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### A Page from History: Hurricane Felipe in 1928

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Hurricane Felipe, which made landfall in Puerto Rico in 1928, was the worst hurricane the Island had ever experienced before Hurricane Maria in 2017. While the states hit by Maria have generally rebuilt and life has largely returned to normal, Puerto Rico is still coping with the devastating damage of Hurricane Maria. Electric power, safe water, sewage, schools, hospitals, businesses, and homes all are still affected by the hurricanes of last fall.

More [federal funds](https://www.puertoricoreport.com/federal-disaster-relief-provides-billions-dollars-puerto-rico/) (<https://www.puertoricoreport.com/federal-disaster-relief-provides-billions-dollars-puerto-rico/>) were recently approved for Puerto Rico. The total is lower than requested, but the Island will be able to take further steps toward recovery.

How long will it take for Puerto Rico to return to pre-hurricane conditions? Estimates just for the restoration of power suggest that getting the lights back on all over the Island will not happen until summer. What about rebuilding of homes and businesses and public buildings?

One place to look for clues could be in the past.

### Hurricane San Felipe II hit Puerto Rico and Florida in 1928.

This hurricane is called San Felipe II because there was an earlier San Felipe, in 1876 – again on September 13th, the feast of St. Phillip. Puerto Rico still belonged to Spain at that time. 19 deaths were reported, but [historians suspect](http://www.aoml.noaa.gov/hrd/data_sub/perez_11_20.pdf) ([http://www.aoml.noaa.gov/hrd/data\\_sub/perez\\_11\\_20.pdf](http://www.aoml.noaa.gov/hrd/data_sub/perez_11_20.pdf)) that Spain suppressed information about the damages in an effort to reduce their financial responsibility for helping Puerto Rico.

The 1928 storm, a Category 5 like Hurricane Maria, hit Puerto Rico on September 13th, 1928, with winds estimated at 160 mph or higher. There were 312 deaths reported in Puerto Rico (though estimates of the actual death toll were as high as 1,000) and estimates of \$50,000,000 in property damage. Sugar factories were reduced to rubble and the entire coffee crop was lost. These two agricultural products were at that time the foundation of Puerto Rico's economy.

Tobacco and citrus crops were also lost. “Hundreds of thousands” were left homeless, according to contemporary reports, and almost every building on the Island was damaged. Towns in the path of the storm were “blown off the map.” The U.S. War Department reported (<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015024071691;view=1up;seq=28>) that “the results of years of private and public enterprise were obliterated in a few hours.”

A few days later San Felipe made landfall in Florida, where it claimed 1,800 lives. This was the first recorded Category 5 hurricane in American history.

Telegraph was used to warn the people of Puerto Rico and there were efforts to gather data about the storm. Unfortunately, most of the tools used (rain gauges, for example) were destroyed by the hurricane, so the information gathered covered only the earliest part of the storm. Winds were measured at 159 miles per hour, but they became stronger and were later estimated at 200 miles per hour. However, initial reports after the storm were congratulatory; people felt that the loss of life was less than it could have been without the preparation.

## It took ten years for Puerto Rico to recover.

There was federal assistance (<https://theconversation.com/maria-will-fundamentally-change-us-policy-toward-puerto-rico-86038>), though the federal government did not yet have a concerted plan for dealing with natural disasters. President Calvin Coolidge asked Americans to contribute to the American Red Cross in support of their fellow citizens in Puerto Rico. The Red Cross collected \$3.1 million in donations. The War Department sent \$500,000 worth of supplies, as well as Army support for construction and medical services. Some months later (<https://books.google.com/books?id=EZWYBQAAQBAJ&pg=PA76&lpg=PA76&dq=economic+effects+of+hurricane+felipe+II&source=bl&ots=5YTGLz2ajL&sig=IYd>) Congress provided \$8,150,000. The governor was dissatisfied with the level of support provided, saying that “Puerto Rico continues to receive only a small portion of the funds to which the island is rightfully entitled.”

In 1931, a delegation went to Washington and successfully argued for another \$108,000,000. “Rehabilitation loans” were also provided to farmers. Farmers experienced economic hardship across the U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century, and a variety of federal programs were developed to support agriculture, but Puerto Rico was generally not included (<https://books.google.com/books?id=EZWYBQAAQBAJ&pg=PA76&lpg=PA76&dq=economic+effects+of+hurricane+felipe+II&source=bl&ots=5YTGLz2ajL&sig=IYd>) in these programs.

The 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression, as well as another hurricane, took place during the decade following San Felipe II. Observers in 1935 described Puerto Rico’s farmers as experiencing “mental depression” because of the long, hard times of recovery. However, observers generally agree that the Island was back in business by 1938.

There are people who lived through both San Felipe II and Maria. They say that Maria was much worse. (<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/10112017/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-first-person-destruction-recovery-news-reporter>).

The federal government’s decisions have so far been different, the available technology is different, and the world itself has changed since 1928. It is much easier for people to leave Puerto Rico for the States, and much easier to communicate with distant places. But Puerto Rico may once again be looking at a long recovery.

In any case, the catastrophe of Hurricane Maria is also being seen by some as an opportunity to rebuild with the future in mind, rather than the past. Regaining a position as a territory far poorer than any of the 50 States may not be the goal for Puerto Rico this time around.

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