



*Teaching
Genealogists AI™*
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Getting Started in Genealogy

Module 3 – Collect Basic Documents

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Organization: Puerto Rican Genealogy Group

Website: <https://puertoricangenealogy.org>

Date Created: 2026-02-17

Estimated Time: 30–45 minutes

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will:

- Know the five basic document types every beginner should look for
- Understand where to find Puerto Rican records online for free
- Recognize common Spanish terms found on Puerto Rican civil and church records

- Know the difference between civil records and church records in Puerto Rico
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The Five Basic Document Types

These are the foundational records for any family history research:

Document	What It Tells You	Spanish Term
Birth certificate	Full name, date and place of birth, parents' names	<i>Acta de nacimiento</i> or <i>Certificado de nacimiento</i>
Marriage certificate	Names of bride and groom, date and place of marriage, parents' names	<i>Acta de matrimonio</i> or <i>Certificado de matrimonio</i>
Death certificate	Name, date and place of death, age, cause of death, sometimes parents' names	<i>Acta de defunción</i> or <i>Certificado de defunción</i>
Obituary	Name, surviving family members, funeral details	<i>Obituario</i> or <i>Esquela</i>
Census record	Household members, ages, birthplaces, occupations	<i>Censo</i>

Key insight: Marriage and death records often name the person's parents. These records help you jump back one generation.

Puerto Rico's Two Record Systems

Puerto Rico has two parallel sets of records, and understanding this is essential:

Civil Records (*Registro Civil / Registro Demográfico*)

- **Started:** 1885 (required by Spanish colonial law)
- **What they cover:** Births, marriages, and deaths registered with the government
- **Where they are:** Originally kept at the municipal level (*pueblo*). Centralized copies held by the *Registro Demográfico* in San Juan.
- **Online access:** Many are digitized on FamilySearch (see below)

Church Records (*Registros Parroquiales*)

- **Started:** As early as the 1700s (some parishes earlier)
- **What they cover:** Baptisms (*bautismos*), marriages (*matrimonios*), and burials (*entierros* or *defunciones*)
- **Where they are:** Parish churches, diocesan archives, and many digitized on FamilySearch
- **Why they matter:** Church records often predate civil records. Before 1885, they may be the only record of a birth, marriage, or death.

Tip: Always check both systems. A person baptized in 1890 should have both a church baptism record and a civil birth registration. Each may contain different details.

Where to Find Records for Free

FamilySearch.org (Free)

FamilySearch is the single most important free resource for Puerto Rican genealogy. It holds millions of digitized Puerto Rican records.

What's available:

- Civil registration records (births, marriages, deaths) for most *pueblos*, roughly 1885–1950s
- Catholic church records (baptisms, marriages, burials) for many parishes
- US Federal Census records that include Puerto Rico (1910, 1920, 1930, 1940)
- Military records and passenger lists

Step 1: Create Your Free Account

Without a FamilySearch account, you can browse collection names but cannot view record images. Registration takes about 2 minutes and is completely free – no credit card, no subscription.

FamilySearch is run by a nonprofit organization. It does not sell your data or share your personal information. Your account is private by default.

1. Go to <https://www.familysearch.org>
2. Click **Sign In** → **Create Account**
3. Enter your name, email, and a password
4. Check your email and click the verification link
5. Sign back in – you now have full access to millions of Puerto Rican records

Step 2: Go Directly to Puerto Rico Records

Once registered, go straight to the collections that matter most:

- **Civil records (births, marriages, deaths), 1885–2001:** <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1682798>
- **Catholic church records (baptisms, marriages, burials), 1645–2021:** <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1807092>
- **All Puerto Rico collections:** <https://www.familysearch.org/search/place/results?placeId=11543&view=records&access=all>

Step 3: Search by Pueblo

1. Go to **Search > Records**
2. In the Place field, type the *pueblo* name (e.g., “Ponce, Puerto Rico” or “Rincon, Puerto Rico”)

3. Browse the available collections for that *pueblo*
4. Click a collection to open it, then search by name or browse by year

Important note: Some records are only viewable at a Family History Center or affiliated library. If you see a lock icon, visit <https://www.familysearch.org/library/fhc> to find a center near you.

Your First Search

Try this right now:

1. Open the Civil Registration collection: <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1682798>
2. Enter the name of the ancestor you most want to find (from your Module 1 worksheet)
3. Filter by the *pueblo* name you identified in Module 2
4. Log the result in your research log whether you find something or not (see Module 4 for the log format)

A “not found” result is still valuable. It tells you to try the church records collection, check neighboring *pueblos*, or search under a different spelling of the name.

Other Free Resources

Resource	What It Offers	URL
Ancestry (via public libraries)	Census, immigration, military records – free with a library card at many public libraries	Check your local library
Find A Grave	Cemetery records and burial information	https://www.findagrave.com
Newspapers.com (via libraries)	Historical obituaries and news	Check your local library
Puerto Rico Civil Registry	Request certified copies of civil records	Contact <i>Registro Demográfico</i>
National Archives (NARA)	Military, immigration, and census records	https://www.archives.gov

What Each Record Looks Like

Understanding what you’ll find on these documents helps you extract the right information.

Birth Record (*Acta de Nacimiento*)

Typical information found:

- Full name of the child (*nombre del niño/a*)

- Date of birth (*fecha de nacimiento*)
- Place of birth (*lugar de nacimiento*) – usually the *pueblo* and *barrio*
- Father’s name and birthplace (*nombre y naturaleza del padre*)
- Mother’s name and birthplace (*nombre y naturaleza de la madre*)
- Names of grandparents (*nombres de los abuelos*) – this is the jackpot for jumping back a generation

Marriage Record (*Acta de Matrimonio*)

Typical information found:

- Full names of bride and groom (*contrayentes*)
- Ages or dates of birth
- Place of residence (*vecinos de...*)
- Father’s and mother’s names for both parties
- Names of witnesses (*testigos*) – often relatives or close family friends
- Whether either party was widowed (*viudo/viuda*) and the name of the deceased spouse

Death Record (*Acta de Defunción*)

Typical information found:

- Full name of the deceased
- Date and place of death
- Age at death or date of birth
- Spouse’s name (*esposo/esposa*)
- Parents’ names (sometimes)
- Cause of death (*causa de la muerte*)

Glossary of Common Spanish Record Terms

Spanish	English
<i>Acta</i>	Record, certificate
<i>Bautismo</i>	Baptism
<i>Barrio</i>	Neighborhood, rural sector within a <i>pueblo</i>
<i>Contrayentes</i>	The contracting parties (bride and groom)
<i>Defunción</i>	Death
<i>Esposo / Esposa</i>	Husband / Wife
<i>Fecha</i>	Date
<i>Hijo/a legítimo/a</i>	Legitimate child (born to married parents)
<i>Hijo/a natural</i>	Natural child (born to unmarried parents)
<i>Hijo/a de crianza</i>	

Spanish	English
	Child raised by someone other than birth parents
<i>Lugar</i>	Place
<i>Madrina</i>	Godmother
<i>Matrimonio</i>	Marriage
<i>Nacimiento</i>	Birth
<i>Natural de</i>	Native of, born in
<i>Nombre</i>	Name
<i>Padrino</i>	Godfather
<i>Pueblo</i>	Town, municipality
<i>Registro Civil</i>	Civil registry
<i>Testigo</i>	Witness
<i>Vecino/a de</i>	Resident of
<i>Viudo / Viuda</i>	Widower / Widow

Your Turn: Identify Your Next Document to Find

Based on what you know from Modules 1 and 2, answer:

Which ancestor do you want to find a record for first?

What type of record will you look for? (birth / marriage / death)

What *pueblo* in Puerto Rico should you search?

What approximate year should you search?

Which website will you use to search?

Reflection Questions

- Do you know which *pueblo* your family came from? If not, that's your top priority – ask relatives or look at migration records.
- Have you checked whether your local public library offers free access to Ancestry.com?
- Could church records fill gaps where civil records are missing (especially before 1885)?

What's Next

In **Module 4 – Keep a Research Log**, you'll learn how to track your searches, record what you find (and what you don't find), and begin citing your sources. This is the habit that separates casual searching from real research.

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