Teaching Genealogists AI™
Instructor: Sylvia Vargas

Puerto Rican Slave Record Research

Module 4 – Building the Research Bridge

Course Instructor: Sylvia Vargas
Organization: Puerto Rican Genealogy Group
Website: https://puertoricangenealogy.org
Date Created: 2026-02-26
Estimated Time: 30–45 minutes

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will:

• Use registry data to move into church, civil, and notarial records
• Understand how formerly enslaved people appear in records after 1873
• Draft a next-steps research plan from your extraction form data
• Connect the 1872 registry to the Genealogical Proof Standard framework

Step 5: Build the Research Bridge

The 1872 registry is a starting point, not an ending point. Use the data you extracted to move into three record types:

1. Church Records (Baptisms, Marriages, Burials)

Before civil registration began in 1885, enslaved and formerly enslaved people appeared in Catholic parish records. Use the parents' names, owner's name, and municipality to search for:

- Baptismal records for children (often noting the enslaved parent and the owner as godparent or witness)
- Marriage records (naming parents and sometimes origin)
- Burial records

FamilySearch collection for Puerto Rico Catholic Church Records, 1645–2021: https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1807092

Note: The Diocese of Mayagüez currently restricts access to parish registers for Rincón, Añasco, Mayagüez, and surrounding municipalities. For these areas, rely on civil records and the resources in this module.

2. Civil Registration Records (Post-1885)

After civil registration began on June 17, 1885, formerly enslaved people and their descendants appear in birth, marriage, and death records. Search using:

- The surnames they adopted after abolition (often taken from the owner, from a godparent, or self-chosen)
- The municipality recorded in the 1872 registry
- Birth years calculated from ages in the registry

FamilySearch collection for Puerto Rico Civil Registration, 1885–2001: https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1682798

3. Notarial Records and Property Documents

The owner's name from the 1872 registry opens the door to property records, estate inventories, and notarial documents where enslaved people appear in transactions. Contact the Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR) for notarial records: https://www.icp.pr.gov/archivo-general/

Practice Exercise 3 – Write Your Next Steps (10 min)

From your extraction form data, draft three specific next searches:

1. **One church search:** Parents' names + municipality = search for baptism or marriage records
2. **One civil search:** Surname + municipality + post-1885 date range = search for civil registration
3. **One owner search:** Owner's name + municipality = search in notarial or property records

Write these as specific search statements, not general goals. Example:

> "Search FamilySearch Catholic Church Records for a baptism entry for [Name], child of [Mother], in [Municipality], ca. 1855–1870."

How Formerly Enslaved People Appear After 1873

After abolition, individuals who had been registered as *esclavo/esclava* began appearing in records under new categories:

Period	Legal Category	Where They Appear
Pre-1873	*Esclavo/Esclava*	Slave registries, parish records noting owner
1873–1876	*Liberto/Liberta*	Labor contract records, parish records
Post-1876	Free person by surname	Civil registration, census records, church records

Surnames adopted after abolition are varied. Some individuals took the surname of their former owner; others chose the name of a godparent, a town, or a name with personal meaning. Be prepared to search under multiple surname possibilities.

GPS Application: Building a Compliant Conclusion

A GPS-compliant conclusion about an enslaved ancestor requires more than the 1872 registry alone. Use the registry as the foundation of a corroboration chain:

1. **Registry entry (1872):** Identifies the person by name, origin, parents, and owner in a specific municipality
2. **Church record:** Confirms identity through baptism or marriage with overlapping details
3. **Civil record (post-1885):** Documents the family in the new civil system under their surname
4. **Negative evidence:** Document explicitly that you searched and found no record – this is meaningful data

When you cannot find corroborating records (due to restrictions, damage, or gaps), document the limitation clearly and state what you were unable to verify and why.

Key Background for Your Citations

- The 1872 registry is part of NARA Record Group 186 (Records of the Spanish Governors of Puerto Rico), microfilm publication T1121
- Slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico on March 22, 1873
- Conditional labor contracts were required for three years after abolition (ending 1876)
- The Moret Law of 1870 had already freed children born to enslaved mothers after September 17, 1868