



*Teaching
Genealogists AI™*
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Census Records for Puerto Rican Genealogy

Module 4 — U.S. Federal Census in Puerto Rico (1910–1950)

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will:

- Identify the five U.S. federal census years available for Puerto Rico and what each captures
 - Search census records on FamilySearch and Ancestry
 - Analyze key fields in Puerto Rican household schedules
 - Build a multi-year comparison log to track age discrepancies and family movement
 - Apply the GPS Three-Layer Framework to evaluate federal census evidence
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Section 1 — Historical Context

When the United States assumed control of Puerto Rico in 1898, the island entered a new administrative era. The 1899 U.S. Military Census captured aggregate demographic statistics but did not produce searchable household listings. Beginning in 1910, the U.S. Census Bureau extended its decennial census program to Puerto Rico, conducting household-by-household enumerations in 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940, and 1950.

These five census years represent the primary name-level genealogical record for Puerto Rican families in the first half of the 20th century. Unlike the earlier Spanish colonial padrones, the U.S. federal censuses are:

- Indexed and searchable online (1910–1940 on FamilySearch and Ancestry; 1950 on FamilySearch)
- Organized by household, identifying every member by name
- Cross-referenced to enumeration districts that correspond to barrios and municipalities
- Available in digitized form through multiple repositories

All five census years are now publicly available. The 1950 census was released to the public in April 2022 under the 72-year privacy rule.

Section 2 — The Five Census Years: What Each Captures

Each census year used a different schedule, adding or dropping categories over time. The table below summarizes the most genealogically significant differences.

Census Year	Key Fields	Notable Features
1910	Name, age, sex, race, marital status, birthplace, language, literacy, occupation	First name-level federal census of Puerto Rico; language field (English/Spanish)
1920		

Census Year	Key Fields	Notable Features
	Name, age, sex, race, marital status, birthplace, citizenship, occupation	Adds naturalization and citizenship questions
1930	Name, age, sex, race, marital status, birthplace, mother tongue, home value	Drops “mulatto” race category; adds mother tongue and home value
1940	Name, age, sex, race, marital status, birthplace, education, migration, income	Adds “where did you live 5 years ago?”; includes years of schooling and income
1950	Name, age, sex, race, marital status, birthplace, occupation	Sample questions added; released to the public in 2022

Research note: The 1940 migration question is especially valuable for tracking family movement. It asks where each person was living on April 1, 1935, often revealing whether a family had moved between municipalities or migrated to or from the U.S. mainland.

Section 3 — Where to Search

FamilySearch (Free)

FamilySearch provides free access to all five U.S. federal census years for Puerto Rico.

Search path: FamilySearch Catalog > Browse by Place > Puerto Rico > Census
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Puerto_Rico_Census

- The 1910–1940 censuses are indexed and keyword-searchable by name
- The 1950 census is available as digitized images; full indexing is ongoing
- Always click through to the original image — index transcriptions frequently contain errors in Spanish names

Ancestry (Subscription)

Ancestry provides fully indexed, searchable access to all five census years with household images.

<https://www.ancestry.com/>

If you do not have a personal subscription, check whether your local public library provides free access.

National Archives and Records Administration

NARA holds the original microfilm and provides guidance on accessing federal census records.

<https://www.archives.gov/research/census>

Section 4 — Key Fields to Analyze

When you locate a census record for your ancestor, extract and evaluate the following fields.

Identity and age:

- Full name as recorded (note spelling variations and anglicization)
- Age as recorded in each census year (ages are frequently inconsistent across years)
- Sex and race designation (see Module 6 for how race classification changed across years)

Household structure:

- Relationship to head of household
- Marital status
- Number of children born and surviving (1910 and 1920 include this field)

Origin and migration:

- Birthplace for the individual and for parents
- Mother tongue (1930)
- Where living 5 years ago (1940)
- Citizenship and naturalization status (1920, 1930, 1940)

Residence:

- Municipality (*municipio*)
- Enumeration district (corresponds to barrios and geographic subdivisions)
- Street address (later census years)

Economic and social context:

- Literacy (can read and/or write)
 - Occupation and industry
 - Employer or self-employed (1940)
 - Income (1940)
 - Years of schooling completed (1940)
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Section 5 — Working with Age Discrepancies

Age reporting in Puerto Rican census records is one of the most common sources of research confusion. The same individual may appear with significantly different ages across census years.

Causes of age discrepancy:

- The enumerator estimated age based on appearance
- The informant reported an approximate or rounded age
- Ages were deliberately altered for social or administrative reasons
- The person answering the enumerator's questions did not know the exact age of another household member
- Children were listed by someone other than the parent who had accurate birth information

Build a multi-year comparison log for every ancestor:

Census Year	Name as Recorded	Age Reported	Implied Birth Year	Municipality/ Barrio
1910				
1920				
1930				
1940				
1950				

A calculated birth year range of plus or minus 3 years across census records is common. Larger discrepancies require further investigation and may indicate you are looking at more than one individual. The worksheet for this module (WS_03_Federal_Census_Matrix) provides a pre-formatted version of this comparison log.

Section 6 — Name Variations

Spanish names were frequently anglicized, abbreviated, or mistranscribed in U.S. federal census records.

Common patterns:

- First names translated: *Juan* becomes John, *María* becomes Mary, *José* becomes Joseph
- Double surnames condensed: *Juan García Reyes* may appear as Juan Garcia or Juan Reyes
- Accent marks dropped: *Martínez* recorded as Martinez, *González* as Gonzalez
- Names abbreviated: *Guillermo* recorded as Wm. or Guillmo.
- Enumerator phonetic spelling: *Concepción* may appear as Consecpcion

Search strategy: Do not limit searches to exact-name matches. Use wildcard searches and browse enumeration districts when name searches fail. If you cannot find an ancestor by name, locate a known neighbor or sibling and browse the surrounding households in the enumeration district.

Section 7 — GPS Application

Apply the Three-Layer Framework when evaluating any U.S. federal census record.

Source type:

- The original enumeration schedule is an **original source** (first recording of the information)
- A microfilm or digital image is a **derivative source**
- A database index or transcription is a **derivative source**
- Always work toward the original image before drawing conclusions

Information quality:

- Data about the informant (whoever answered the enumerator's questions): **primary information** — they have direct knowledge of their own name, age, and birthplace
- Data about other household members reported by the informant: **primary or secondary** depending on the informant's firsthand knowledge of those individuals
- Race designation assigned by the enumerator based on visual observation: **secondary information**

Evidence value:

- **Direct evidence:** household membership, residence location, name, approximate age
 - **Indirect evidence:** derived birth year (calculated from reported age), implied family relationships between household members
 - **Negative evidence:** documented absence of an expected household member (note and explain in your research log)
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Section 8 — Research Strategy

A GPS-compliant census research strategy for Puerto Rican families includes:

1. **Search all five census years.** Do not stop at the first record found. Track the family forward and backward through every available enumeration.
2. **Go to the original image.** Index errors are common in Spanish-language names. Always verify the transcription against the handwritten schedule.
3. **Build a comparison log.** Track names, ages, barrio, and household members in a structured table for every census year.
4. **Extend to the FAN Club.** Review neighboring households in the enumeration district. Relatives, godparents, and associates frequently lived in proximity.

5. **Document all discrepancies.** Age differences, name variations, and missing census years all require acknowledgment and explanation in your research narrative.
 6. **Correlate with civil records.** A census record is stronger when corroborated by civil registration data. See Module 8 for how to build this correlation.
 7. **Record negative searches.** If a family is absent from an expected census year, document where you searched and what the search returned. Negative evidence is meaningful data.
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Worksheets Included

- WS_03 — Federal Census Multi-Year Matrix
 - Migration Tracking Log
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What's Next

Module 5 — Municipal and Barrio Enumerations covers local census substitutes, tax lists, voter rolls, and padrones that fill the gaps between federal census years and provide barrio-level data not captured in island-wide enumerations.

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