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Santaisabelinos Beyond the Register: Using the Santa Isabel Enslaved Census of 1870 to Reconstruct Enslaved People's Experiences in Puerto Rico

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

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Description

The Santa Isabel Enslaved Census dataset (SIEC) is drawn from a municipal register of enslaved people in Santa Isabel in 1870.¹ The original document was one of several similar municipal

¹ 1870 Register of Enslaved Population in Santa Isabel, 12 January 1870, Box 76, Records of the Spanish Governors of Puerto Rico Collection (RSG), Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR), San Juan, Puerto Rico.

censuses of enslaved populations across Puerto Rico requested ad hoc by the colony's central government in the years leading up to the abolition of slavery in 1873. The register documents demographic information about each of the 423 people who were enslaved in Santa Isabel, who made up 19% of the inhabitants of the small town on Puerto Rico's southern sugar coast.² The data in the SIEC includes each of the enslaved ' names, civil status, age, occupation, whether they were in the process of self-purchased manumission, and the enslaver who held them in bondage. The SIEC makes this information publicly accessible and searchable.

In 1872, two years after the creation of this municipal register, a colony-wide Slave Census was conducted, which generated great interest from the state and the enslaver class; in fact, it was used as the basis for calculating the indemnification promised to slave-owners as a condition of the 1873 law of abolition.³ Though the extensive census ostensibly documented the colony's entire enslaved population, down to their places of birth, parents' and children's names, and physical descriptions, it includes none of the more than 400 enslaved people in Santa Isabel. The 1872 Slave Census has in large part been digitized, converted into a searchable database, and made publicly accessible through the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and Ancestry.com, however, Santa Isabel was one of twenty-five municipalities (of the colony's total sixty-eight) that were not included in the major census effort of 1872.⁴ In this regard, the SIEC is important because it begins to fill a gap in the public archival record of the enslaved Puerto Rican population.

The SIEC provides a demographic snapshot of Santa Isabel's enslaved population on the eve of abolition. Of particular note, it contains each of their 423 names, a seemingly minor but important detail in the face of colonial archiving practices and societal architecture that often rendered invisible and commodified human beings through the written record.⁵ To know their names and in some cases their aliases is to know how these individuals were addressed not

² To provide some scale of Santa Isabel's population in relation to the colony in 1870, 0.4% of Puerto Rico's population lived in the municipality, and 1.1% of the enslaved people in Puerto Rico were counted among its residents. It was not, however, a minor sugar town thanks to its four sugar plantations and one mill, and, in comparison to the other sixty-six municipalities at the time, Santa Isabel had an intermediate-sized population of enslaved people. See "CUADRO de la Población de esta isla clasificada por estado civil en cada una de sus respectivas razas y condición social," *Gaceta de Puerto Rico*, 4 August 1870, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/2013201074/1870-08-04/ed-1/seq-2/> (accessed December 20, 2023) and Julio Molina Olivieri, *Santa Isabel: notas para su historia* (San Juan: Oficina de Preservación Histórica, 1986).

³ "Registro Central de Esclavos, 1872-1872," National Archives and Records Administration, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1476161> (accessed April 10, 2023). On use of the 1872 Registro to determine indemnification for former slaveowners, see Minutes of the Junta de Indemnización, 1874-1876, Archive of the Library of Congress, Puerto Rico Collection, Box 8.

⁴ Ellen Fernandez-Sacco, "Reconstructing District 3's Missing Registro Central de Esclavos for Northwestern Puerto Rico," *Hereditas* 20, no. 2 (2019), 83-5; "Division de Distritos," *Gaceta de Puerto Rico*, Library of Congress, 18 July 1872, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/2013201074/1872-07-18/ed-1/seq-4/> (accessed May 10, 2023).

⁵ Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

just in their capacity as enslaved people, but among their community and loved ones, revealing at least one of the sonic elements of their personal lives.

Although this 1870 municipal register does not include the intergenerational notations or physical descriptions that were included in the colony-wide register of 1872, some of those details can be inferred from the documentation of their names. For example, a pair of women captives of Don Pedro Juan Capó Primero (as in “senior”) were registered as Marta “Primera” (42 years old) and Marta “Segunda” (24 years old); judging by their ages, they were possibly mother and daughter, and the designations after their names (“primera,” or first, and “segunda,” or second) denote a senior and junior familial relationship. What might this say about naming choices and intergenerational legacy for enslaved people? Enslaved *Santaisabelinos* may have used naming practices to mark legacies beyond the perpetual subjugation that shaped so much of their daily lives in bondage. Similarly, at the Don Ramon estate, a man and a woman, Juan and María, both had the same ethnolinguistic marker – “Congo” – after their first name; their ages (45 and 61, respectively) align with those of enslaved people trafficked from Africa to Puerto Rico as was significantly more common decades earlier. Other aliases or nicknames that appear in the census after enslaved *Santaisabelinos*’ official first names alluded to physical or personality characteristics, as is common to this day in practices of Puerto Rican nicknaming. Such is the case with José “Chino,” enslaved by Don Juan María Colón, who, in the general absence of Chinese or other East Asian laborers in Puerto Rico, was likely named for his facial features. The nickname “Gallito” (“little rooster”), given to Ramon, aged 5 years and 7 months, captive of Don Pedro Delpín, probably referred to a confident, outspoken demeanor demonstrated by the child.

Beyond the individuals, a broader image emerges of Santa Isabel’s enslaved community. The register demonstrates that they ranged in age from 3 months (Margarita) to 72 years old (Luis “Francisco,” Riudó, Domingo, and Bernardino) – with the youngest and oldest among the community held in bondage by the same white planter family (the Capós). There were more enslaved boys and men than girls and women in the town – 242, or 57.2% men and boys and 181, or 42.7%, women and girls. Prior to age 9 for boys and age 12 for girls, most people in the register were listed as not having an occupation, though there were twelve exceptions of occupational assignments for children younger than that – eight as laborers or domestics, and four children younger than 20 months who were erroneously listed as having occupations. The majority of working-aged enslaved people (78%), regardless of gender, were assigned the open-ended occupation of “laborer” (*labrador/labradora*) and would have spent their work time, in whole or part, among the sugar cane fields of the town’s plantations. Other labor categories were more heavily gendered: women were 73% of the municipality’s eleven enslaved domestics (*domestico/domestica*), eight of the ten cooks, and the sole confectioner, whereas men occupied all of the town’s specialized physical jobs: the two carpenters and one farmer.

The register also reveals aspects of the imposed conditions of enslaved peoples’ lives – not just the kinds of labor to which they were assigned but the labor communities into which they were forced, and the kinds of proprietors who held them in bondage. Nearly three-fourths of the

population – 311 of the people in the register – were enslaved on the town’s four plantations: ninety-eight at Don José Alomar’s *Hacienda Santa Isabel*, eighty-three at Don Nicolas Marquez’s estate, the *Central Florida*, sixty-six at Don Juan Cortada’s *Central Cortada*, and sixty-four at the Capós’ (father and son) *Hacienda Destino*.⁶ Though the sugar industry governed the town’s economy, the remaining quarter of the enslaved population (112 people) were divided among nineteen other proprietors, including six women, in groups of one to twelve captives. The register does not offer explicit distinctions between the kinds of work “laborers” in large or small groups were assigned, but domestic or field labor on a plantation and in a small businessman’s personal home undoubtedly varied in scope and scale. The day-to-day experiences of an enslaved person among the 98-person labor force on Alomar’s *Hacienda Santa Isabel* and the three women (Josefina, María Josefa, and Ceferina) enslaved in the house of Don Pedro Questel were certainly different in terms of duties, division of labor, and the ways each enslaver surveilled their lives.⁷

The document also illuminates the illusion of choice during this time. When this register was conducted in 1870, enslaved people in Puerto Rico were able to self-purchase manumission, a process known as *coartación*, if they could agree on a price with their captors, put a down payment towards their freedom, and work on festival days and evenings over time to pay off their agreed-upon value.⁸ Their resulting status, both during the process and after completing payment, was noted as “*coartado*,” as listed in the “Observations” column. The fact that not a single of the 423 people on the 1870 register was *coartado* is significant. It makes clear that neither the planters nor the small proprietors in Santa Isabel were offering this option to, or accepting potential negotiations for, *coartación* from the enslaved population of the town.

In addition to those imposed conditions, the details of the register offer, to some extent, glimpses into who the enslaved people of Santa Isabel were – as far as that can be judged through the documented decisions they made – in a moment shortly before emancipation. For example, 7.8% of people who appear in the register were listed as married or widowed, an indication of some choice in partnership and a degree of recognition of their partnerships by administrators of a state run on the exploitation and control of enslaved Puerto Ricans’ lives. The people to whom they were married, the reasons for their unions, and any children they might

⁶ Jaime Montilla, “Santa Isabel/Alomar,” <https://jaimemontilla.com/santa-isabel> (accessed June 27, 2023).

⁷ Entries of enslaved people registered at the Haciendas Santa Isabel, Florida, Cortada, and Destino, and those registered to Pedro Questel, 1870 Register of Enslaved Population in Santa Isabel, 12 January 1870, Box 76, Records of the Spanish Governors of Puerto Rico Collection (RSG), Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR), San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1-4, 14. On the laborers, functions, and legacies of the plantations in Santa Isabel, see Olivieri, *Santa Isabel*, 21-33.

⁸ Gerardo A. Carlo Altieri, “Derecho y Esclavitud En El Puerto Rico Del Siglo XIX,” *Cuadernos Inter.c.a.mbio sobre Centroamérica y el Caribe* 6, no. 7 (2012), 118; Benjamin Nistal-Moret, “Problems in the Social Structure of Slavery in Puerto Rico,” in *Between Slavery and Free Labor: The Spanish-Speaking Caribbean in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Frank Moya Pons, and Stanley L. Engerman, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 153.

have parented are not identified in the document, but the fact of their marriages is, which denoted the varied possibilities of partnership, romance, and commitment.

The SIEC can be used as a springboard to learn more about the individual lives of the enslaved *Santaisabelinos*, both during slavery and after abolition, using online and digitized sources as well as those from archives in Puerto Rico. To demonstrate, consider the example of the aforementioned trio of women enslaved by Don Pedro Questel: thirty-three-year-old Josefina, thirteen-year-old María Josefa, and eleven-year-old Ceferina. No mention is made of their relationship to each other, but the man in whose house they were held captive was listed in *Catálogo de Extranjeros Residentes en Puerto Rico en el Siglo XIX* as a French fisherman with a Puerto Rican wife and eight children.⁹ The house in which they likely lived was located on the Santa Isabel boardwalk and flanked “to the north . . . with Hacienda Florida,” as described in an ad in the colony’s official newspaper several years later.¹⁰ The contextual information in these sources, about their enslaver’s profession and the location of his house, would have shaped the duties assigned to the three people enslaved by Questel and the relationships they had beyond the household in which they were forced to labor.

Josefina, listed as a cook on the 1870 census, would have been tasked with regularly cooking for the family of ten and their guests, including collecting foodstuffs from vendors in local markets, preparing meals for many hours, and maintaining the family’s kitchen. As the only adult woman captive under Questel’s roof, the gendered domestic labor of cooking was most likely accompanied by some child-rearing duties to care for Questel’s eight children. In addition to assisting Josefina with cooking and childcare, María Josefa, who was registered in the census as a general laborer, would have been assigned to the varied tasks of the house, such as supporting Questel’s fishing business by preparing bait and supplies or cleaning his catch for sale in the market, preparing the house for hurricane season each year, and so on. Ceferina, despite being designated as “without occupation” (likely due to her age), would have likely also been tasked with similar duties. Their residence, so close to the Hacienda Florida, indicates that in the course of those daily duties that brought them beyond the threshold of the house, Josefina and the two girls would have been most likely to brush shoulders and maintain an overlapping social circle with the eighty-three people enslaved by the Marquez family. This illustrates the ways that other sources provide clues about elements of the trio’s lives not documented in the census: their day-to-day labor tasks and, to some extent, the other enslaved people whom they likely encountered in their social lives due to proximity.

Local archives in Puerto Rico provide additional information about the lives of Josefina, María Josefa, and Ceferina while they were enslaved. The records of the local *Archivo de la Iglesia*

⁹ Estela Cifre de Loubriel, *Catálogo De Extranjeros Residentes En Puerto Rico En El Siglo XIX* (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1962), 58.

¹⁰ Miguel Ferrer y Plantada, “Administración Central de Contribuciones Y Rentas de La Isla de Puerto-Rico,” *Gaceta de Puerto Rico*, November 22, 1883, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/2013201074/1883-11-22/ed-1/seq-4/> (accessed February 21, 2019).

Santiago Apóstol de Santa Isabel y Salinas document baptisms among the enslaved population. Records for María Josefa and Ceferina appear under the last name of their captor, Pedro Questel. They describe the elder sister as born on April 10, 1856 and baptized on the first day of June that year, and Ceferina born on September 20, 1857 and baptized on February 20, 1858. Their baptism certificates reveal that Josefina was their mother, though their father is unlisted. The records also confirm that Josefina and María Josefa had been under Questel's roof at least since April 1856, when the latter was born. Several differences appear between the two certificates: a maternal grandmother, Teresa, is listed on María Josefa's but not on Ceferina's, indicating that Teresa may have passed away between their births (she also does not appear in the 1870 register). Additionally, the godparents listed denote different networks of support for the birth of each child. For María Josefa, godparents Don Jaime Melia and Doña B. Clevair both had honorific titles and were therefore likely white, whereas Ceferina's godparents, Candido Aponte and Nicolasa Hernandez, were likely among the 965 free people of color in the town, as they both had last names but did not have honorific titles, and neither appeared on the 1870 register.¹¹

Records in Puerto Rico's national archive (Archivo General de Puerto Rico) and the regional archive nearest Santa Isabel (Archivo Historico Municipal de Ponce), show some of this family unit's whereabouts after abolition. The abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico in March 1873 required that all *libertos* (freedpeople) take up labor contracts with their former owners, other proprietors, or the state for a period of no less than three years.¹² In June 1873, Josefina and her two daughters each took on post-emancipation labor contracts with Questel, agreeing to continue working for him as domestics for four pesos a month; María Josefa and Ceferina took on contracts for three years, while Josefina's contract, for reasons unspecified, was for only three months.¹³ Two months later, the three rescinded their contracts with Questel and took on new ones with Don Diego Sans in Santa Isabel.¹⁴ In their decision to remain working for Questel in June 1873 and their decision to all change to contract with Sans in August of that year, the mother and daughters prioritized the cohesion of their family unit (a practice exhibited by *libertos* elsewhere in Puerto Rico),¹⁵ even though it meant physically moving from the house María Josefa and Ceferina had known their entire lives.

¹¹ Archivo de la Iglesia de Santiago de Apóstol de Santa Isabel y Salinas, Book of Baptisms of Slaves, entries 80 (June 1856) and 98 (January 1858); "CUADRO de la Poblacion de esta isla clasificada por estado civil en cada una de sus respectivas razas y condicion social," *Gaceta de Puerto Rico*, August 4, 1870, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/2013201074/1870-08-04/ed-1/seq-2/> (accessed December 20, 2023).

¹² Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, *El Proceso Abolicionista en Puerto Rico: Documentos para su Estudio*, Vol. II (San Juan: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1978), 144.

¹³ Folder of Santa Isabel contratos de libertos, Box 72, Records of the Spanish Governors of Puerto Rico Collection, Archivo General de Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

¹⁴ Notification of contract changes from the Mayor of Santa Isabel in the Copiador de Oficios dirigidos a las Autoridades locales y particulares (Book 6), 27 August 1873, Box S-522, Ayuntamiento Collection, Secretaría Section, Archivo Histórico Municipal de Ponce, Ponce, Puerto Rico.

¹⁵ Mariano Negrón Portillo and Raúl Mayo Santana, *La esclavitud urbana en San Juan* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán), 111-3.

The SIEC provides researchers a starting point to learn about the community of enslaved people in a sugar town in southern Puerto Rico, and offers key information to further research the lives of individuals in that community beyond the dataset. In the example provided, details drawn from the SIEC were plugged into open-access online resources and publicly accessible archival collections at multiple levels in Puerto Rico to flesh out broader details about a specific family, made up of three enslaved people, in the 1870 register. Readers are encouraged to replicate this process to find information about others in this dataset using similar methods. Additionally, the data about enslaved people in Santa Isabel, now accessible through the SIEC, has not yet been included in broader studies of the enslaved population of Puerto Rico in the years prior to abolition. In this regard, it provides a valuable addition to the field of slavery and abolition studies in Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, and the broader Atlantic World. As this specific dataset includes names, civil status, profession, and age, it lends itself well to broader analyses of colony-wide enslaved life in tandem with documents that have been digitized and publicly-accessible by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the New York Public Library, for example. Other 1870s registers similar to this one, which would further enhance the suggested undertaking, can be found for the municipalities of Aguada, Carolina, Guayama, Ponce, and Rio Grande, in the Archivo General de Puerto Rico under the *Records of the Spanish Governors of Puerto Rico* collection, box 76.

Dates of Data Collection

2019-2023

Dataset Languages

Spanish, English

Geographic Coverage

Santa Isabel, Puerto Rico

Temporal Coverage

1870

Document Types

Census or Register

Sources

1870 Register of Enslaved Population in Santa Isabel, 12 January 1870, Box 76, Records of the Spanish Governors of Puerto Rico Collection (RSG), *Archivo General de Puerto Rico* (AGPR), San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Methodology

Data for the Santa Isabel Enslaved Census dataset (SIEC) was drawn from a register of enslaved people in Santa Isabel, Puerto Rico in the *Archivo General de Puerto Rico* (AGPR) in San Juan, Puerto Rico.¹⁶ This dataset came to being through research about the lives of enslaved and newly emancipated people in Santa Isabel, Puerto Rico – their familial networks, physical descriptions, and the work communities into which they were forced. Originally, I sought information through the extensive colony-wide “1872 Slave Register,” much of which has been digitized through the National Archives and Records Administration and is searchable online through the proprietary site *Ancestry.com*.¹⁷ Santa Isabel does not appear among the digitized records available online. In search of this missing information, I traveled to the AGPR in July 2019 to view the physical tomes of the 1872 Register.¹⁸ The records, which are organized by regional departments in Puerto Rico, revealed that Santa Isabel—and therefore the enslaved people of the town—were not included in the Register.

In developing this dataset, I input the 423 entries from the 1870 Register, exactly as they appear in the original document, into an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet includes data across the seven variables present in the Register: Entry Number; Names of the Owners; Enslaved person’s name; Civil status; Age; Occupation; Observations. These column titles have all been translated exactly as they appear in the register, with the exception of “*Núm*” (short for “*Número*”), which I translated to “Entry Number” for clarity, and “*Nombres de los esclavos*,” which I adapted to “Enslaved person’s name” to center the humanity of the individuals represented in the entries. I included three additional columns, for a total of ten. One column notes the sex of the enslaved person (inferred from their names or gendered terms in their civil status or occupation), and the two others offer information of use for the end-user: page number, so that other researchers can more easily find specific entries on the original document; and Researcher’s Notes and Comments, populated with additional context and notes about any corrections or edits I have made in the dataset. The column headings are in English and the values in the cells are in English and, where appropriate, modernized Spanish in parentheses. After inputting the 423 entries, I reviewed the document to confirm the details of each entry and correct any errors in the first step. Finally, as I detail in the next paragraph, I prepared the data for end-users such that any individual enslaved person’s entry can be useful for future researchers both in relation to other entries and on its own.

The final data set includes only the values adapted from the original source in order to populate full values from abbreviations, shorthand, and any errors of spelling. For example, the original document included shorthand notations – such as “id” (for “idem,” a Latin term akin to “ditto”) and a double quotation mark (”) - for repeated values within a column from one entry to the next. These shorthand symbols appear on every page of the original document, and many other

¹⁶ 1870 Register of Enslaved Population in Santa Isabel, 12 January 1870, Box 76, RSG Collection, AGPR.

¹⁷ “Puerto Rico, Registro Central de Esclavos, 1872.”

Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2774/>, (accessed 10 April 2023).

¹⁸ Books of the 1872 Registro de Esclavos, Boxes 79 to 87, RSG Collection, AGPR.

similar registers in Puerto Rico, most often in the Civil Status, Occupation, and Observations columns as most registered enslaved people were coded as single (“soltero” or “soltera”), assigned to the broad category of laborer (“labrador” or “labradora”), and were not in the process of purchasing their manumission (“No está coartado”). I have also expanded abbreviations for names and titles. For example, “Ma” and “Fran^{co}” were common abbreviations for “María” and “Francisco,” respectively; “D”/“Dⁿ,” and “D^a” were abbreviations for the honorific titles “Don” and “Doña” for landowners, and “Sucn” was used to denote a “Succession” or estate.

Additionally, I populated the “Names of the Owners” where none were present using common documentation practices of the time and place: for those people who held multiple enslaved people in bondage, their names often appeared only on the first entry for those enslaved people they registered. For example, for the first 98 entries in the Santa Isabel registrar, Don José Alomar is listed as “Owner,” but his name only appears in the original document four times, at the beginning of the four pages on which entries for the people he enslaved were documented. As is, any mention of a slave-holder denotes the start of a new person’s log of registered human property.

Date of Publication

March 2024

Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/AJ091N>

Linked Data Representation: [Enlaved.org](https://enlaved.org)

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