

A Capital Woman: Felisa Rincón de Gautier (1897-1994) was the first female mayor of a capital city in America. The city was San Juan. The year was 1946. Multiply re-elected, she served twenty-two years until retiring in 1968.

Felisa Rincón was born in Ceiba, a small municipality in northeast Puerto Rico. She was the first of nine children born to Rita Marrero Rivera, a school teacher, and Enrique Rincón Plumey, an attorney. He and his political involvement on the island were a major influence on Felisa.

When her mother died giving birth to her ninth child, the care of her children fell to Felisa, just eleven, and interrupted her schooling. But her father resolved to provide her the best education he could. Her secondary studies took place in Humacao, Santurce and Fajardo, larger cities of the San Juan metropolitan area. Her summers, because of her interest in medicine, were spent with an uncle in San Lorenzo learning how to prepare pharmacy medications to become a pharmacist.

Studying in multiple cities made her aware of varying classes of people, most notably, the poor class. She internalized how no jíbaro (country people, the people who farm the land in a traditional way) would let another jíbaro starve. It is noted this was the most important lesson Felisa learned. And, as she was an expert seamstress, she set a long-term goal of starting a local clothing factory to create employment for the poor.

She moved to New York City for two years during the Great Depression living with relatives, where she learned fashion design and the business of running a business. Upon returning home, she opened Felisa's Style Shop in Old San Juan and also managed a flower shop. She encouraged women to participate in business and in government.

An activist in the women's suffrage movement, she registered her vote when Puerto Rico's legislature recognized a woman's right to vote in 1929, if the woman was literate, and in 1935 for all adult women in Puerto Rico. Rincón motivated other women to register to vote, and paved the way for hundreds of women to join the political process.

Her interest in politics began to manifest itself formally in 1932. She joined the Liberal Party of Puerto Rico, which believed in Puerto Rico's independence, and was immediately named representative by the party's president. Within two weeks, she was named to the Executive Committee. Starting in 1936, she actively campaigned in US presidential, congressional and municipal races and also worked tirelessly to promote electoral participation among Hispanics living in the United States mainland.

In 1940, she married San Juan lawyer Genaro A. Gautier, who had served as the Assistant Attorney General of Puerto Rico. Six years later she became the first female mayor of San Juan. As mayor, her first priority was the well being of people, especially the disadvantaged, the jíbaros. She directed her efforts toward raising the standards of living for those impoverished, something she would continue to do throughout her lifetime.

In the early 20th century, there were no welfare programs or social departments on the island. During her years in office she created elder care centers, child-care, legal aid, housing programs, basic public health and social services to assist thousands of poor people. Every Wednesday she held open-house public forums at city hall to listen to concerns of the residents.



Working with others, historical structures of Old San Juan were restored and conserved. Public works projects, including housing, hospitals, schools and sanitation were addressed. Her renovation of the Municipal Hospital of San Juan received accreditation from the American Hospital Association in 1948 that made possible the establishment of the School of Medicine in 1950. In 1951, during the Cold War era, she established the island's first civil defense system.

Under her leadership, San Juan was transformed into a Latin-American urban center. In 1959, San Juan was awarded the *All American City Award*.

She began a Christmas tradition, which was continued annually by the governors. On the *Día de los Reyes (Three Kings Day)*, January 6, she would bring gifts and treats to the poor children. In 1952, '53 and '54, she had planes deliver snow to San Juan for children who had never seen or played in snow.

She established the first preschool program called *Las Escuelas Maternales*. When President John Kennedy visited in 1961 and saw the program, he sent Sargent Shriver to San Juan to consider it for the US. Shriver approved, adapted its model and renamed it *Head Start*. That same year, Eleanor Roosevelt presented her with the "Hebrew Philanthropic Award."

Rincón de Gautier did not seek reelection in 1968 but continued her public service. She served as an American Goodwill Ambassador in Latin America, Asia, and Europe for four US presidents promoting friendship between those regions and the United States.

An ardent defender of democracy and social justice globally, she received honorary degrees not only nationally, but internationally from the governments of France, Spain, and Ecuador. At the age of ninety-five, she served as the oldest delegate to the 1992 Democratic National Convention in New York City.

Numerous public structures and avenues have been named in her honor. In New York, the Felisa Rincón de Gautier Institute for Law & Public Policy is in the Bronx and a public school in Brooklyn bears her name. There is a Felisa Rincón de Gautier Museum in Old San Juan. When she died at age ninety-seven in 1994, she was given full burial honors of a head of state. Dignitaries from all over the world attended her funeral.

On May 29, 2014, the Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico honored twelve illustrious women in the history of Puerto Rico with plaques in "La Plaza en Honor a la Mujer Puertorriqueña" (Plaza in Honor of Puerto Rican Women) in San Juan. Rincón de Gautier was among those so honored. San Juan's poor affectionately addressed her as Doña Fela.

Sila María Calderón Serra is the second woman to be elected mayor of San Juan. She served from 1997 to 2001 when she was elected as the first female governor of Puerto Rico and served until 2005.

Carmen Yulín Cruz Soto, an adviser to mayor Calderón Serra in 1992, was a member of the Puerto Rico House of Representatives and ranking member of the Women Affairs Committee from 2009 to 2013 when she became the third woman to be elected, and is the current, mayor of San Juan.

Following the 2017 devastation of Hurricane Maria to Puerto Rico and its people, especially the jíbaros, Cruz Soto is serving as mayor in a manner seemingly similar to that of Felisa Rincón de Gautier, the first female mayor of a capital city in America.

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