



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

Lesson 4: Search Strategies and a Case Study

Estimated Time: 45 minutes

Difficulty: Intermediate

Prerequisites: Lessons 1, 2, and 3

Learning Objectives

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

1. Apply name variation strategies appropriate to Spanish-language colonial records
2. Adapt search approaches for women, widows, and female property holders
3. Plan a date range strategy for newspaper research around a known life event
4. Decide when to use keyword search versus browsing

5. Extract multiple genealogical data points from a single colonial legal notice
 6. Apply the Esquela Extraction Form (WS-02) to a real newspaper source
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Section 1: Name Variation Strategies

Spanish-language genealogical sources, especially nineteenth-century colonial newspapers, present naming challenges that you will not encounter in most English-language records. Understanding these patterns before you search will save you significant time.

Patronymics and Compound Surnames

In the Spanish naming tradition, a person carries two surnames: the father's first surname followed by the mother's first surname. In records, a person might appear as:

- Juan Bonet Méndez (father's surname Bonet, mother's surname Méndez)
- Juan Bonet y Méndez (with the connector *y*)
- Juan Bonet (first surname only, common in casual or legal notices)
- Juan de Bonet (rare, but found in older colonial records)

Search for the first surname alone first. Then search for both surnames together. Do not assume that a record using only one surname refers to a different person.

OCR and Accent Marks

The OCR process that converts newspaper images to searchable text was designed primarily for English-language content. Spanish accent marks (á, é, í, ó, ú, ñ) are frequently stripped, misread, or replaced with incorrect characters.

Always search both forms: - Méndez and Mendez - González and Gonzalez - María and Maria

Search tip: When in doubt, search only the first three or four letters of a surname. A search for Men will return both Mendez and Méndez along with other surnames beginning with those letters. This is less precise but more thorough when OCR quality is poor.

Spelling Variation in Colonial Records

Colonial Puerto Rican records show consistent spelling variation that reflects how scribes and typesetters heard names rather than how families spelled them. Common patterns:

- Rosado and Rosado (generally stable, but look for Rrosado in poor OCR)
 - Bonet and Bonnet (French-origin surname common in Puerto Rico)
 - Mañuz and Mañuez (variation in this specific surname found in Rincón records)
 - Given names: Bibiana may appear as Viviana, Bebiana, or Bibiana
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Section 2: Searching for Women

Women in colonial Puerto Rican records present a specific challenge: they are often identified not by their own name but by their relationship to a man.

Common Patterns for Women in Newspapers

- **“Viuda de [husband’s name]”:** “Widow of [name].” Used as the primary identifier for widows in legal and community notices. Example: *Viuda de José María Rodríguez*.
- **“Sucesión de”:** “Estate of.” When a property holder died and their heirs had not yet settled the estate, notices often named the *sucesión* rather than individual heirs.
- **Wife listed under husband:** In vital notices, a married woman’s name often appears as part of her husband’s entry: “*Juan Bonet y su esposa Bibiana*”.

Search Strategies for Women

1. Search for the husband’s name and read surrounding text for the wife’s name.
2. Search for *viuda* combined with the husband’s surname.
3. Search for *sucesión* combined with a known family surname.
4. If a woman held property in her own name (as widows often did), search her surname directly.

Research implication: Women who appear in their own right in colonial Puerto Rican newspapers – as property holders, as parties to legal notices, as business owners – are often widows or women with independent economic status. When you find a woman named in her own right, note it: it tells you something about her circumstances.

Section 3: Date Range Planning

Newspaper searches without a date range can return thousands of results across decades. A focused date range is essential.

Rules of Thumb

- **For a birth:** Search 1–2 years before and after the estimated birth date.
- **For a marriage:** Search 3–6 months before and after the estimated marriage date (announcements appear before and after the event).
- **For a death:** Search 1–4 weeks around the known or estimated death date for the notice or *esquela*, and 6–12 months after for probate and property notices.
- **For property research:** If you know an ancestor lived in a place during a certain decade, search the full decade range. Property transactions do not always cluster around life events.

The Pre-1885 Window

For ancestors born or married before 1885, newspapers are often your only named source outside of church records. The most genealogically productive window in the *Gaceta de Puerto Rico* is **1840–1885**: after enough issues survive to be genealogically useful and before civil registration began.

Section 4: Browsing vs. Keyword Searching

Keyword searching is faster, but it depends on legible OCR text. For heavily degraded newspaper images, browsing may be more productive.

When to Browse Instead of Search

- When keyword searches return no results despite evidence that your ancestor should appear
- When you are working in a time period or municipality where OCR quality is likely to be poor
- When you want to understand the context: what else was happening in your ancestor's town and time period
- When you are looking for a common surname that will return too many results to review

How to Browse Effectively

1. Select a specific newspaper title and date range.
 2. Sort by date and work forward or backward from a known event.
 3. Read the full municipal news section (often titled *Noticias locales*, *Municipios*, or the municipality name) rather than searching by keyword.
 4. Note the names of neighbors, witnesses, and associates. These FAN club connections (family, associates, neighbors) may lead you to your ancestor indirectly.
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Section 5: Case Study – Bibiana Bonet Méndez, Rincón, 1872

The following case study uses a real colonial newspaper notice from Rincón, Puerto Rico, dated July 20, 1872. It demonstrates how to find a notice, how to read it, and what genealogical conclusions you can draw from it.

The Source

The notice appears in a colonial Puerto Rican newspaper under the heading *Alcaldía Municipal del Rincón* (Municipal Mayor's Office of Rincón). It is a public announcement of a tax auction. The full text, translated, reads:

On the twenty-seventh of August, at exactly twelve o'clock noon and in front of the Town Hall, public auctions will be held for the sale of the properties listed, belonging to the individuals named, in order to collect unpaid Royal and Municipal taxes owed from previous years. Notice is given for public knowledge and competition among bidders, with the warning that no bid less than two-thirds of the assessed value will be accepted.

The notice lists property holders by name, with property descriptions and assessed values per *cuerda* (a traditional Puerto Rican unit of land, approximately 0.97 acres). Among the names listed:

Bibiana Bonet, id. id., 2 id. de id., á 30 id. id.

The notice is dated: *Rincón 20 de Julio de 1872. El Alcalde, Valle.*

What the Abbreviations Mean

Colonial tax notices used heavy abbreviations to save typesetting costs. In the context of this notice:

- **id.** is short for *idem*, Latin for “the same.” Each use of *id.* refers back to the previous entry.
- The first *id. id.* refers to the same town and barrio as the entry immediately before Bibiana’s.
- *2 id. de id.* means 2 units of the same measurement as the previous entry (*cuerdas*).
- *á 30 id. id.* means at 30 of the same unit as the previous entry (pesetas per *cuerda*).

Reading the abbreviations: Bibiana Bonet held 2 *cuerdas* of land in the same *barrio* as the person listed just before her, assessed at 30 pesetas per *cuerda*, with unpaid Royal and Municipal taxes.

What This Notice Tells Us

From this single legal notice, we can establish several facts about Bibiana Bonet Méndez in 1872:

1. **She was alive in Rincón in July 1872.** The notice is dated July 20, 1872.
2. **She held property.** She owned at least 2 *cuerdas* of land in Rincón.
3. **She held property in her own name.** In colonial Puerto Rico, a married woman’s property was typically listed under her husband. If Bibiana appears in her own name, she may have been widowed or unmarried at this point.
4. **She owed unpaid taxes.** The property was subject to a tax auction in August 1872.
5. **She lived in a specific barrio.** The *id. id.* construction ties her location to the person listed immediately before her in the notice.

Research implication: Property appearing in a woman’s own name in 1872 suggests she was a widow at that time. Cross-reference: check civil death records or church burial records for a husband with surname Bonet in Rincón in the years before 1872.

Other Names in the Same Notice

The same tax notice lists several other individuals from Rincón. Their names are genealogically significant because they lived in the same barrio, in the same period, as Bibiana Bonet:

- **Narciso Rosado** – barrio Cruz, 1 cuerda at 35 pesetas/cuerda
- **Viuda de José María Rodríguez** – (identified as widow, not by her own name)
- **Juan Ángel Crespo Sucesión** – estate, not individual
- **Germán Valentín** – present in Rincón in 1872; note for cross-referencing with Valentín family research
- **Julián Mañuz Sucesión** – estate
- **Antonio Méndez** – shares surname with Bibiana’s maternal line
- **Manuel Reyes Méndez** – shares Méndez surname
- **Antonio Lorenzo Ruiz** – note the surname Lorenzo, common in records with enslaved-ancestor surname signals
- **Juan Mata Valle** – note the surname Valle; the *Alcalde* (mayor) who signed the notice is also Valle

The mayor’s surname, Valle, and the presence of Valle-connected individuals in the notice is worth noting for FAN club research.

Cross-References to Pursue

Based on this 1872 tax notice, the next research steps for Bibiana Bonet Méndez are:

1. **1872 Padrón General de Esclavos:** Check whether any individuals named in this notice appear in the slave census taken the same year.
2. **1880 Spanish census (Rincón):** Look for Bibiana Bonet and her household.
3. **Civil records post-1885:** Search for any death, marriage, or birth records involving Bonet or Méndez in Rincón.
4. **Church records (Rincón parish):** Search for baptism, marriage, and burial records for Bonet and Méndez.
5. **Additional Gaceta issues:** Search for Bibiana Bonet in the years 1865–1885 for any other property or legal notices.

Applying the Esquela Extraction Form (WS-02)

The Esquela Extraction Form was designed for obituaries, but the same extraction logic applies to legal notices: record every named person, every place, every date, and every relationship the document implies. Use WS-02 for the Bibiana Bonet notice to practice extracting all data points before moving on.

Key Terms

Term	Definition
<i>Id. / Idem</i>	Latin: “the same”; used as abbreviation in colonial notices to refer back to the previous entry
<i>Cuerda</i>	

Term	Definition
	Traditional Puerto Rican unit of land, approximately 0.97 acres
<i>Alcaldía</i>	Municipal mayor's office; source of official local government notices
<i>Sucesión</i>	Estate; used when property was listed in the name of a deceased person's heirs collectively
<i>Viuda de</i>	"Widow of"; common identifier for women in colonial records
FAN club	Family, Associates, and Neighbors; the circle of people who appear alongside your ancestor in records

Reflection Questions

1. In the Bibiana Bonet notice, she is listed under her own name rather than a husband's name. What does this suggest about her marital status in 1872, and how would you test that hypothesis in other records?
2. The notice lists *Antonio Méndez* and *Manuel Reyes Méndez* in the same barrio as Bibiana Bonet Méndez. What research step would you take next to determine whether these individuals share a family connection with Bibiana?
3. Germán Valentín appears in the same 1872 notice as Bibiana Bonet. How would you use this co-appearance to advance research on both families?
4. You have found the 1872 tax notice through a keyword search on Chronicling America. What other search terms or date ranges would you try next to find additional newspaper evidence for Bibiana Bonet?

Class Exercise

Using the Esquela Extraction Form (WS-02), extract all genealogical data points from the Bibiana Bonet 1872 tax notice described in this lesson. For each row of the form, either fill in the information found in the notice or mark it as "not stated."

When you have completed the form, write two sentences describing what you now know about Bibiana Bonet that you did not know before finding this notice, and one sentence identifying the most important research question the notice raises.

What's Next

Lesson 5 covers what is not yet digitized, which Puerto Rican archives hold newspaper collections available only in person, and how to plan a productive research visit.

[Continue to Lesson 5: What's Not Online and Planning On-Site Research]

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