Sacred Names:
In Search of Ancient Cuban Slave Records
Dancing While Digitizing in Cuba

The sound of drums and the music from a Reggaeton band practicing in a Cuban street filled the air. Meanwhile Vanderbilt History Professor Jane Landers and her research team occasionally found themselves dancing to the serenade while rapidly taking digital photographs of sacramental records of African slaves who were imported into Cuba from the 16th through the 19th centuries.

Unfortunately, the decaying documents being photographed are in danger of being lost forever. Most of the records are held in religious archives of local Catholic churches and are at risk from climate, bug infestation and other damage.

In February, 2005, Landers made her second trip to Cuba with a seven-member team from Cuba, Canada, Brazil and the United States. The team from Vanderbilt consisted of Landers, her graduate student David Wheat and Paula Covington, the Latin American bibliographer for the Heard Library. Covington not only helped digitize records but also searched out and bought rare and difficult-to-obtain Cuban books for the Heard Library's Latin American collection. Also joining the contingent was Vanderbilt graduate Andrew McMichael, now an assistant professor of history at Western Kentucky University; York University graduate students Oscar Grandio Moráquez and Henry Lovejoy; and Brazilian archivist, Antonio Meneses.

Using techniques McMichael dubbed "guerrilla preservation," the researchers captured more than 40,000 digital images of records from churches in Havana, Regla and Matanzas. These documents ranged from 16th-century black marriages in Havana to burials of unbaptized Chinese who labored alongside African slaves on plantations in Matanzas.

Through the auspices of Vanderbilt’s Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Landers’ digital project has access to...
an impressive and innovative technical infrastructure prepared to support the research. University Librarian Paul Gherman has enthusiastically supported the project since its inception and has agreed to house the materials in the Heard Library’s Digital Collections, thus making them widely available to international scholars.

Catholic parish priests in Cuba faithfully recorded data of African slave baptisms, marriages and burials beginning in the 1500s. The churches also recorded, when known, parents’ names and occasionally alluded to birthplaces in Africa. These church sources comprise the longest serial data available for the history of Africans in the Americas.

Too often, however, local lay persons or parish priests are the documents’ only guardians. Some of these well-meaning individuals are unaware of the historic significance and fragility of the documents they manage. Sadly, there are few resources available to devote to preserving these decaying treasures and, if not captured quickly by digital cameras, some may be lost forever. Many of the materials have never been examined because some small churches in Cuba are no longer open. The dispersed nature of the records also makes them difficult for scholars to access.

Although conditions have improved since Landers first began working in Cuba in 1991, on occasion the team still went without water, electricity, sufficient electrical outlets or work areas in which to film. Obtaining lunches in some locations was another challenge. These are conditions with which Cubans struggle every day, of course, but the Vanderbilt team’s urgency was that it could not afford a single lost day of shooting. Church schedules and international politics both dictated a frenetic schedule.

The team might work at the church in Regla in the morning, take the ferry back to work at Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje in the afternoon, and the following day take a car to Matanzas for a day’s work at the Cathedral of San Carlos de Matanzas. As one team member presented letters and explained the project, another began a rough inventory of a church’s holdings, and others began shooting. Using eight megapixel digital cameras with extra memory chips and spare batteries, the team snapped images of the records and then downloaded them to a laptop computer for classification and storage.

In two trips to Cuba, Landers and her team have now captured more than 50,000 images, each of which might record entries for between five and eight individuals of African descent in targeted colonial churches of Matanzas, Havana and the Havana suburbs of Regla and Guanabacoa.

The work thus far has been funded by a $150,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant titled “Ecclesiastical Sources and Historical Research on the African Diaspora in Brazil and Cuba.” As the first phase of their collaboration nears its end, Landers and her chief research collaborators—Professor Mariza de Carvalho Soares of the Universidade Federal Fluminense in Brazil and Professor Paul Lovejoy of the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora at York University in Canada—are preparing to submit a new grant proposal to the NEH.

If approved, this renewal will allow Landers and the Cuba group to digitize the remaining archives of the many churches in Havana, and to expand into additional plantation areas, including Cienfuegos. Landers also plans to expand operations into Cartagena, Colombia, which was once the main slave port for South America.

Soares plans to expand her Brazil project to include all the churches in the Guanabara Bay area—a part of the country rich with sugar plantations and their attendant records. The project also hopes to open additional field offices in the Archive of the Curia of Rio de Janeiro and in Mina Gerais, where the wealth from gold and diamond mines supported rich 17th-century Brazilian churches and many black lay brotherhoods.

All in all, it’s a researching feat with a Reggae beat.