



*Puerto Rican
Genealogy Group*
Instructor: Sylvia
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Looking for Ancestors in Historical Puerto Rican Newspapers

Lesson 2: The Gaceta de Puerto Rico and Chronicling America

Estimated Time: 45 minutes

Difficulty: Intermediate

Prerequisites: Lesson 1

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Navigate Chronicling America to find Puerto Rican newspaper titles
2. Filter results by territory, newspaper title, and date range
3. Conduct a keyword search and interpret the results

4. Identify the types of genealogical records available in the *Gaceta de Puerto Rico* and three other Chronicling America titles
 5. Apply specific search terms to locate slavery-related notices in colonial Puerto Rican newspapers
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Section 1: What Is Chronicling America?

Chronicling America is a freely accessible digital archive maintained by the Library of Congress. It holds more than 22 million pages of historic American newspapers digitized through the National Digital Newspaper Program, a partnership between the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

For Puerto Rican researchers, Chronicling America is the single most important starting point for newspaper research. It holds six Puerto Rican newspaper titles, more than 33,000 issues, covering the period from 1756 to 1963. All content is free, searchable by keyword, and available as digitized page images.

Access Chronicling America at: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Section 2: Puerto Rican Titles on Chronicling America

Before you begin searching, it helps to know which titles are available and what each is likely to contain.

Gaceta de Puerto Rico (1806–1902)

The *Gaceta de Puerto Rico* is the oldest and most genealogically valuable newspaper in Puerto Rican history. As the official colonial government gazette, it published:

- Royal decrees and administrative orders
- Land grants, property transactions, and tax notices
- Militia appointments and military records
- Birth, marriage, and death announcements from official sources
- Legal notices affecting named individuals
- Slave sale advertisements, manumission notices, and runaway notices (pre-1873)
- Post-1873 *liberto* labor contract disputes
- Electoral census lists (*Censo electoral para Diputados a Cortes*): official voter eligibility lists for Spanish parliamentary elections, naming voters by full name, municipality, barrio, and qualification for voting

Chronicling America holds 10,643 digitized issues of the *Gaceta*, covering 1836 to 1902. The Library of Congress item record is at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2013201074/>

Research implication: For ancestors who owned property, held any official position, were involved in legal proceedings, or were enslaved or freed in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico, the *Gaceta* is your first newspaper stop.

Electoral census tip: Search the *Gaceta* for censo electoral or diputados a cortes to find voter eligibility lists. An ancestor's appearance confirms their presence in a specific barrio and indicates property or professional status. Voter eligibility before late 19th-century reforms was restricted to men who owned property, paid taxes, or held recognized occupations: absence from the list does not mean absence from the town.

Boletín Mercantil de Puerto Rico (1839–1918)

The *Boletín Mercantil* was the second major colonial-era paper. It is particularly valuable for reconstructing the economic and social lives of ancestors connected to commerce, land, or elite networks. Property sales, business partnerships, and travel notices appear throughout its run. Chronicling America holds 34 of 37 years in print. Item record: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021270641/>

La Correspondencia de Puerto Rico (1890–1943)

Founded in San Juan on December 18, 1890, by Ramón B. López, *La Correspondencia* was the first daily newspaper in Puerto Rico accessible to a wide public: priced at one cent, it quickly reached a daily print run of 5,000 copies. Its vital notices often include family detail that official records omit: birthplaces, parents' names, occupations, and lists of surviving relatives. Item record: <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn91099747/>

La Democracia (Ponce, 1890–1948)

Founded and published by Puerto Rican poet, journalist, and politician Luis Muñoz Rivera, *La Democracia* covered political activity, community leadership, and land disputes. Chronicling America holds more than 4,244 issues from 1891 to 1907. Item record: <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn90070270/>

Section 3: Step-by-Step – Searching Chronicling America for Your Ancestors

Step 1: Go to the Site

Open <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> in your browser.

Step 2: Filter by Territory

On the main search page, look for the “**Limit by State**” dropdown. Scroll down to find **Puerto Rico** and select it. This narrows results to Puerto Rican newspapers only.

Step 3: Filter by Newspaper Title (Optional)

If you want to search within a specific newspaper, use the “**Select Newspapers**” option to choose one title. If you are not sure which paper to start with, leave this unfiltered.

Step 4: Set a Date Range

Use the “**Select Date Range**” fields to narrow your search. For pre-civil-registration ancestors (born or married before 1885), start with a range 3–5 years around the estimated event date. For 20th-century research, use a tighter range of 1–2 years.

Step 5: Enter Your Search Terms

In the “**All of the words**” field, enter your ancestor’s surname. Start with the surname alone. If the results are too broad, add a given name or town name.

Search tip: Accent marks are often stripped by the OCR (optical character recognition) process that converts newspaper images to searchable text. Search for Mendez rather than Méndez. Try multiple spellings if the first search returns nothing.

Step 6: Review Results and Browse Images

Results show matching pages with keyword highlights. Click any result to open the page image. Use the zoom controls to read the original text.

If a keyword search returns no results, switch to **Browse** mode: select a newspaper title and date range and read through issues directly. This is often more productive than keyword searches in heavily degraded OCR text.

Step 7: Save or Download

Each page image can be downloaded as a PDF or JPEG. Save the image and create a citation before moving on. Use the URL of the specific issue page as your source reference.

Section 4: Searching for Slavery-Related Records in Chronicling America

The *Gaceta de Puerto Rico* and the *Boletín Mercantil* published slave-related notices throughout the slavery period, which ended with abolition in 1873. After abolition, the same papers published notices related to freed persons (*libertos*) under the patronato system, which governed labor contracts until 1876.

For researchers with ancestors who were enslaved, who enslaved others, or who held labor contracts in the patronato period, newspapers offer evidence that appears in few other sources.

What to Look For

- **Slave sale advertisements:** naming the enslaved person, sometimes including age, origin, skills, and physical description
- **Runaway slave notices:** detailed physical descriptions and sometimes information about the enslaved person's place of origin or family
- **Manumission notices:** formal announcements of freedom, often naming the enslaved person, the previous owner, and sometimes a monetary value
- **Liberto labor contract disputes:** post-1873 notices in which freed persons or their former enslavers contested the terms of labor contracts

Search Terms for Slavery Research in Chronicling America

Use these terms in combination with a Puerto Rican town name or municipality for the most focused results. Because OCR text often strips accent marks, search without them.

Search Term	What It Finds
esclavo	References to enslaved men
esclava	References to enslaved women
manumision	Manumission notices (accent stripped by OCR)
liberto	Freed men under the post-1873 patronato
liberta	Freed women under the post-1873 patronato
patrocinado	Persons under patronato labor contracts (1873–1876)
patrocinada	Women under patronato labor contracts
carta de libertad	Documents of freedom granted to enslaved persons
se ha fugado	“Has escaped” – runaway slave notices
se vende	“For sale” – may appear in slave sale advertisements

Search tip: Owner surnames appear in manumission and sale notices. If you know the name of an enslaving family in your research, search for that surname alongside esclavo or manumision. Freed persons frequently adopted the surname of their former enslaver or a saint's name after 1873.

Research implication: The 1872 Padrón General de Esclavos (the slave census taken one year before abolition) is the most systematic record of enslaved people in Puerto Rico. Cross-reference any newspaper findings with the 1872 Padrón, available through FamilySearch at https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Puerto_Rico_Slavery_Records.

Key Terms

Term	Definition
Chronicling America	Free Library of Congress digital archive of historic American newspapers, including Puerto Rico
OCR	Optical character recognition; the process that converts newspaper images to searchable text; often imperfect, especially for Spanish-language content
<i>Gaceta de Puerto Rico</i>	Official colonial government gazette, 1806–1902; the most genealogically valuable Puerto Rican newspaper
<i>Liberto/Liberta</i>	Freed person; term used in Puerto Rican records after abolition in 1873
<i>Patrocinado/Patrocinada</i>	Person under the patronato labor contract system, 1873–1876
Manumission	The formal act of freeing an enslaved person; documented in official notices
Patronato	The labor contract system that governed freed persons in Puerto Rico from 1873 to 1876

Reflection Questions

1. You are searching for an ancestor with the surname Rodríguez who lived in Bayamón around 1870. What search terms would you try first in Chronicling America, and why would you search without the accent mark?
 2. The *Gaceta de Puerto Rico* and *La Correspondencia de Puerto Rico* were published for different audiences. How would that difference affect what type of genealogical information each is likely to contain about the same family?
 3. Your ancestor was freed from enslavement in Puerto Rico in 1873. Which section of the *Gaceta* would you search, and what specific search terms would you use?
 4. You search Chronicling America for your ancestor's surname and find no results in the keyword search. What is your next step?
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Class Exercise

Open Chronicling America at <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>. Filter by Puerto Rico. Select the *Gaceta de Puerto Rico* as your newspaper. Set a date range of 1860–1875.

Search for the term *manumision* (without accent). Record the following in your Newspaper Search Log (WS-01):

- How many results appeared
- The date and title of one result you found
- What information about a named person appears in that notice
- The URL of the specific issue page

If no results appear for *manumision*, try *liberto* or *esclava* in the same date range and record what you find.

What's Next

Lesson 3 moves beyond *Chronicling America* to the digital portals based in Puerto Rico itself. You will learn to navigate ADNPR, the Biblioteca Digital Puertorriqueña, the Digital Library of the Caribbean, and the El Mundo Digital Archive.

[Continue to Lesson 3: Puerto Rico's Own Free Portals]

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