



*Teaching
Genealogists AI™*
Instructor: Sylvia
Vargas

Census Records for Puerto Rican Genealogy

Module 5 — Municipal and Barrio Enumerations

Course Instructor: Sylvia Vargas
Organization: Puerto Rican Genealogy Group
Website: <https://puertoricangenealogy.org>
Date Created: 2026-02-27
Estimated Time: 40–55 minutes

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will:

- Understand why municipal and barrio-level records exist and what they capture
- Identify the major types of local census substitutes available for Puerto Rico

- Know which repositories hold these records and how to access them
 - Build an alternative source strategy for time periods when census records are missing
 - Apply the GPS Three-Layer Framework to evaluate local and municipal records
-

Section 1 — Historical Context

The U.S. federal census covered Puerto Rico only once per decade. That means nine-year gaps between each enumeration, and no federal name-level records before 1910. For many families, those gaps are precisely when the most important events occurred: births, marriages, migrations, property transfers, deaths.

Municipal and barrio-level records exist because Puerto Rico's 78 *municipios* each maintained their own administrative records independently of island-wide censuses. Local governments needed to track residents for tax purposes, military service, elections, and public administration. Some of these records survive — and they can document your ancestor in a specific barrio during years when no census was taken.

Survival is uneven. Humidity, fires, political disruptions, and institutional neglect have all taken a toll. But researchers who know what types of records existed, where they were kept, and how to search for them will find evidence that others miss.

Section 2 — The Barrio as a Research Unit

Before searching municipal records, understand Puerto Rico's geographic structure:

- **Island level:** Puerto Rico as a whole
- **Municipal level:** 78 *municipios*, each with a *pueblo* (town center) and surrounding rural territory
- **Barrio level:** each municipality is divided into named *barrios* — rural subdivisions that serve as the primary geographic unit in most genealogical records
- **Sector or ward level:** some barrios are further subdivided

Why this matters for research: Nearly every genealogical record in Puerto Rico identifies a person's barrio as well as their municipality. Civil birth and death certificates, church records, census schedules, and tax rolls all use barrio designations. Knowing your ancestor's barrio is often necessary to locate them in municipal records.

Research tip: Before searching any repository, identify the specific barrio where your ancestor lived. A person listed in "Rincón" may be in Barrio Ensenada, Barrio Partido, Barrio Puntas, Barrio Stella, or any of several other barrios within the *municipio* of Rincón. The barrio designation is usually required to locate records in the AGPR and in many FamilySearch collections.

Section 3 — Types of Municipal and Local Records

1. Padrones Municipales (Local Census Registers)

Municipal governments periodically conducted their own enumerations for local administrative purposes, separate from and between island-wide censuses. These *padrones municipales* list households with names, relationships, ages, and barrio.

Survival is municipality-dependent. Some collections at the Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR) include fragmentary or complete municipal padrones from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

2. Tax Records (Contribución Territorial / Catastro)

Property tax rolls list property owners within a municipality, organized by barrio. They can:

- Confirm a family's presence in a specific barrio between census years
- Identify the extent of a family's landholdings
- Reveal transfers of property that suggest migration or inheritance patterns

Tax records are held at the AGPR in the municipal fonds for each *municipio*. Completeness and accessibility vary.

3. Voter Registration Lists (Listas Electorales)

Under Spanish colonial rule, voter lists were restricted to adult male property owners of certain means. Under U.S. administration, broader voter registration was conducted after the Jones Act granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship in 1917. These lists can document an adult male's presence, address, age, and occupation at a specific point in time.

4. Military Draft Registration Cards

Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens under the Jones Act (March 2, 1917), making them subject to the draft. Draft registration cards from both World War I (1917–1918) and World War II (1940–1945) are among the most genealogically rich sources available for this period. Each card includes:

- Full name
- Date and place of birth
- Address at time of registration
- Occupation and employer
- Physical description
- Name and address of nearest relative

Both WWI and WWII draft cards are available through FamilySearch and Ancestry:

- **WWI (1917–1918) — FamilySearch:**
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_World_War_I_Draft_Registration_Cards

- **WWII (1940–1946) — FamilySearch:**
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States,_World_War_II_Draft_Registration_Cards
- **WWI and WWII — Ancestry.com** (search under Puerto Rico in the card catalog):
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/military/>

5. Property Registry (Registro de la Propiedad)

The *Registro de la Propiedad* records real estate transactions: purchases, sales, inheritances, and mortgages. These records can place your ancestor in a specific barrio at a precise date and identify relatives through inheritance patterns. The Registry is organized by municipality and held at regional offices across the island.

6. School Enrollment Records

Under U.S. administration, public schooling expanded rapidly. School enrollment records can document children's names, ages, and addresses — particularly useful for confirming family composition between census years. These records may be held at local school district offices or at the Puerto Rico Department of Education archives.

7. Status Animarum (State of Souls Records)

Some Catholic parishes maintained periodic household censuses of their parishioners called *status animarum* or *padrones parroquiales*, listing household members by name, age, and relationship. Survival in Puerto Rico is limited, but where these records exist they can fill substantial gaps. Search through the AGPR's ecclesiastical fonds and through FamilySearch's Puerto Rico Catholic Church Records collection.

Section 4 — Where to Search

Archivo General de Puerto Rico

The AGPR is the primary repository for surviving municipal administrative records in Puerto Rico. Municipal fonds are organized by *municipio* name and may include padrones, tax records, council minutes, and other local government documents.

Research must be conducted municipality by municipality — there is no single searchable island-wide database of municipal records. Contact the AGPR in advance; not all collections are fully processed or publicly accessible.

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

FamilySearch

FamilySearch has digitized portions of Puerto Rico's vital records, church records, and some municipal collections. Search the FamilySearch catalog by Puerto Rico and then by municipality to see what is available for a specific *municipio*.

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

Draft registration cards and some voter records are also available through FamilySearch.

Ancestry

Ancestry holds the WWI and WWII draft registration card collections and several Puerto Rico-specific genealogical databases. Check the Ancestry card catalog under Puerto Rico for current holdings.

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

Municipal Archives (Alcaldías)

Some municipalities retain historical records locally. Contact the *alcaldía* (municipal office) directly. Accessibility and survival vary widely by municipality.

University of Puerto Rico — Colección Puertorriqueña

The Lázaro Library at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus, holds historical collections including some municipal and genealogical materials.

<https://biblioteca.uprrp.edu/coleccion-puertorriquena/>

Archivo General de Indias (Pre-1898)

For Spanish colonial records predating 1898, the Archivo General de Indias in Seville holds documents created under Crown authority. The PARES portal provides online search access.

<https://pares.culturaydeporte.gob.es/inicio.html>

Section 5 — Building an Alternative Source Strategy

When a census year is missing or a family cannot be located in an expected enumeration, build a structured alternative source strategy:

Step	Action
1	Identify the time period, municipality, and barrio
2	List what major records existed for that period (census, civil, church, tax)
3	Determine which records survive and where they are held

Step	Action
4	Search AGPR municipal fondos for the relevant <i>municipio</i>
5	Search FamilySearch catalog for digitized collections from that municipality
6	Look for draft registration cards, voter lists, and tax records in the date range
7	Document every negative search: repository name, collection searched, dates, and result

The worksheet for this module (WS_04_Alternative_Source_Strategy) provides a pre-formatted planning tool for this process.

Section 6 — GPS Application

Apply the Three-Layer Framework when evaluating municipal and local records.

Source type:

- An original municipal tax roll or padrón municipal = **original source** (first recording by a government official)
- A microfilm, digital image, or photocopy = **derivative source**
- A compiled abstract or published list from a secondary work = **authored source** — useful for leads, but verify against the original

Information quality:

- Property ownership, residence: typically **primary information** — the property owner or household head reported this
- Ages and family relationships in a padrón: **primary** if reported by the head of household; **secondary** if estimated by the enumerator or collector
- Tax records frequently omit ages: this is not negative evidence of age — the record simply did not capture that information

Evidence value:

- **Direct evidence:** property ownership, residence in a specific barrio, identity, presence at a point in time
- **Indirect evidence:** implied household composition when multiple persons appear at the same address or property
- **Negative evidence:** documented absence from a tax roll or voter list when the person would be expected to appear (explain the absence — the record may not include all residents, or the person may have been a tenant rather than a property owner)

Section 7 — Research Strategy

1. **Identify the geographic unit first.** Determine the *municipio* and barrio before searching any repository.
 2. **Know the time period.** Match your date range to the record types that existed and survived.
 3. **Search AGPR first.** The AGPR holds the largest collection of municipal administrative records. Search the catalog and contact the staff.
 4. **Use draft cards for the 1917–1945 period.** WWI and WWII draft registration cards are among the most accessible and information-rich records for adult males in this period.
 5. **Check FamilySearch.** New Puerto Rico collections are added regularly. Search the catalog by place name.
 6. **Integrate with census and civil records.** Municipal records are most valuable when correlated with civil registration data and census schedules. See Module 8 for the correlation framework.
 7. **Document every negative search.** If a municipal collection does not survive or cannot be searched, record that fact. It is evidence of the limits of the surviving record base — not a research failure.
-

Worksheets Included

- WS_04 — Alternative Source Strategy Planner
 - WS_06 — Municipal Research Log
-

Reflection Questions

1. A family you are researching appears in Rincón in the 1910 federal census but cannot be located in any record between 1910 and 1930. You know they were no longer in Rincón by 1930. What municipal and local records would you search to document the family during that 20-year gap, and what specific information would you expect each record type to provide?
 2. You find a property tax record from 1905 listing your ancestor's name in Barrio Ensenada, Rincón, with no ages or family members listed. Classify this record using the Three-Layer Framework: what is the source type, what is the information quality for the fact of property ownership, and what evidence value does it provide for your research question of confirming your ancestor's presence in that barrio?
 3. A researcher says, "I searched FamilySearch for my ancestor in the Añasco padrones municipales from 1915 and found nothing — so the family was not there." Identify two problems with this conclusion and explain what the researcher should do instead.
-

What's Next

Module 6 — Race and Social Classification in Puerto Rican Census Records examines how racial designations changed across Spanish colonial and U.S. federal census systems, and why the same ancestor may carry different designations across different records.

© 2026 Sylvia Vargas. *Teaching Genealogists AI™*. All rights reserved.