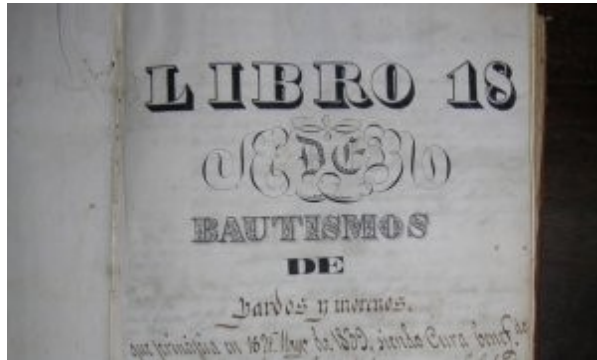




Published on *National Endowment for the Humanities* (<https://www.neh.gov>)

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Moldy Church Records in Latin America Document the Lives of Millions of Slaves

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Posted March 7, 2017

On Sunday, March 2, 1721, in the San Carlos Cathedral of the Cuban city of Matanzas, Father Francisco Gonsales del Alamo laid hands on a black slave named Francisco, to mark his entry into the Catholic Church. Though his exact age is unknown, Francisco was a grown man, thought to be of Mina extraction—meaning that he came from or passed through Elmina, a port city in what is now South Ghana that was once an important hub in the slave trade. Less than three weeks later another Matanzas priest, Thomas de Oruera, gave the same sacrament to Bartolome Joseph, a four-month-old baby boy of mixed European and African ancestry near the point of death, who was born free. A six-week-old infant named Ana that de Oruera baptized that summer had a different fate. Of Arará descent (traceable to modern-day Benin), she was born into slavery. The holy rites were witnessed by her godfather, Joseph, who, like Ana's parents, was a slave of one Don Juan Joseph de Justis. We know these details of this complex community because of rediscovered baptismal books kept by the Matanzas clergy, who noted each ceremony in sprawling script.

Until recently, the names and lives of individuals like Ana, Bartolome Joseph, and Francisco—and millions of others who toiled on the sugar plantations of colonial Cuba or in the mines of eighteenth-century Brazil—were thought to have vanished. Undertakings like the [Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database](#) have helped reclaim some of their history, giving a picture of the enormous scale of the slave trade by tracing the routes of roughly 10 million Africans forcibly transported to the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Now, an international team of researchers is working to fill in missing details about those individuals by rescuing church and municipal records before these documents disappear for good.

The Ecclesiastical and Secular Sources for Slave Societies (ESSSS) project brings together endangered records from Cuba, Brazil, Colombia, and Spanish Florida that document the lives of between four and six million African and Afro-descended individuals, and the indigenous Americans and Europeans who lived alongside them. Over 13 years of hunting through the archives and basements of cathedrals and parish churches produced three centuries' worth of handwritten documents. It is the most extensive continuous record we have of the African diaspora in the Americas and offers new insights into the history of countries that still struggle with the political, economic, and social legacies of slavery.

That these records exist is due chiefly to the reach of the Catholic Church in colonial Latin America, explains Jane Landers, a historian who leads the ESSSS project at Vanderbilt University. In the fifteenth century, fearful that newcomers would import Islamic or heathen practices, the Church mandated the baptism of slaves from Africa, and later extended the requirement across the Catholic Americas. Slaves were sometimes baptized while still in Africa, mid-voyage, or upon their arrival in the New World. Some may have been baptized several times, says Landers.

Absorption into the Church helped justify slavery as the salvation of African souls, but the practice also reflected legal codes dating to the Roman Empire, whereby any individual could become enslaved, for example, as a prisoner of war, or to atone for crimes. Unlike chattel slavery in English Protestant North America, slavery in Catholic Iberian colonies was not explicitly tied to race, but was instead a "legal condition," says Landers, and an impermanent one. Slaves could purchase their freedom through a process called *coartación*, or achieve emancipation through good deeds or acts of public service such as serving in the militia. Rates of manumission in Latin America were considerably higher than in the North American colonies, and there was a greater degree of intermarriage between races. Thus for theological and practical reasons, Catholic spiritual and sacramental requirements applied to free and enslaved alike.

Among the oldest church records located by ESSSS are those from St. Augustine, Florida, which date from the 1590s and show a multiracial community of Spanish settlers, Africans, and Native Americans. "They predate the standard narrative of African-American history in the U.S.," says Landers. The first recorded baptism of a black person in St. Augustine was in 1606, one year before the settlement of Jamestown, and more than a decade before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. St. Augustine archives revealed that in the 1700s the city became a sanctuary for runaway slaves from Georgia and Carolina who were able to obtain freedom by joining the Catholic Church and swearing allegiance to Spain. "The first Underground Railroad ran south," says Landers. Ecclesiastical sources also confirmed that the illicit importation of Africans into North America continued well after the U.S. and Britain formally abolished the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, as slaves were brought into Florida, which was still under Spanish rule, and trafficked northward into the United States.

Once they were baptized into the Church, African slaves, free and enslaved indigenous peoples, and their descendants were documented through an ecclesiastical paper trail of confirmation records, marriage certificates, burial entries, wills, and, occasionally, divorce papers. When paired with secular municipal archives registering the sale and manumission of slaves, local deeds, bonds, and maps, the ESSSS database represents one of the largest and most diverse collections of historical documents about Africans in the Americas.

Church conventions ensured a degree of uniformity among the records. Across the Iberian colonies, baptismal records were divided up into books of *españoles* (white Spanish), *pardos* (of

mixed African and European ancestry), *morenos* (African), and *indios* (indigenous peoples). Each entry provides a wealth of detail about the baptized individual, including name, age, gender, date and place of ceremony and the name of the officiating priest, and names of godparents. The records list the baptized' parents and their ethnicity or nation of origin, and whether free or enslaved. If the entry refers to a child, it indicates whether he or she was born of a legitimate marriage or a "natural" child of unmarried parents. Records for slaves provide the names of their owners.

Baptismal books, along with similarly detailed marriage and burial records, allow us to reconstruct the biographies of these forgotten peoples, including their lineages, family connections, and movements. Because church scribes meticulously recorded the original nations and ethnicities of African congregants and their descendants, noting for example if they were Mandinga, Angolan, or Congolese, scholars are able to trace the history of specific groups and identify patterns within the slave trade as the importation of Africans shifted geographically.

Marriage and birth records demonstrate the creolization of Latin America, while connections forged between families through god-parentage (*compadrazgo*) and marriage sponsorships illustrate community networks, and suggest attempts by slaves to better their lot or secure freedom by aligning themselves with European colonists or freed blacks. Fraternal order books produced by black Catholic religious brotherhoods, or *cofradías*, detail the religious and social customs of the community, including how they celebrated major feast days and the special causes they contributed to, and identify local leaders and their political and economic networks. "There's a lot of wonderful stuff there on ritual and custom," says Landers, noting that church documents offer a level of detail on community social life that can't be found in secular records. Wills give us insights into the occupations and property owned by free and enslaved Africans. Ecclesiastical records even offer epidemiological details on life in the colonial Americas: Death records and registers of baptisms performed "in case of necessity" provide hard data on the outbreaks of typhus, yellow fever, malaria, smallpox, leprosy, and syphilis that decimated populations.

Landers and her team have amassed ecclesiastical records for more than 750,000 individuals through a process she jokingly refers to as "guerrilla preservation." Since 2003, ESSSS groups have made pilgrimages to churches and cathedrals in remote locations throughout Latin America—sometimes unannounced—with letters of introduction from a bishop or other church official, hoping to photograph as many documents as they could find. "We'd just show up. I would start to explain what we were doing while students set up cameras, and, before they knew it, we were working."

"Time is the enemy here," says Landers. "If we don't get it digitally preserved, it will be gone the next time we go back." Fragile and poorly protected, many of the documents have been eaten into lace by book-boring insects and oxidizing ink, or moldered by tropical heat, fungus, and humidity. ESSSS researchers have found caches of records in the backs of parish churches, wrapped in plastic grocery bags, piled on pesticide-covered boxes, or in stacks held together by bungee cords. Missing volumes sometimes turn up on Craigslist or at flea markets; some church archives have been tossed out or destroyed wholesale.

In many cases, neglect has been exacerbated by periods of war, famine, and political instability. The search for these endangered records has taken Landers's researchers deep into the Pacific jungle to Quibdó, one of the poorest and most isolated cities in Colombia. In the eighteenth century, the area was home to a large free black population, most of whom had purchased their

freedom by working in local gold mines. The last five decades, however, have transformed the region into a war zone, plagued by drug trafficking, violence, and armed conflicts between paramilitary groups like the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government. The same volatility that has displaced 20,000 local inhabitants has also placed the region's historic documents in peril. But, working with students from the Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó, ESSSS was able to locate and digitally preserve approximately 100,000 colonial records from parochial archives in the region, detailing the lives of local African and Afro-descended individuals and their role in Colombia's mining industry.

In Cuba, where relations between Church and state have been strained, the ecclesiastical records preserved by local Catholic stewards date back more than 400 years. These rediscovered religious documents show another side of Cuban history, says Landers, who used church records to investigate untold stories of Cuba's most famous nineteenth-century slave rebellions, which were previously known only through secular records of criminal investigations and military tribunals housed at the Spanish and Cuban national archives.

Through marriage and burial certificates, Landers was able to trace a web of connections linking many of the free blacks of Matanzas who were executed in the bloody 1843 crackdown on suspected insurgents—known as *La Escalera* for the ladders on which accused rebels were whipped to death. She found that the famous Havana-born mulatto poet, known as Plácido—whose wedding in Matanzas was attended by prominent white witnesses and godparents—grew up in the same orphanage as a well-to-do mulatto Matanzas dentist, who, through marriage to the daughter of a cleric, had intimate ties to the Church. Through the latter's well-connected family, both men had regular contact with other leaders of the city's free black community, including a notable black militia sergeant, a mulatto violinist and orchestra leader, and a pardo militia lieutenant, many of whom had been married at Matanzas' San Carlos Cathedral. Ironically, Landers determined, it was precisely these individuals' visibility in the church and military that allowed Cuban officials to track and target them as potential conspirators. Last wills and testaments recorded by the condemned men identified their heirs, left money for masses in their names, made donations to fund a school for girls, erect a new church statue, and pay alms to the convicts who would bury their bodies. The same priest who married many of them signed their burial registers, entering details of their wives, parents, and African ethnicities.

At each location, ESSSS researchers conduct digital preservation workshops for local communities and work with local universities to train historians, archivists, and students in digitization, metadata creation, and paleography (the study of historical handwriting). At the end of their stay, teams leave behind their cameras, tripods, and other equipment so that local partners can continue to photograph important records and upload them to the ESSSS online database, housed at Vanderbilt's Jean and Alexander Heard Library. To date, more than 80 people from institutions across the United States, Canada, Brazil, and Colombia have participated in ESSSS digitization efforts, and the project's influence on the field continues to grow. Students trained by ESSSS researchers have gone on to obtain PhDs and conduct their own research on African history in Latin America, apply ESSSS methods to the archives in more countries, and train new groups of students in digitizing colonial records. "It's got a generational life to it," says Landers.

While the group's first priority is locating and digitizing as many crumbling church records as they can "before it rots," says Landers, the ESSSS team is also working to make these previously untapped resources widely accessible for use by scholars and the public. At present, the ESSSS database contains 600,000 photographs of the original weather-beaten parchments, written in

difficult-to-decipher antique scripts. Landers hopes to recruit graduate students to transcribe the records and make them searchable. Meanwhile, through a recent NEH grant, the ESSSS project is moving its data to an open-source platform that will make it compatible with other online databases about the slave trade and facilitate collaboration among scholars.

Already, says Landers, the ESSSS archive is helping overturn false assumptions about the identities and experiences of slave and free Africans in the Americas. Popular conceptions of slavery, she says, typically derive from depictions of nineteenth-century antebellum America. “Nobody imagines that there were centuries of this earlier African history across all of the Americas.” But, she says, wherever there was a Catholic church, “it’s possible to get three centuries of lost lives.”

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