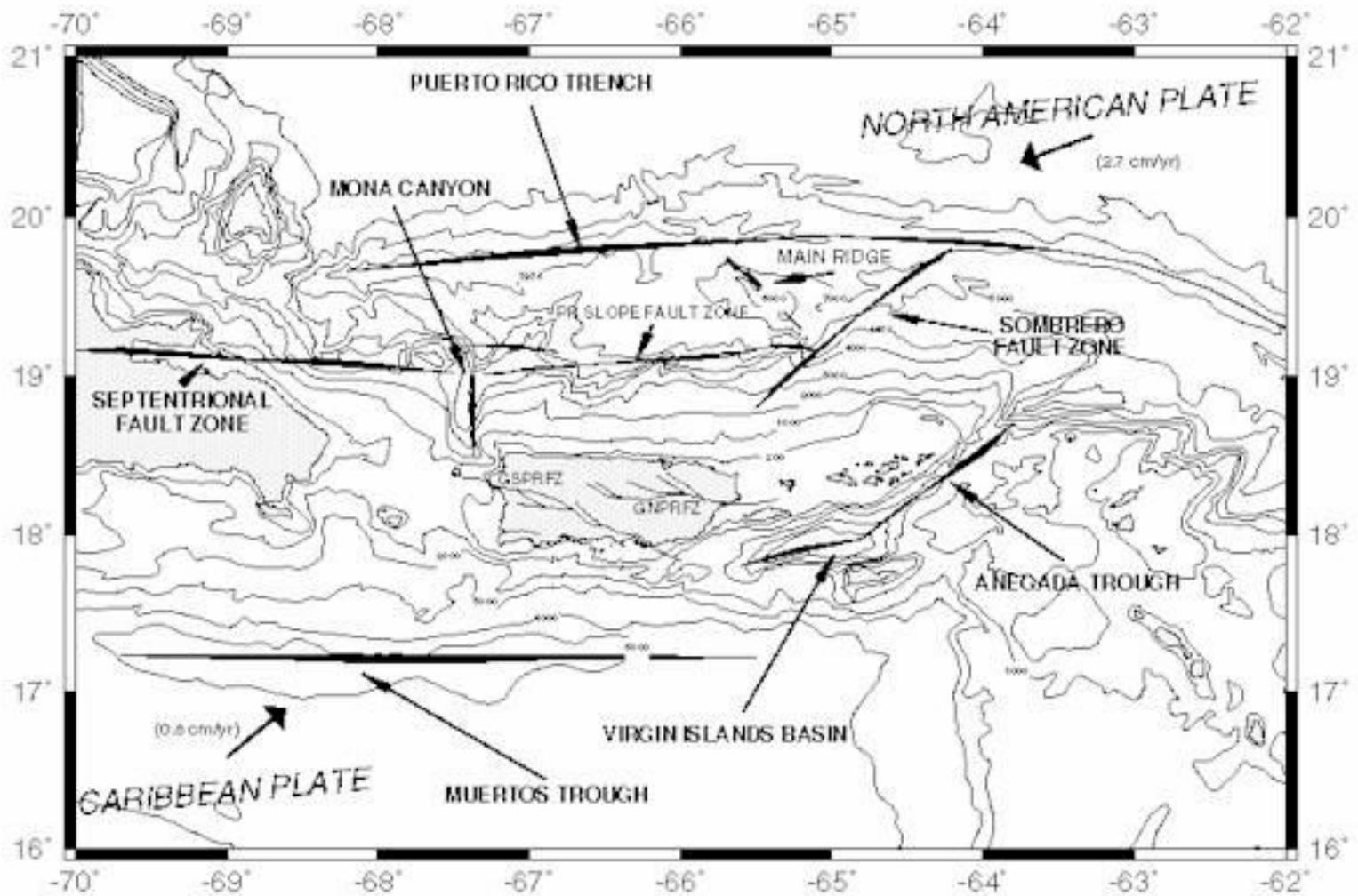
Mayaguez - Damage in side streets.



Mayaguez - Spanish Center & La Palma Restaurant.



**U.S.S. MONONGAHELA
Swept ashore by tsunami.**



Siesmic Map of Puerto Rico & Surrounding Areas