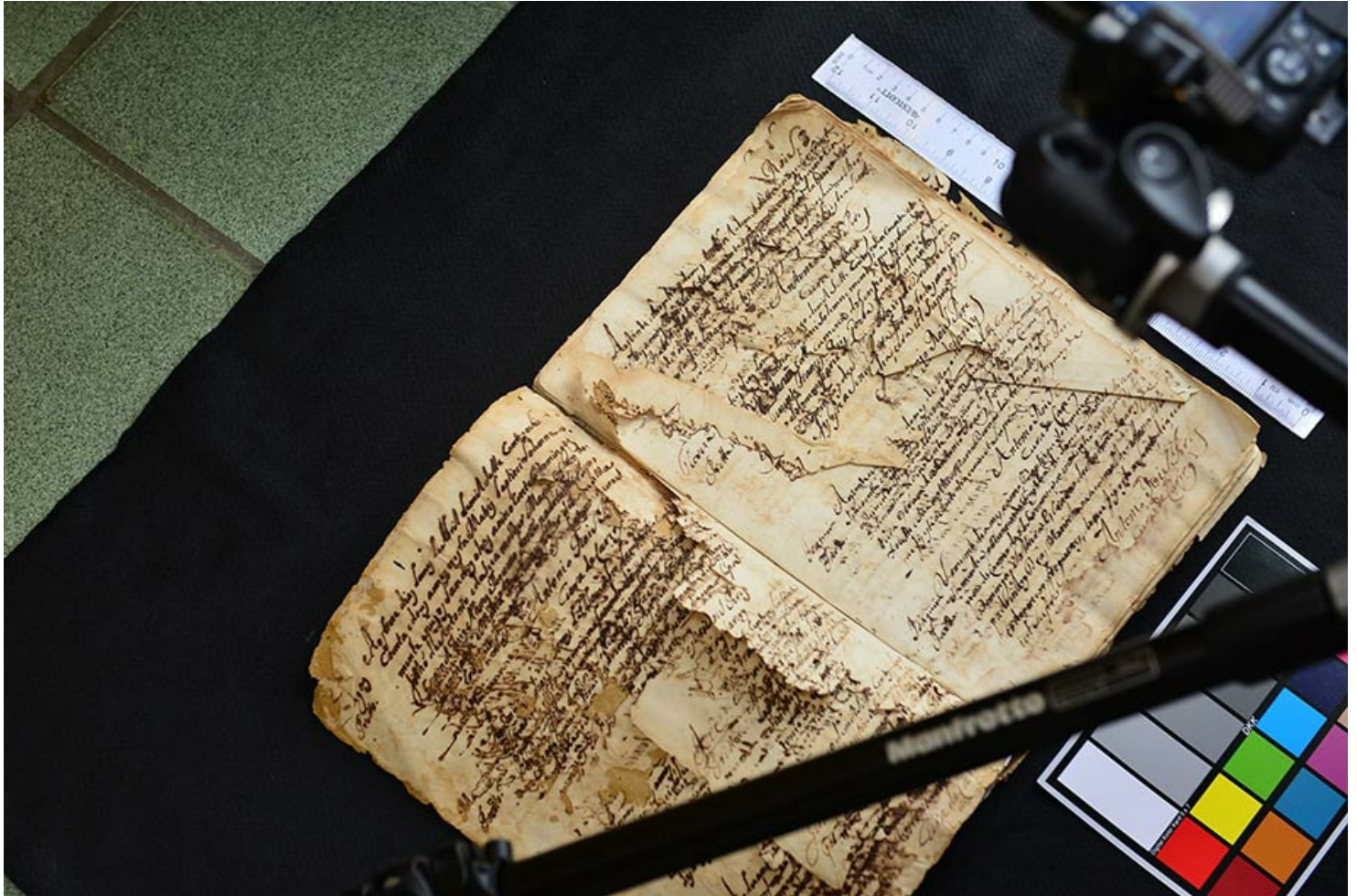


# From invisible to digital: digitising endangered historical documents in Brazil

[www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/courtney-j-campbell/from-invisible-to-digital-digitising-endangered-historical-documen](http://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/courtney-j-campbell/from-invisible-to-digital-digitising-endangered-historical-documen)

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Without documents, much of the history of the enslaved is lost. Digitisation offers a way to preserve rapidly deteriorating documents, but how does one actually set up a large-scale digitisation project?



Digitising documents at the parish church of Our Lady of the Miracles of São João do Cariri in São João do Cariri, Paraíba. Photos by David and Tara LaFevor. All rights reserved.

The personal histories of enslaved and oppressed peoples are notoriously difficult to access. This is especially true of people who lived in earlier historical periods, since information on their lived experiences usually come via third parties, such as foreign travellers writing about slavery for European audiences, or by way of court cases, [where their voices are only faintly heard](#). These sources are essential to understanding how slave societies worked, but they too often reduce the enslaved to a nameless and faceless crowd. While documents about the lives of the enslaved and free people of colour do exist, they tend to be hard to find and can often be in an advanced state of deterioration. We need these documents to create human historical narratives and to understand how individuals justified, resisted, accepted, and fought against enslavement and other forms of social oppression.

This piece considers one increasingly important method of bringing the lives of the invisible to light: the digitisation and dissemination of archival historical sources related to slavery and its afterlives. I draw upon personal experience arising from two research projects in the state of Paraíba, Brazil. The [first project](#) successfully digitised 266 ecclesiastical and secular documents stored at three institutions: the Waldemar Bispo Duarte Historical Archive; the Paraíba Historical and Geographical Institute in the coastal state capital of João Pessoa; and the Church of Our Lady of the Miracles of Saint John of the Cariri in the town of São João do Cariri in the interior of the state. The project digitised many types of documents, but the most exciting are the baptismal, marriage, and death records, which list the names and places of origin of the free, freed, and enslaved, as well as early land grants from the Portuguese government that describe the terrain in great detail.

A [second project](#), currently underway, focuses on criminal and notarial records (such as wills, land deeds, and other documents that require official stamps and signatures), and is projected to nearly double the first project in size. All of the materials generated by both projects are made accessible via the [Ecclesiastical and Secular Sources for Slave Societies](#) (ESSSS) website, which is housed at Vanderbilt University. Both projects have been supported by the [Endangered Archives Programme](#) (EAP) of the British Library, in turn supported by Arcadia, a fund dedicated to both environmental and historical conservation.

The following remarks explain the five main steps associated with these digitisation projects, and offer practical advice for undertaking similar projects in the future.

## **Step one: identifying partners and securing permissions**

Digitisation projects require the investment and expertise of many institutions and individuals. The first step involved entering into a partnership with ESSSS to house our digitised documents. This was done by contacting Vanderbilt University to explain how our digitised documents fit within the overall project of preserving and making available to the public documents related to slavery. Vanderbilt accepts the documents, ensures that they are hosted across several servers in several locations, and provides and updates the web interface for viewing.

While carrying out research in Paraíba, I met Solange Rocha and Vitória Lima of the Federal University of Paraíba, who were eager to co-coordinate a digitisation project. We brainstormed a list of archival institutions that might be suitable partners and we quickly came to agreements with the three institutions listed above. Once we had established verbal confirmation with each institution, we quickly sought written agreements giving permission to digitise the documents on site and make the images available online.

We carefully explained to our institutional partners both the benefits (for example, less day-to-day damage to documents by researchers in the archives and greater institutional visibility online) and risks (for example, damage done to documents during digitisation or reduced need for people to consult within the archive itself) so that they could make an informed decision before giving us permission to digitise. If an institution expressed serious doubts, we gave them time to consider the possibility and make the decision according to their institutional aims and needs. We also agreed to leave a set of digitisation equipment and provide copies of the digitised images on hard drives to each partnering institution.

## **Step two: applying for funding and seeking advice**



Students in the Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous Studies group of the Federal University of Paraíba in João Pessoa learning to digitise historical documents. Photo by David LaFevor. All rights reserved.

I decided to apply for an EAP grant because this programme focuses on archives whose contents are endangered by environmental, infrastructural, and/or political conditions. The project archives were strong candidates because the humid environment of the north-eastern coast of Brazil and a lack of funding to conserve historical documents in the region had already left important historical documents to decay. To support the application, I recruited a number of experts to the project team, and also consulted sample grant applications from colleagues who had secured similar funding in the past.

These consultations were particularly important when it came to putting together a realistic list of equipment required for the project, including digital cameras, laptops, tripods, carrying cases, rulers, and colour charts. Without this step, we might not have thought of ball heads for tripods to allow the cameras to point downward and remote shutter releases to keep the camera from trembling (see Step four for more on the types of cameras we use). The final submission included a detailed monthly timeline and budget justifications for each proposed expense, along with letters and photographs from the archives. As with all applications, this process proved to be very time consuming.

### **Step three: providing specialised training and project oversight**



Students digitizing documents at the parish church of Our Lady of the Miracles of São João do Cariri in São João do Cariri, Paraíba. Photos by David and Tara LaFevor. All rights reserved.

Our project took off once funding was secured, starting with the recruitment of students, archival staff, and faculty to help with digitisation and other tasks. This expanded project team completed training regarding how to handle fragile historical documents, including information on British Library EAP guidelines for [copying](#) images and creating [listing](#) metadata (translated into Portuguese). Other issues included making effective use of cameras, controlling for light variations, adjusting white balance, and setting up tripods. As with all research projects, it also proved necessary to provide administrative support, transfer funds and manage budgets, complete interim and final reports, and communicate with partners and institutions.

### **Step four: overcoming unexpected challenges**

All research projects encounter unexpected problems. On this occasion, a potentially major problem emerged when one of the archives, having previously agreed in writing to participate, later expressed a desire to pull out of the project. This resulted in delicate negotiations to address their concerns about document conservation and project ownership. We offered a timeline to make a final decision so that we could adjust our original plans and, maybe, find another archive with which to partner. Fortunately for the project, we were able to complete digitisation as planned. Extended negotiations were also required in relation to governmental archives, with incredible patience and local knowledge being required in order to secure bureaucratic permissions at numerous levels.

The next obstacle we faced was transferring money internationally. Vanderbilt University houses these projects, so funds are transferred from the British Library to Vanderbilt in instalments, and then from Vanderbilt to Brazil as needed. In the first project, we paid unexpected taxes and fees on our transfers to Brazil, with the values differing

unpredictably from one transfer to the next. Great patience was again required in order to successfully release funds from the Brazilian banking system. For our second project, we partnered with an NGO in Brazil in order to facilitate the administration of funds across international institutions. This initially led to an unexpected amount of paperwork in the United States, but this initial investment should make things easier and cheaper in the longer term.



Students digitizing documents at the parish church of Our Lady of the Miracles of São João do Cariri in São João do Cariri, Paraíba. Photos by David and Tara LaFevor. All rights reserved.

Another challenge involved our equipment. Knowing that we needed to produce RAW images (for Canon that is CR2) and then convert to TIFF to meet EAP standards, we purchased six Canon G12 cameras. The Canon G12 can take images in both CR2 and JPG formats simultaneously. Each of our CR2 images, once converted to TIFF, showed significant barrel distortion. We contacted Canon, who suggested that we shoot from further away, which reduces the clarity of images. The only way to remove the barrel distortion without altering the images would be to buy new cameras, which was not within our budget. The EAP reluctantly agreed to accept our JPG images, which, by definition, are altered. The CR2 images were subsequently edited to remove some of the distortion. To avoid these problems, we switched to the Canon EOS Rebel T3 in the second project, and our images no longer suffer barrel distortion.

## **Finally: celebrating accomplishment**

We also had unexpected victories. At the initial training workshops, students were timid when using the equipment, since they were afraid they would break it. As the project progressed, they came to speak and work like experts. Undergraduate students who presented papers on their work at conferences repeatedly received awards, and some were able to publish their work.

Graduate students working on the project completed dissertations based on the digitised documents and were able to make claims about Afro-Brazilian presence in the interior of the state that upended previous historical understandings. We also held an international symposium at the end of the project where they could present their work to an audience made up of directors of local archives, governmental representatives, and professors from Brazil and the United States. Celebration is important to team morale. The team in Brazil puts day-to-day travel, time, and diligence into these projects and their success must be celebrated.

Without these documents, we cannot study how the enslaved lived, who they married, who they looked to for support, how they sought freedom, or how they interacted with the state. Allowing these documents to disappear makes it easier for us to forget slavery. Yet, the documents deteriorate before our eyes and often there simply is not the time or funding to conserve or repair the physical copies. Digitisation makes it possible to create a copy of documents on the brink of vanishing forever, to preserve their content, and to make them available to anyone with access to the internet.