



*Teaching
Genealogists AI™*
Instructor: Sylvia
Vargas

Census Records for Puerto Rican Genealogy

Module 3 — The 1899 U.S. Military Census

Course Instructor: Sylvia Vargas
Organization: Puerto Rican Genealogy Group
Website: <https://puertoricangenealogy.org>
Date Created: 2026-02-24
Estimated Time: 30–45 minutes

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will:

- Understand why the 1899 U.S. Military Census exists and what it contains
- Distinguish between statistical publications and name-level (nominal) records

- Know what the 1887 Spanish census is — and what it is not
 - Identify where name-level colonial census data may survive
 - Apply the 1899 census correctly in a GPS-compliant research strategy
-

Section 1 — Historical Context

After the Spanish-American War (1898), the United States assumed control of Puerto Rico under the Treaty of Paris (December 10, 1898). The U.S. War Department needed to understand the population it now governed — so in 1899, it conducted a comprehensive military census of the island.

This census is historically significant because it:

- Captures the Puerto Rican population immediately after the end of Spanish governance
- Bridges the Spanish colonial era and the U.S. federal census era
- Provides the first American-administered demographic snapshot of the island
- Documents each municipio’s population, economic conditions, literacy, occupation, and racial composition

The full digitized report is available at no cost:

<https://archive.org/details/reportoncensusof00unit>

Section 2 — What the 1899 Census Is and Is Not

This distinction matters. Many researchers assume census reports contain searchable household listings. The 1899 military census, like the 1887 Spanish census before it, is primarily a **statistical publication**.

What it contains:

- Population totals by municipio and barrio
- Race classification counts
- Literacy statistics
- Occupation summaries
- Agricultural and economic data

What it does not contain:

- Individual household listings searchable by name
- A complete name-level database of Puerto Rico’s population

Research implication: The 1899 census is essential for **demographic context** — understanding your ancestor’s community, social environment, and economic conditions. It does not replace name-level sources for identifying specific individuals.

Section 3 — Understanding the 1887 Census: Clearing Up a Common Misconception

To use the 1899 census effectively, researchers must also understand the record it bridges *from* — the 1887 Spanish census. This is one of the most widely misunderstood sources in Puerto Rican genealogy.

What the 1887 Census Is

The 1887 Spanish census is an **official government statistical publication** summarizing population data across Puerto Rico.

It includes:

- Total population by municipio
- Race classification categories
- Literacy statistics
- Occupation summaries

Full statistical report (PDF):

https://censo.estadisticas.pr/sites/default/files/Decenal/INE_CensodePoblacionyVivienda_1887.pdf

What the 1887 Census Is Not

**The 1887 census is NOT a searchable island-wide name database.
It does NOT provide household listings in the published volume.**

Most genealogy websites present this PDF as a primary research source for finding ancestors. That framing is incorrect. The published volume is a demographic summary, not a household enumeration.

The reality of name-level 1887 data:

- Name-level 1887 schedules have very limited survival
- Some municipal copies may exist in archives
- Some fragments appear in published town abstracts
- There is no comprehensive, searchable island-wide name database available online

Absence of your ancestor's name from the 1887 published census does not mean they were absent from Puerto Rico. It means the published volume does not list individuals.

Section 4 — Where Name-Level Colonial Census Data May Exist

Because the 1887 and 1899 published reports are statistical, researchers seeking name-level evidence from the colonial and transition period must look to different sources. The following are the most productive places to search.

1. Archivo General de Puerto Rico (Archivo General de Puerto Rico)

Municipal census fragments and padrones may survive at the town level within municipal fonds. Research is conducted municipality by municipality — there is no single searchable island-wide database.

<https://www.icp.pr.gov/archivo-general/>

2. Archivo General de Indias (Spain)

The Spanish colonial archives in Seville hold records created under Crown authority. Search using these terms:

- *Padrones Puerto Rico*
- *Censo Puerto Rico 18__* (substitute the decade)
- Municipio name + *padrón*

Search portal (PARES): <https://pares.culturaydeporte.gob.es/inicio.html>

3. Published Municipal Abstracts

Some researchers and local historians have compiled name-level abstracts from surviving colonial records. These are derivative sources — useful for leads, but always verify against the original.

Example: <https://hijosdecoamopr.com/puerto-rico-census-records-from-the-early-1800s/>

4. FamilySearch Wiki — Puerto Rico Colonial Records

The FamilySearch wiki provides a research guide explaining what colonial records survive, where they are held, and how to access them. This is the best starting point before searching any archive.

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Puerto_Rico_Colonial_Records

Section 5 — Research Strategy

Use the 1899 military census as one layer in a multi-source, GPS-compliant strategy:

1. **Establish demographic context** — Use the 1899 report to understand population, race classification, and economic conditions in your ancestor's municipio at the transition period.
 2. **Compare with 1887 Spanish data** — What do the statistical summaries reveal about the community between the two enumerations?
 3. **Bridge to 1910 federal census** — The 1910 U.S. Federal Census is the first name-level federal enumeration. Work backward from a confirmed 1910 household.
 4. **Seek name-level colonial sources** — Use the four pathways in Section 4 to find padrones or other nominal records that predate the federal census era.
 5. **Track migration patterns** — Compare barrio-level data across 1887, 1899, and 1910 to identify family movement.
 6. **Document all negative searches** — If no name-level record survives for your municipio in this period, log that as part of your reasonably exhaustive search.
-

Section 6 — A Note on Research Credibility

Most genealogy websites misrepresent the 1887 and 1899 censuses by implying they are searchable name databases. They are not.

Presenting these sources accurately — as statistical publications useful for demographic context, not for identifying individuals — reflects a higher standard of research and builds trust with your audience. It also sets realistic expectations that protect researchers from drawing false conclusions.

When you cannot find an ancestor in these records, that is not a research failure. It reflects the historical reality of what was recorded and what has survived.

Worksheets Included

- WS_02 — 1887 vs. 1899 Comparison Table
 - Transitional Household Analysis
-

What's Next

Module 4 — U.S. Federal Census in Puerto Rico (1910–1950) covers the first name-level federal censuses of Puerto Rico, how to access them through FamilySearch and Ancestry, and how to analyze the data across multiple census years.
