



Puerto Rico Resources

Family History Sources in the Isle of Enchantment

Puerto Rico History

For all of its natural beauty, Puerto Rico's history is filled with conquest and revolution.

Christopher Columbus arrived in Puerto Rico in 1493. The island was already home to thousands of people of the Taínos culture. In the early 1500s, after exploration by Juan Ponce de León and others, Puerto Rico's economy changed from being mostly agrarian to one of gold mining.



The labor required for mining was tremendous and was supplied in part through the *repartimiento* system, which allotted a number of native Taínos to Spanish settlers to work as forced laborers in the gold mines. In time the system was changed, and workers were to be paid and taught Christianity, but the Taínos remained essentially slaves. In 1513, African slaves were brought to the island.

As the gold mines were depleted, entrepreneurs looked to exploit Puerto Rico's rich land, and coffee and sugar became the main forces in the Puerto Rican economy. As these grew more important, so did the need for even more labor. The slave trade grew right along with that need.

Puerto Rico stayed loyal to the Spanish Crown while other colonies were rebelling. To shore up the strength of the colony, in 1815 the Royal Decree of Graces opened settlement to non-Spaniards and encouraged settlement by giving land to settlers who would swear loyalty to the Spanish Crown and the Roman Catholic Church. The decree also opened the port to foreign trade.

As the 19th century drew to a close, the citizens of Puerto Rico were finally afforded the opportunity to have political autonomy. Unfortunately, this happened just months before the Spanish-American War. The end of the war saw Spain cede Puerto Rico to the United States.

In 1917, the Jones Act made the people of Puerto Rico U.S. citizens and the island a U.S. territory. Puerto Rico became a commonwealth in 1952.

When working with Puerto Rican records, it is important to remember that almost all of them are in Spanish. Catholic Church records could be in Spanish or Latin. Puerto Rico is divided into 78 *municipios* (municipalities) that function much the same as a county in a U.S. state.



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Puerto Rico Census Records

The general population of Puerto Rico was first included in U.S. federal censuses in 1910. The 1900 federal census included only U.S. armed forces in Puerto Rico.

There was a special census in Puerto Rico in 1935. The population schedule is much like the 1930 or 1940 federal census and includes inhabitants, along with their relationship to the head of household, age, occupation, etc. The 1935 agricultural schedule names only those who were land managers. These records also list by name those who were leasing part of the land.

Puerto Rico and Related Censuses Available on Ancestry.com:

- [Puerto Rico, Social and Population Schedules, 1935-1936](#) (in Spanish)
- [Puerto Rico, Special Censuses, Agricultural Schedules, 1935](#) (in Spanish)
- [Puerto Rico, Registro Central de Esclavos, 1872](#) (Register of slaves; in Spanish)

Puerto Rico Vital Records

Civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths began in Puerto Rico in 1885. Before then, the Catholic Church recorded these events. You can learn more in our guide to [Using Vital Records in Puerto Rican Research](#).

Puerto Rico Vital Records on Ancestry.com

- [Puerto Rico, Civil Registrations, 1885-2001](#) (Includes births, marriages, and deaths)
- [U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1700s-Current](#) *Free*

Military Collections

- [U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918](#)
- [U.S., World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942](#)
- [U.S., Burial Registers, Military Posts and National Cemeteries, 1862-1960](#)

Immigration Collections

- [Puerto Rico, Records of Foreigners, 1815-1845](#)
- [San Juan, Puerto Rico, Passenger and Crew Lists, 1901-1954](#)



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Other Puerto Rico Resources

- [Hispanic Genealogical Society of New York](#) (includes PRAM, the Puerto Rican Ancestor Match)
 - [PRRoots.com](#)
- [Sociedad Puertorriqueña de Genealogía](#) (Puerto Rican Genealogical Society).
- [La Genealogía de Puerto Rico](#) (The Genealogy of Puerto Rico; part of the GenWeb Project)
- [Searching for Our Roots](#) (Puerto Rico genealogy)
- [Center for Puerto Rican Studies](#), Hunter College, The City University of New York
 - [Library and Archives](#)
 - [Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora](#)
 - [Voices e-magazine](#)
- [The National Archives at New York City](#) (serves Puerto Rico)
 - [Guide to Puerto Rican Records in the National Archives, New York City](#) (downloadable PDF)

Help and Advice

- [Overview of Hispanic Research](#)

[View all Puerto Rico collections on Ancestry.com](#)

Significant Dates (through 1952)

1493 – Christopher Columbus landed on Puerto Rico.

1508 – Queen Isabella of Spain granted Juan Ponce de León permission to explore Puerto Rico. He founded the settlement of Caparra; mining operations began.

1509 – The *repartimiento* system began, which allotted a number of native Taínos to Spaniard settlers for forced labor in the gold mines. The Crown changed the system to one that paid the native workers (a low wage) and taught them Christianity; Taínos continued to be treated as essentially slave labor.

1511 – Pope Julius II established the first Catholic diocese in Puerto Rico (one of the first three in the New World).

1511 – Taínos rebellion was put down by the Spanish military. Ponce de León ordered 6,000 shot.

1513 – African slaves brought to Puerto Rico for the first time to work in the gold mines.

1518–1519 – Smallpox killed much of the Taínos population.

1521 – Caparra was moved to an island in the harbor and renamed "Puerto Rico." Eventually the port would be renamed San Juan.

Population	
1765	44,883
1775	70,250
1800	155,426
1815	220,892
1832	350,051
1846	447,914
1860	583,308
1877	731,648
1887	798,565
1899	953,243
1910	1,118,012
1920	1,299,809
1930	1,543,913
1940	1,869,255
1950	2,210,703



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- 1595** – Sir Francis Drake attacked the city of San Juan. The city was burned, but Drake was unable to take control of the city.
- 1736** – Coffee began to be grown on the island.
- 1815** – The Royal Decree of Graces opened settlement to non-Spaniards and encouraged settlement by giving land to settlers who would swear loyalty to the Spanish Crown and the Roman Catholic Church. The decree also opened the port to foreign trade.
- 1821** – Marcos Xiorro, an African slave, led a conspiracy for a slave revolt. It was ultimately unsuccessful.
- 1835** – Queen Maria Cristina of Spain abolished the slave trade to the Spanish colonies.
- 1859** – Samuel Morse introduced telegraph service on Puerto Rico.
- 1868** – The Grito de Lares uprising against Spanish rule was suppressed.
- 1873** – Slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico.
- 1885** – Civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths began.
- 1897** – Spain granted Puerto Rico political autonomy and gave voting rights to literate males.
- 1898** – The United States declared a state of war with Spain in April. The Spanish-American War ended in August with the signing of the Protocol of Peace; this was formalized with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in December and ratified in February 1899. In the treaty, Spain ceded control of Puerto Rico and Guam and agreed to sell the Philippines to the U.S.
- 1900** – The Foraker Act granted Puerto Rico the right to choose members of its lower house in the legislature by popular vote.
- 1909** – The Olmsted Amendment gave administrative control of Puerto Rico to the president of the United States.
- 1917** – The Jones Act (also known as the Jones-Shafroth Act) made Puerto Rico a U.S. territory. It also granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship.
- 1918** – An earthquake and tsunami hit the western part of Puerto Rico. The death toll was estimated at around 100 people, along with massive property damage.
- 1937** – The Ponce Massacre occurred when police opened fire on a civilian march supporting Puerto Rican independence. Nineteen people were killed and more than 200 injured.
- 1947** – U.S. granted Puerto Rico the right to popularly elect its own governor.
- 1952** – Puerto Rico became a U.S. commonwealth.



"Vicinity of Corozal, Puerto Rico"
from "[Library of Congress Photo Collection, 1840-2000](#)"