In July 1508, Governor Ovando authorized Juan Ponce de León to lead an expedition to Puerto Rico. He established towns in the richest gold areas – near San Juan and San Germán. The gold quickly played out, and by 1513 most of the Spaniards left. Development was slow, but due to the depredations of the British and of pirates, King Philip II sent an Italian engineer to fortify the Caribbean. He built huge fortresses to protect the harbors of Havana and San Juan, which became the primary ports for trans-shipping the wealth of Spanish America to the mother country.

In 1765, Puerto Rico had a total population of only 45,000 – 5,000 of those being slaves. By 1802 the population more than tripled to 163,000. This was due to the reform of governmental practices, encouragement of immigration (both skilled artisans and planters), and permitting foreigners to sell slaves on the island.

Following the Spanish American revolutions of the early part of the 19th century, only Puerto Rico and Cuba remained of the Spanish empire in the Americas. Since Cuba was so much larger and wealthier, the Spanish government’s focus was on it. Puerto Rico was forced to live with the same system of government and laws as Cuba, though the two islands were very different in many ways.

There were some sugar estates in the coastal plain of Puerto Rico, but it is quite mountainous. As a result, sugar was not predominant in the 19th century as it was in Cuba. Coffee, primarily sold in Europe, became Puerto Rico’s principal crop. The small, largely family-owned coffee plantations thrived in the western mountain regions with their high rainfall. The nearby ports of Mayagüez and Ponce prospered as coffee shipping centers.

The Puerto Rican population remained poorer and more rural than Cuba’s population, but there was a much higher percentage of landowners. Whites represented a larger percentage of the population than on other Caribbean islands, and most people of color were free. Thus a steady blending of the races, beginning early in the colonial period, continued uninterrupted through the 19th century. By 1900, Puerto Rico’s population was approaching one million, and most of it remained rural.

As in Cuba, the governor was essentially a military dictator. This was resented by the small, educated elite of the colony. But, there were few advocates for complete independence. A
revolt begun in the town of Lares (near Mayagüez) in 1868 was quickly put down. In 1873, the few remaining slaves were freed, with compensation to their owners. Continuing agitation for greater political autonomy persisted through the last decades of the century. In 1898, autonomy was finally granted only eight days before the landing of U.S. troops.

After victory in the Spanish-American War, the U.S. decided that Puerto Rico was too small for independence, and its Spanish culture precluded statehood. Initially, in 1900, a status patterned after British crown colonies was imposed on the island. But, Woodrow Wilson, during the World War I period, was very concerned with the security of the Caribbean. Among his actions were the occupation of Haiti, the purchase of the Virgin Islands, and signing the Jones Act of 1917 which brought Puerto Rico firmly under the American flag.

Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens protected by the Constitution, with freedom to travel on the mainland, and subject to the draft. They did not pay federal taxes, and could not vote in federal elections. They had considerable power over local laws, but the Governor was appointed by the President. This status persisted until the middle of the 20th century.

Our Riera relatives immigrated to Ponce from the Barcelona area in the mid-1840s. We know that in the 1860s they owned businesses in that busy port city. The city had been founded in 1692 by the great-grandson of Juan Ponce de León. In the 19th century, Ponce was both a commercial and intellectual center. Rum manufacturers and artists, plantation owners and coffee shippers, poets and wealthy merchants mingled on her streets. The old city is now a National Historic Zone with over 1,000 restored buildings. Among the most famous is the Old Firehouse, known in Spanish as the “Parque de Bombas.” It was constructed in 1883 for an agricultural fair, and soon became the firehouse – a role it filled until 1990. Now it is a major tourist attraction. Our ancestor Pelayo Riera was a founder and one-time head of the Ponce volunteer fire department.

The Cathedral at Ponce and the Old Ponce Firehouse.

In 1898, Ponce was the largest city in Puerto Rico, with a population of 22,000. The Americans arrived there on July 28, after marching from their landing at Guánica. On their way, General Garretson’s brigade occupied the town of Yauco. In Ponce, there were then skirmishes, but no major battle was fought. On the Spanish side, three men were killed and 13 wounded, while four Americans were wounded. The American flag was raised on the plaza at the center of Ponce that same day and most of the Spanish troops retreated into the surrounding mountains.
The U.S. Army then established its headquarters in Ponce. General Miles made a public proclamation in the city that same day, promising rights and declaring the goodwill of the United States and its people toward all Puerto Ricans – including 11 year-old Felix Riera who likely witnessed the event.

![The Plaza in Ponce in 1900](image)