

PUERTO RICO

GUIDE

STATE RESEARCH

BY LAUREN GAMBER

HISTORY HAS CREATED a unique heritage mix on Puerto Rico. Christopher Columbus claimed the island for Spain in 1493. Four hundred years later, after the Spanish-American War, Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States. By then, the Spanish had left their mark on the island nicknamed Isle of Enchantment, as evidenced by its language, dominant religion (Roman Catholic) and art.

Although Puerto Rico's official languages are Spanish and English, its culture is decidedly Spanish—with a twist of African, Indian and Anglo influences. As you trace your Puerto Rican roots, don't be surprised if you discover African, French, British, Dutch or South American ancestors. Immigrants from all over have settled here—something to keep in mind as you begin your ancestral island adventure.

Cultural blend

Taino Indians lived on the island when Columbus arrived, but European diseases and enslavement by the Spanish decimated their numbers. Juan Ponce de León founded the island's first town, Caparra, in 1508. By 1521, the town had moved and was renamed Puerto Rico ("rich port"). It later became San Juan, and the island was called Puerto Rico.

The Spanish brought African and Indian slaves to work their gold mines and sugar cane plantations. Spanish men often married indigenous and African women. During the latter 1500s, Spain turned San Juan into a military outpost, and the British, French and Dutch began to fight over and settle other Caribbean islands. As Spain encouraged population growth in Puerto Rico, Canary Islanders, French from Louisiana and Haiti, and Spaniards from the Dominican Republic (then Santo Domingo) settled there. Sugar cane and coffee plantations prospered. In the mid-1800s, immigrants from China, Italy, Germany, Scotland, Ireland, Corsica and Lebanon made their way to the island.

After the United States obtained Puerto Rico in 1898, Americans began moving there. Jews lived there even though Spain had forbidden it; in the 1930s and 1940s, European Jews sought refuge on the island. Migration and improved health conditions resulted in a population increase that strained the economy in the early 1900s. The Great Depression, an earthquake and hurricanes worsened the situation. In the 1930s, many Puerto Ricans moved to the United States, the majority to New York City. They eventually dispersed throughout the United States, but New York still has a large Puerto Rican population. Those still in Puerto Rico, saw jobs shift from plantations and into cities. Today, Puerto Rico's population is largely urban with a quarter of residents living in San Juan. The island is a self-governing US territory and its residents are US citizens.

Latin lessons

Start your genealogical research by gathering as much information as you can from relatives, then focus on an ancestor whose name, hometown and approximate years of residence you know. With this basic information, you're ready to fill in the missing branches in your family tree.

Next, see the FamilySearch Wiki Puerto Rico pages <www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Puerto_Rico>. It details where to find records, particularly those you can borrow on microfilm through the Family History Library (FHL) and its branch FamilySearch Centers.

Puerto Rico's historical records are in Spanish, and even though many Puerto Ricans speak English today, Spanish dominates. If your Spanish is rusty, use FamilySearch's Spanish Letter-Writing Guide <www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Spanish_Letter_Writing_Guide> and our Spanish Genealogy Glossary <familytreemagazine.com/article/spanish-glossary>.

FAST FACTS

■ **US COMMONWEALTH STATUS:** 1952

■ **US TERRITORY STATUS:** 1898

■ **FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:** 1910

■ **TERRITORY-WIDE BIRTH, MARRIAGE AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:** 1931

■ **MUNICIPALITIES:** 78 (these function as counties)

■ **CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:**

Department of Health,
Demographic Registry,
Box 11854, Fernandez Juncos
Station, San Juan, Puerto Rico
00910, (787) 767-9120,
<www.salud.gov.pr/Programas/RegistroDemografico>



Records roster

Your best sources for Puerto Rican records, Hispanic Genealogical Society of New York vice president Charlie Fourquet says, are FamilySearch and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Northeast Region in New York City <archives.gov/northeast/nyc>. You'll also use records from Puerto Rico's Demographic Registry (*Registro Demográfico*) <www.salud.gov.pr/Programas/RegistroDemografico> and General Archive (*Archivo General de Puerto Rico*) <www.icp.gobierno.pr/programas/archivo-general-de-puerto-rico>. To see the FHL's holdings on Puerto Rico, click the Catalog tab at FamilySearch.org and choose Place Search. Type *Puerto Rico* and hit Search. Here's a snapshot of resources in the FHL and elsewhere:

■ **CENSUSES:** Puerto Ricans were enumerated in US censuses beginning in 1910. See the Record Reference section for information on finding federal census records. The government took a special census of Puerto Rico in 1935; NARA has these schedules on microfilm M1881.

■ **SLAVE REGISTERS:** The FHL has registers from 1867 to 1873, the year slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico. The NARA microfilm publication *Registro Central de Esclavos, 1872*—also available at NARA and on subscription site

Ancestry.com <ancestry.com>—lists slaves' names, physical descriptions, parents and owners.

■ **CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL RECORDS:** The Puerto Rican government recorded almost all births, marriages and deaths beginning in 1885; municipalities kept some records for earlier years. Many civil registrations are digitized on FamilySearch.org (you'll find Puerto Rico categorized with Caribbean records). If your ancestor's record isn't there, see the index of names with civil records on FHL film at <rootsweb.ancestry.com/~prwgm/microfilm_a01.htm>. Once you find the number of the reel you need, rent it through your FamilySearch Center.

You'll need to request records that aren't microfilmed. If the birth, marriage or death was before July 22, 1931, send a request to the Demographic Registry in the city or town where the person lived. Find addresses at <welcome.topuertorico.org/reference/demogra.shtml>. To get copies of records created since July 22, 1931, contact the Demographic Registry in San Juan (see Fast Facts).

Copies cost \$5 in the form of a money order payable to the Secretary of the Treasury. Include a signed letter indicating the full name of the person whose record you want, your relationship to that person and your reason

TOOLKIT

WEBSITES

- **AfriGeneas Caribbean Research Forum** <afriogeneas.com/forum-carib>
- **Caribbean Genealogy Research** <www.candoo.com/genresources>
- **Caribbean GenWeb Project** <rootsweb.ancestry.com/~caribgw>
- **Cyndi's List: Puerto Rico** <cyndislist.com/us/puerto-rico>
- **The Genealogy of Puerto Rico** <rootsweb.ancestry.com/~prwgw>
- **Hispanic Genealogy Center** <www.hispanicgenealogy.com>
- **PRRoots.com** <prroots.com>
- **Puerto Rico at the Dawn of the Modern Age** <memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/puertorico>

PUBLICATIONS

- *The Family Tree Sourcebook* by the editors of *Family Tree Magazine* (Family Tree Books)
- *Finding Your Hispanic Roots* by George R. Ryskamp (Genealogical Publishing Co.)
- *From Colonia to Community: The*

History of Puerto Ricans in New York City by Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol (University of California Press)

- *Not of Pure Blood: The Free People of Color and Racial Prejudice in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* by Jay Kinsbruner (Duke University Press)
- *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* by Jorge Duany (University of North Carolina Press)
- *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* by César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe (University of North Carolina Press)
- *Puerto Rico Past and Present: An Encyclopedia* by Ronald Fernandez, Serafín Méndez Méndez and Gail Cueto (Greenwood Press)

ARCHIVES & ORGANIZATIONS

- **Florida International University Libraries**
Latin American and Caribbean Information Center, Green Library 225, University Park Campus, Miami, FL 33199,

(305) 348-3142, <lacic.fiu.edu>

- **Hispanic Society of America**
613 W. 155th St., New York, NY 10032, (212) 926-2234, <www.hispanicsociety.org>
- **Center for Puerto Rican Studies**
Hunter College, CUNY, 695 Park Ave., Room E1429, New York, NY 10065, (212) 772-5688, <centropr.org>
- **NARA Northeast Region, New York City**
Alexander Hamilton US Custom House, One Bowling Green, New York, NY 10004, (866) 840-1752, <archives.gov/northeast/nyc>
- **New York State Archives**
Cultural Education Center, 11th floor, 222 Madison Ave., Albany, NY 12230, (518) 474-8955, <www.archives.nysed.gov>
- **Puerto Rico General Archive (Archivo General de Puerto Rico)**
Instituto de Cultura, Apartado 9024184, San Juan, Puerto Rico 00902, (787) 725-1060, <www.icp.gobierno.pr/programas/archivo-general-de-puerto-rico>

for the request; a copy of an identification card; and a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

■ **CHURCH RECORDS:** The Catholic Church and other religious organizations recorded baptisms, marriages and deaths before and after civil registration. To find church records, you must know the town where your ancestor lived and the parish he belonged to. The FHL has some church records on microfilm and on the free FamilySearch.org website. Most original records are still with the parish church (see a church directory at <www.churches-in.com/puerto+rico>), but one of five historical dioceses listed at <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholicism_in_Puerto_Rico#List_of_dioceses> might have copies..

■ **IMMIGRATION AND EMIGRATION RECORDS:** The FHL and NARA have various microfilmed records documenting people who moved in and out of Puerto Rico, particularly during the 1800s. That includes passport applications from 1795 to 1889 (those through 1925 are on Ancestry.com),

emigration records from 1816 to 1837, foreigners in Puerto Rico between 1815 and 1845, and airplane passengers from 1929 to 1941. Also see records of foreign residents of Puerto Rico (1815-1845) on FamilySearch.org.

From 1930 to 1959, the Bureau of Employment and Identification and the Migration Division of the Labor Department of Puerto Rico issued 47,342 English identification cards to US citizens born in Puerto Rico. The Center for Puerto Rican Studies at the City University of New York's Hunter College <www.centropr.org/prdiaspora.html> has the applications for these cards, plus documents used to prove US citizenship. These records provide birth date and place, residence, marital status and more. See 46 applications and search names of ID card applicants on the center's website.

■ **MILITARY RECORDS:** Check the FHL for microfilmed military records for Spaniards in Puerto Rico between 1793 and 1800. WWI and WWII draft registration cards are on FamilySearch.org and Ancestry.com. ■

TOP 5 HISTORIC SITES

TIMELINE

1 African Heritage Museum (Museo Nuestra Raíz Africana)
 San José Plaza, San Sebastián Street, San Juan, Puerto Rico 00900, (787) 724-4294

This museum preserves and documents the history of Puerto Rico’s black population.

2 Casa Blanca
 1 San Sebastián St., San Juan, Puerto Rico 00901, (787) 725-1454,
places.eyetour.com/whatToSee/san-juan/23/casa-blanca

Inhabited by Juan Ponce de León’s family (but not by the governor himself) for more than 250 years, *Casa Blanca* now houses a museum with antiques and artifacts from the 16th and 17th centuries.

3 The Fortress (La Fortaleza)
 1 Fortaleza St., San Juan, Puerto Rico 00902, (787) 721-7000, ext. 2211

Built in the mid-1500s, this structure is the oldest still-used governor’s mansion in the Western Hemisphere. Guided tours are available.

4 Hacienda Buena Vista
 Route 123, Kilometer Marker 16.8, San Juan, Puerto Rico 00902,
 (787) 722-5882, www.nps.gov/nr/travel/prvi/pr18.htm

Visit this “working” coffee plantation to catch a glimpse of rural 19th-century life—not to mention a beautiful view. The house contains many of the original furnishings, and the farm features antique equipment.

5 Tibes Ceremonial Park (Centro Ceremonial Indígena de Tibes)
 Route 503, Kilometer Marker 2.2, Ponce, Puerto Rico 00733, (787) 840-2255,
ponce.inter.edu/tibes/ingles/conozca.html

Discovered in 1975, this archaeological site contains pre-Taino ruins and burial grounds dating to about 400 AD. You’ll see ceremonial playing fields for a game thought to be similar to soccer, as well as stones carved with petroglyphs. Researchers have unearthed Indian remains here and believe the island’s early inhabitants practiced human sacrifice.

- **1493**
Christopher Columbus claims Puerto Rico for Spain
- **1873**
Slavery is abolished in Puerto Rico
- **1898**
Spain cedes Puerto Rico to the United States
- **1904**
Supreme Court ruling lets Puerto Ricans travel to US without going through immigration
- **1917**
Puerto Ricans are granted US citizenship
- **1932**
Island of “Porto Rico” reverts to its original spelling, “Puerto Rico”
- **1934**
Professional baseball player Roberto Clemente is born in Carolina
- **1952**
Puerto Rico becomes a self-governing US commonwealth
- **1959**
More than 20,000 Cuban exiles move to Puerto Rico after Fidel Castro comes to power
- **1961**
Puerto Rican-born actress Rita Moreno wins an Oscar for *West Side Story*
- **1998**
Puerto Rico votes to remain a commonwealth

VISITOR INFO

Puerto Rico Tourism Co.

La Princesa Building, No. 2 Paseo La Princesa, Old San Juan, PR 00902,
 (800) 866-7827, www.seepuertorico.com

STATE RESEARCH GUIDES: RECORD REFERENCE

No matter where in the United States your ancestor lived, you'll use the same strategies to obtain federal records including censuses, land patents, military service and pension records, immigration passenger lists and naturalizations. Here, you'll find instructions for accessing these records. You can rent the Family History Library's microfilmed records for viewing at your local branch FamilySearch Center; see <www.familysearch.org/films> for rental instructions.

■ **FEDERAL CENSUSES:** The US government began taking censuses every 10 years starting in 1790 (check the Fast Facts box in each state research guide for the state's first federal census with surviving records). The most recent census available for research is 1940. Although fire destroyed almost all of the 1890 census, a few schedules survive; check the guide for your ancestor's state for information on surviving fragments.

Extant records for US censuses are online at subscription sites Ancestry.com <ancestry.com> (free at subscribing libraries), findmypast.com <findmypast.com> and MyHeritage.com. HeritageQuest Online <heritagequestonline.com> (free through some libraries) has records through 1930; not all are indexed. The free FamilySearch.org <www.familysearch.org> has indexes for most censuses and record images for some, including the 1940 census.

Find census records on microfilm at the Family History Library (FHL) <www.familysearch.org>, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) <archives.gov> and many large libraries.

■ **FEDERAL LAND PATENTS:** An ancestor may have received federal land under the Homestead Act, in exchange for military service or for another reason. Visit the Bureau of Land Management General Land Office website <www.gloreCORDS.blm.gov> to search patents for lands the federal government distributed in public-land states (the Fast Facts box in each state research guide tells you if the state is a public-land state). These patents granted

the recipient ownership of the land. You can request copies of land entry case files—applications for federal land—from NARA. See <archives.gov/research/land> for information.

■ **FEDERAL MILITARY RECORDS:** NARA holds surviving federal service, pension and other military records from the American Revolution going forward. (Each State Research Guide covers important military record collections at the state archives and elsewhere.) Note that in general, pension records of Confederate Civil War soldiers are with the state archives where the pension request was filed. Copies of records from WWII and later are subject to privacy restrictions. See <archives.gov/research/military/genealogy.html> for more on military research at NARA.

Check genealogy websites such as Ancestry.com, Fold3.com and FamilySearch.org for indexes and images of military records from wars in which the United States participated. Online records are most plentiful for the American Revolution, War of 1812, Civil War and World Wars. You can search a free index to Union and Confederate Civil War soldiers and sailors at <www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>.

Even if your ancestor didn't serve, he may be named in WWI and/or WWII military draft cards if he was of draft age. Available cards are on Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org.

■ **IMMIGRATION PASSENGER LISTS:** The US government mandated ships to keep passenger lists starting in 1820. Early lists contain little passenger information, with more details added as time went on. Lists were created at the port of departure and

given to US officials upon arrival; they checked names on the lists against the arriving passengers.

You can search and view lists for nearly all US ports and northern/southern border entry points on Ancestry.com. New York was the nation's busiest immigration port; search its arrivals free at <www.castlegarden.org> (1820-1892; index only) and <www.ellisland.org>. Port of New York passenger indexes also are free at FamilySearch.org.

Microfilmed passenger lists are available through NARA and the FHL, as well as some major libraries. The film is organized by port, date and ship name. For pre-1820 immigrants, check *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index, 1500s-1900s* by P. William Filby, digitized on Ancestry.com and in print in many libraries. It compiles information about immigrants collected from a variety of records.

■ **NATURALIZATION RECORDS:** Naturalization wasn't legally required, and until 1922, a husband's citizenship status was conferred upon his wife. Before 1906, immigrants could file for naturalization in any court—local, state or federal. After 1906, naturalization records were forwarded to the US government. Naturalizations filed in US District Courts for many areas of the country are online (in indexes or as digital records) at Ancestry.com, Fold3.com or FamilySearch.org. Pre-1906 records filed in other courts would be among records for those courts. Order post-1906 records from the Citizenship and Immigration Service at <www.uscis.gov/genealogy>.