



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

Module 6 — Race & Social Classification in Puerto Rican Census Records

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will:

- Understand the racial classification systems used in Spanish colonial and U.S. federal census records
 - Recognize why the same ancestor may carry different racial designations across different records
 - Identify how the 1873 abolition of slavery changed documentation practices
 - Apply this knowledge to avoid filtering errors and missed records in your research
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Section 1 — Why Race Classification Matters for Genealogical Research

Racial classification in Puerto Rican census records is not a stable, consistent fact. It is a recorded judgment — made by an enumerator, under a specific administrative system, at a specific historical moment.

The same person may appear as *pardo* in an 1838 padrón, *blanco* in the 1887 census, and *mulatto* in the 1910 U.S. federal census. None of these designations reflects a biological truth. Each reflects the classification system in use, the enumerator's perception, and the social pressures of the time.

Research implication: Never filter a database search by race category. You may exclude records for your own ancestor.

Understanding how classification systems worked — and how they changed — is a practical research skill, not merely historical background.

Section 2 — Spanish Colonial Classification System (Pre-1898)

The Categories

Spanish colonial records used a hierarchy of racial and legal categories that varied somewhat by period and document type. The most common categories in census and padrón records include:

Spanish Term	Meaning in Context
<i>blanco</i>	White; European descent
<i>pardo</i>	Literally “brown”; mixed African and European ancestry; also used for free people of mixed descent
<i>negro</i>	Black; African descent
<i>mulato</i>	

Spanish Term	Meaning in Context
	Mixed African and European ancestry (usage overlapped with <i>pardo</i>)
<i>libre</i>	Free (used with race category, e.g., <i>pardo libre</i> , <i>negro libre</i>)
<i>esclavo / esclava</i>	Enslaved (used with race category, e.g., <i>negro esclavo</i>)

In practice, padrones often combined these: *blanco libre*, *pardo libre*, *negro libre*, *negro esclavo*.

Who Made the Determination

The enumerator — typically a local official — made racial assignments based on visual assessment and community knowledge. This was not self-reported. The result was inconsistency: neighbors might classify the same family differently. Municipal officials might record a family one way; the parish priest another.

Social Stakes of Classification

Classification affected legal rights, military service obligations, tax liability, and access to certain occupations. Families sometimes negotiated their classification over generations, and upward reclassification (*blanqueamiento*) was documented in some communities. This means the same family may appear under different racial designations in records created years apart.

Section 3 — The 1873 Abolition of Slavery: A Documentation Watershed

On March 22, 1873, Spain abolished slavery in Puerto Rico. This event fundamentally changed how formerly enslaved people were recorded.

Before 1873:

- Enslaved people appeared in records primarily as property — in estate inventories, sales records, and baptismal registers
- Padrones listed enslaved individuals under the household of their enslaver, often without surnames
- Family relationships among enslaved people were rarely documented

After 1873:

- Freed people began appearing as named heads of household in padrones and civil registration
- They could establish surnames (often taking the surname of their former enslaver, a saint's name, or a descriptive name)
- Civil registration records (births, marriages, deaths) beginning in 1885 documented formerly enslaved families as full legal persons

Research implication: If your ancestor was enslaved, your name-level documentary evidence trail realistically begins between 1873 and 1885. Evidence prior to that date requires research in estate records, notarial records, baptismal registers, and other sources that captured enslaved people incidentally. Absence of a name before 1873 is not evidence the person did not exist — it reflects the historical record-keeping system.

The 1872 Registro de Esclavos: Last Name-Level Record Before Abolition

One year before abolition, Spain conducted a systematic registration of all enslaved people in Puerto Rico. The **Registro de Esclavos of 1872** is the last name-level enumeration of enslaved individuals before freedom — and for researchers with enslaved ancestors, it is often the only Spanish-era record where that ancestor appears by name.

The 1872 schedules were created as part of Spain's preparation for abolition — to register all enslaved individuals so slaveholders could later be compensated. This administrative purpose made the registry unusually thorough. Scholarly analysis of the Mayagüez subset (approximately 2,580 individuals) found records organized across 22 fields.¹

What the 1872 Schedules Record

When you locate an ancestor in the 1872 Registro de Esclavos, expect to find some or all of the following:

- **Name** of the enslaved individual
- **Age and sex**
- **Origin** (birthplace or African origin when known)
- **Owner's name** and community
- **Manumission status** (whether freedom had been partially granted)
- **Kinship ties** — family relationships among enslaved people, when recorded
- **Occupation**
- **Physiognomic description** (physical characteristics)

When an ancestor later appears in post-1873 civil records carrying a surname that is unfamiliar or unexplained, the 1872 schedule may identify the enslaver from whom that surname was derived. Kinship entries, when present, can also reveal family relationships that no other pre-1873 record documents.

Accessing the 1872 Schedules

Recommended starting point — searchable indexes:

- **FamilySearch — Puerto Rico Slave Registers, 1863–1879** (free, index + images):
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Puerto_Rico_Slavery_Records
- **Ancestry.com — Puerto Rico, Registro Central de Esclavos, 1872** (subscription, index + images):
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2774/>

Raw digitized images by administrative district (FamilySearch film viewer; no index):

District	Municipalities	Access
District 1	Dorado, <u>National Archives</u> njito, Trujillo Alto, Trujillo Bajo, San Juan	<u>FamilySearch Film 007529154</u>
District 2	Arecibo, Camuy, Ciales, Hatillo, Manatí, Morovas, Quebradilla, Utuado	<u>Genealogía Nuestra</u>
District 3	Not located in digitized collection	—
District 4	Añasco, Cabo Rojo, Mayagüez	<u>FamilySearch Film 007529156</u>
District 4	Mayagüez, Sabana Grande, San Germán	<u>FamilySearch Film 007529157</u>
District 5	Adjuntas, Barros, Coamo, Guayanilla, Juana Díaz, Peñuelas, Yauco	<u>FamilySearch Film 007529158</u>
District 5	Barranquitas, Ponce	<u>FamilySearch Film 007529159</u>
District 6	Arroyo, Cidra, Guayama	<u>Genealogía Nuestra</u>
District 6	Aguas Buenas, Caguas, Cayey, Cidra, Gurabo, Hato Grande (San Lorenzo), Sabana del Palmar (Comerío), Salinas	<u>FamilySearch Film 007529161</u>

Note on coverage: The western and interior municipalities — including Rincón, Las Marías, and Lares — are not well represented in the 1872 *central* registry organized by district. However, many of these municipalities have **earlier slave censuses** spanning the 1840s–1871 period. See below.

Earlier Municipal Slave Records (1840s–1871)

The 1872 Registro de Esclavos was the culmination of decades of earlier slave documentation. Spanish administrators conducted slave censuses at the municipal level throughout the 1840s–1871 period. These records vary by municipality and date and are not organized into a district framework.

For municipalities underrepresented in the 1872 central registry, earlier records may provide the only surviving name-level documentation. Examples from western and interior municipalities include:

- Aguada, Aguadilla, & Lares — Slave Registry Census 1870
- Moca, Aguadilla, Aguada, Isabela, San Sebastián, & Lares — Slave Registry Census 1870

- San Germán — Slave Registry Census 1868
- Añasco — Slave Registry Census 1868

Eastern and northern municipalities have records going back further:

- Juncos — Esclavos Census 1842–1873 (Film 1511709)
- Fajardo — Esclavos 1851–1868 (Film 1511709)
- Camuy — Slave Census 1849–1890
- Caguas — Esclavos Census 1863–1879 (Films 1667559 and 1667560)

Many of these films require access through a **Family History Center** rather than being freely available online. For a municipality-by-municipality guide with image numbers, consult:

Anna Bayala, “Finding Enslaved Ancestors in Puerto Rico Through Registries Online,” *Genealogía Nuestra*, November 26, 2018:
<https://genealogianuestra.com/2018/11/finding-enslaved-ancestors-in-puerto-rico-through-registries-online/>

Post-Abolition: Libertos Records (1873)

Abolition on March 22, 1873 created an immediate administrative need to document formerly enslaved people as free persons. Two record types were generated:

- **Contratos de libertos** (freed slave contracts) — recorded the labor agreements freed people were required to enter
- **Registro de libertos** (registration of freed slaves) — official registration of individuals transitioning to free status

These records bridge the twelve-year gap between the last slave censuses and civil registration (which began in 1885). Where they survive, libertos records may name individuals who do not yet appear in post-abolition padrones. Known surviving examples include records for Lares (Film 1511709, Items 5 and 6).

Search for libertos records by municipio at the [Archivo General de Puerto Rico](https://www.coleccionesicp.pr.gov/agpr) digital portal:
<https://www.coleccionesicp.pr.gov/agpr>

Section 4 — U.S. Federal Census Classification System (1910–1950)

When the United States began administering Puerto Rico, it brought its own racial classification system — one built around different categories, different assumptions, and different social purposes than the Spanish system.

Categories by Census Year

Census Year	Racial Categories Used
1910	White (W), Black (B), Mulatto (Mu)
1920	White (W), Black (B), Mulatto (Mu)

Census Year	Racial Categories Used
1930	White (W), Negro (Neg) — mulatto dropped
1940	White (W), Negro (Ne)
1950	White (W), Negro (Ne)

The elimination of “mulatto” in 1930 reflects a shift in U.S. racial policy — not a change in the Puerto Rican population. Families previously recorded as mulatto were reclassified as either white or Negro based on the enumerator’s judgment.

The Enumerator’s Role

As in the Spanish system, U.S. census enumerators made racial determinations based on visual observation. They were not required to ask. Their determination could differ from:

- What a family considered themselves
 - How the same family had been classified in previous census years
 - How the family appeared in Puerto Rican civil registration
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Section 5 — Cross-Era Classification Inconsistencies

The transition from Spanish to U.S. classification systems created predictable inconsistencies that affect genealogical research.

Common Patterns

Pardo → White: Individuals classified as *pardo* under the Spanish system were sometimes classified as White by U.S. enumerators, particularly in western Puerto Rico.

Pardo → Mulatto: Others classified as *pardo* appear as Mulatto in 1910 and 1920 federal censuses.

Mulatto → White or Negro (1930): The elimination of the mulatto category forced a binary classification that divided families with previously consistent designations.

Blanco → White: Generally consistent, but not universal — some families recorded as *blanco* in Spanish records appear as Mulatto in U.S. records.

What This Means for Your Search

A family appearing in the 1887 statistical report under one community demographic may appear in the 1910 federal census under a different racial designation. If you are searching a database filtered by race, you may miss records for your own family.

Best practice: Search by name, age range, and municipio — not by race category. Review all results regardless of racial designation.

Section 6 — Social Stratification and Record Survival

Racial classification in Puerto Rican history intersected with social stratification in ways that affected which records survive for which families.

Factors That Affected Record Survival

Record creation: Wealthier, landed families appear in more record types — property records, notarial records, estate inventories — in addition to census and civil records. Poorer families may appear only in census enumerations and civil registration.

Institutional bias: Some institutions recorded baptisms, marriages, and burials for enslaved people inconsistently or in separate registers that were less carefully preserved.

Post-abolition documentation gaps: Between 1873 and 1885 (when civil registration began), many freed families are difficult to document. Padrones from this period provide the primary name-level evidence.

Research Strategy for Underrepresented Families

When documentary evidence is sparse for ancestors who were enslaved or of mixed racial ancestry:

1. Search the **1872 Registro de Esclavos** (see Section 3) for the ancestor's name before freedom — this is often the earliest nominal record available
 2. Search civil registration beginning at 1885 for the family surname
 3. Check padrones from 1873–1885 in the relevant municipio via [Archivo General de Puerto Rico](#)
 4. Search estate inventories and notarial records at AGPR for pre-1873 documentation
 5. Consult the FamilySearch wiki for guidance on specific record survival: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Puerto_Rico_Colonial_Records
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Section 7 — GPS-Compliant Approach to Classification Data

The Genealogical Proof Standard requires thorough analysis of every source. When dealing with racial classification data:

1. **Record what the document says** — transcribe the exact term used (*pardo*, *mulatto*, White, etc.)
2. **Note the classification system** — identify which era and which administrative system produced the record
3. **Do not assume consistency** — cross-era and cross-document variation is normal, not a sign of error

4. **Resolve conflicts explicitly** — if the same person carries different classifications in different records, note this in your research log and explain which classification system produced each result
 5. **Never rely on race classification as an identifying feature** — use name, age, location, and family relationships as your primary identifiers
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Reflection Questions

1. If your ancestor appears as *pardo* in a Spanish-era padrón and as White in the 1910 federal census, does this mean you have found two different people? What would you do to confirm or rule out this possibility?
 2. For a family that was enslaved before 1873, what is the earliest type of record where you would realistically expect to find individual names and family relationships?
 3. Why might a 1930 census researcher find a family listed as Negro when the same family had been listed as Mulatto in 1910 and 1920?
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What's Next

Module 7 — Migration Patterns examines how Puerto Rican families moved within the island and to the U.S. mainland, and how to track those movements across census years.

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1. Rigoberto Andino, “The Slave Registry of Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, 1872,” *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 6, no. 1 (April 2025): 15–24. <https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/msup/jsdp/article/6/1/15/399986/The-Slave-Registry-of-Mayaguez-Puerto-Rico-1872>^[?]