Module 2 — Spanish Colonial Census & Padrones (1765–1898)

Objective

Understand what Spanish colonial census records in Puerto Rico actually contain, what survives today, and how to use them responsibly in genealogical research.

---

1. Important Clarification

Not all Spanish-era censuses contain individual names.

Many published colonial census reports provide:

- Statistical summaries
- Population counts by municipio
- Racial classifications
- Occupation totals
- Literacy totals
- Property totals

They do NOT always contain household listings.

Researchers must distinguish between:

- Statistical census publications
- Nominal (name-level) census schedules
- Municipal padrones (local population lists)

---

2. Major Spanish Colonial Enumerations

Documented censuses include:

- 1765 Census
- 1779 Padrones
- 1802 Census
- 1828 Census
- 1834 Census
- 1887 Official Census

However, survival of name-level schedules varies significantly by municipio.

---

3. The 1887 Census — What It Is and What It Is Not

What It Is:

An official Spanish government statistical publication summarizing population data across Puerto Rico.

Includes: - Total population by municipio - Race classifications - Literacy statistics - Occupation summaries

What It Is NOT:

- It is NOT a searchable island-wide name database.
- It does NOT provide complete household listings in the published volume.

Full Statistical Report (PDF): https://censo.estadisticas.pr/sites/default/files/Decenal/ INE_CensodePoblacionyVivienda_1887.pdf

This PDF is useful for demographic context, not for identifying specific individuals.

3a. Using the 1887 Statistical Data in Your Research

Because the 1887 census contains no individual names, many researchers dismiss it. That is a missed opportunity. Statistical data answers questions that nominal records cannot — and it provides the context you need to interpret everything else you find.

What the 1887 Census Actually Contains

The published report provides aggregated data at the municipio and district level:

- **Total population** by municipio (island-wide total: 798,565, up 9% from 1877)
- **Racial composition** by municipality (island-wide: approximately 59.5% white, 40.5% colored, including mulattos)
- **Age group distributions**
- **Literacy rates** by municipio
- **Occupation summaries**
- **Property and housing data**

Questions a Genealogist Should Ask

When reviewing the 1887 statistical data for your ancestor's municipio, work through these questions systematically:

Population and Community Size

- What was the total population of my ancestor's municipio? Was it a large town or a small rural community?
- How much had the population grown or declined since the 1877 census? Does that pattern suggest economic stability, displacement, or migration?
- What was the population of the specific barrio, if listed?

Reference: 1887 Puerto Rico Population Size Guide

Puerto Rico had 71 municipios in 1887 with an island-wide total of 798,565 (average ~11,000 per municipio). Use these ranges to interpret your ancestor's community:

Population Range	Community Type	Genealogical Implications
30,000+	Major urban center (San Juan, Ponce)	Robust civil registration; experienced enumerators; high name variation; migrants from many origins
15,000–30,000	Regional city (Mayagüez, Arecibo)	Good civil records; commercial economy; mixed migration patterns
7,000–15,000	Established town	Typical municipal records; mixed agricultural/commercial
3,000–7,000	Small agricultural community (Rincón, Añasco, Las Marías)	Tight-knit; FAN club highly reliable; extended kin across barrios; coffee economy
Under 3,000	Very small / rural hamlet	Enumeration may be incomplete; records less formal; dense kinship networks

Barrio Type Also Matters

Within every municipio, *Barrio Pueblo* was the urban core (town center). All surrounding barrios were rural. A family in Barrio Pueblo lived in town — more access to commerce, schools, and record-keepers. A family in an outlying barrio (e.g., Barrio Añasco Arriba) was in a rural agricultural zone. The 1887 census often reports barrio-level data separately.

Why Size Affects Your Research

- Small towns (under 7,000): Everyone knew everyone. FAN club analysis is especially powerful — census neighbors are often actual neighbors and kin. Absence from the census is more meaningful (the family was likely genuinely absent or deceased, not just missed).

- Large cities (15,000+): More anonymity and transient population. Absence may simply mean they haven't been found yet.
- Small communities had fewer record-keepers but also less administrative chaos — civil registration post-1885 tends to be more complete for smaller municipios where the local registrar knew every family.

Racial and Social Composition

- What was the racial breakdown in this municipio? How does that compare to the island average?
- Does the composition align with or challenge family stories about heritage?
- What does a high proportion of free colored or mixed-race population suggest about social dynamics in this community?

Occupation and Economic Conditions

- What were the primary occupations recorded for this municipio?
- Was the local economy primarily agricultural (coffee, sugar, tobacco), artisan, or mixed?
- Does the occupational profile match what you know — or expect — about your ancestor's livelihood?
- What do property or housing statistics suggest about economic stratification in this community?

Literacy

- What was the literacy rate for this municipio?
- How does that compare to the island average?
- If your ancestor's family had unusual literacy for the time and place, does that suggest a particular social or economic class?

Migration Signals

- Are there age-group imbalances (fewer young adults than expected) that might suggest out-migration?
- Does population growth or decline between 1877 and 1887 signal economic disruption that might explain why your ancestor's family later relocated?

How to Apply This to Your Research

Statistical data does not replace nominal records — but it situates your ancestor in their historical community. Use the 1887 data to:

1. **Validate migration hypotheses** — If you believe an ancestor moved from one municipio to another between 1887 and 1910, population data may explain why (economic contraction, coffee economy disruption, etc.)
2. **Set realistic expectations** — If your ancestor's municipio was 80% agricultural jornaleros, a birth certificate listing *jornalero* is consistent; if it was a small barrio of 200 people, records are more likely to be complete than in a city of 10,000

3. **Narrow subsequent searches** — Community size and composition help you understand which civil and parish records likely existed and whether they survive
4. **Corroborate family oral history** — Statistical data can confirm or challenge family stories about social standing, heritage, or economic circumstances

Additional Resources

1887 Census — Puerto Rico Statistics Institute Portal
Provides context and links to the full PDF:
https://censo.estadisticas.pr/censo-decenal/Puerto-Rico/1887

Full Statistical Report (PDF)
https://censo.estadisticas.pr/sites/default/files/Decenal/
INE_CensodePoblacionyVivienda_1887.pdf

Puerto Rico Historical Population Trajectories
Context for population change across census years:
https://www.estadisticas.pr.gov/productos/la-poblacion-de-puerto-rico-y-su-
trayectoria-historica

Example — Lares Wealth Census 1886–1887
A municipio-level wealth census from the same period that does contain name-level data — illustrating what complementary records may exist alongside the statistical publication:
https://genealogiapr.com/wpfd_file/lares-censo-de-riqueza-1886-1887/

Genealogia Nuestra — Puerto Rico Census Records from the 1800s
Overview of colonial census access and survival:
https://genealogianuestra.com/?s=Puerto+Rico

Worksheet

Apply these questions to your ancestor's municipio using **WS_05 — 1887 Statistical Analysis Worksheet**.

---

4. Where Name-Level Colonial Records May Exist

Where Name-Level Colonial Records May Exist (Examples, Not a Complete List)

Name-level Spanish colonial population lists in Puerto Rico most often survive unevenly as municipal padrones, censos de población, or other local enumeration substitutes preserved within municipal fonds, box groupings, or later microfilm/ digitization projects. Researchers should approach discovery municipality-by-municipality and document negative searches when no padrón is found.

Example 1 — San Juan (Fondo Municipio de San Juan)

The Archivo General de Puerto Rico digital collections describe the Fondo Municipio de San Juan (1722–1955) as including "censos" among its materials—an explicit indication that census-like documents exist within that municipal fonds. 🖼 Portal entry (Archivo General de Puerto Rico): *Collections del Archivo — Municipio de San Juan*

In addition, a Rutgers/PRAC report describes the identification of an 1807 population census item within the municipal fonds and provides practical access guidance (including contacting the AGPR reference service). 🖼 Article: https://prac.rutgers.edu/encuentran-el-censo-de-poblacion-mas-antiguo-del-fondo-municipio-san-juan-1807/

Example 2 — Yauco (Municipal fonds box-level inventories)

Municipal holdings for Yauco have been documented through box-level indices referencing a "censo de población" for 1838, illustrating how name-level enumeration material can be discovered through inventories rather than a single searchable database. 🖼 Inventory PDF: https://mate.uprh.edu/~jse/genealogia/contenidosCajasYauco.pdf

Example 3 — Vega Baja (Finding aids and digitization projects)

Some municipio-level materials for Vega Baja appear through institutional guides and digitization references—e.g., a "Proyecto de Digitalización Parcial de Documentos del Fondo Municipio de Vega Baja" and listings that include "censo electoral" in Vega Baja-related groupings. 🖼 Guide PDF (CIH/UPR Río Piedras): https://archiredpr.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/guia-descriptiva618.pdf

Core Access Portal (Archivo General de Puerto Rico Digital Collections)

AGPR digital portal: https://www.coleccionesicp.pr.gov/agpr 🖼

❓

How to Search the Archivo General de Puerto Rico Portal (Standards-Driven Checklist)

Use this checklist to keep your work repeatable, auditable, and GPS-aligned: 1. Search by municipio first Start with: "Municipio de [Town Name]" (e.g., "Municipio de San Juan"). 2. Search with Spanish record-type keywords Use variations: • padrón / padrones • censo / censos • vecinos • almas • población • matrícula (sometimes appears in labor/registration contexts) 3. Confirm record type before extracting data Determine whether the item is: • Nominal (names/households) • Statistical (counts/tables only) • Administrative substitute (electoral lists, tax lists, labor registers) 4. Capture a complete source trail immediately Record: • Collection/fondo name • Box/legajo/expediente identifiers (if shown) • Page/image number • Full URL • Access date 5. Document negative searches If no padrón is located for

your municipio/time period, log: • Search terms used • Date searched • Portal/ collection searched • Result: "No relevant padrón found" This is evidence of a reasonably exhaustive search. —

5. What Information May Appear in Surviving Padrones

When nominal records survive, they may include:

- Head of household
- Age
- Marital status
- Race classification
- Free or enslaved status
- Occupation
- Property indicators
- Household members

However, structure varies significantly by year and location.

---

6. Research Strategy

1. Identify the municipio.
2. Determine whether a padrón survives.
3. Confirm whether the record is statistical or nominal.
4. Extract entire household.
5. Correlate with:
    ◦ Civil registration (post-1885)
    ◦ Parish records (if available)
    ◦ Land and probate records
6. Document citation fully.

---

7. Research Limitations

Researchers must understand:

- Many Spanish colonial census schedules were lost.
- Some survive only as statistical publications.
- Name-level access is uneven across municipios.
- Not all towns were preserved equally.

Absence of a name in the 1887 published census does not mean the person was absent from Puerto Rico.

---

8. Best Practice

Use colonial census records as:

- Contextual demographic evidence
- Corroborating evidence
- Social classification analysis
- Migration pattern indicators

Never rely on a single census as proof of identity.

Worksheet Included

- Colonial Census Extraction Sheet
- Household Matrix
- Citation Builder
- Statistical vs Nominal Record Checklist