Slavery in Ecclesiastical Archives: 
Preserving the Records

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and Andrew McMichael

Ever since Frank Tannenbaum argued about the nature of the relationship between the Catholic Church and slavery in the New World, religion has been an important subject for scholars working on the history of slavery in the Americas. Ecclesiastical records provide an important documentary source, and church archives in Brazil, Cuba, and the Spanish circum-Caribbean provide the longest serial data available for the history of Africans in the Americas, beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing through almost the end of the nineteenth century. Many also offer insights into African history. Catholic parish registers record data on African baptisms, marriages, and burials. In addition to providing critical demographic statistics on the African populations in the Americas, these records provide detailed information on ethnicity. Entries may record, when known, parents’ names and occasionally allude to birthplaces in Africa. These ethnic and geographic markers will enable scholars to track the history of specific groups over time in targeted areas and allow for comparisons across Spanish and Portuguese colonies.

Scholars can also use ecclesiastical records in longitudinal and comparative studies of population, fertility, and mortality. The records provide information on residence, naming practices, and family patterns, as well as fictive kinship patterns evident in choices of baptismal and marital godparents. The Brazilian records include, as well, a number of valuable testaments by Africans not generally found in the Cuban and borderland records. Brazilian wills offer important information on the occupations, property, and economy of free and enslaved Africans, as well as additional insights into fictive kin and kin networks and religious devotion. Historians are combining these collections into ever more comprehensive databases using so-called new media, which will allow for a greatly expanded understanding of African slavery in the Americas.

Unfortunately, these documents are in danger of being lost forever. Churches store most of these records in religious archives or local churches, at risk from climate, insects, and other damage. Too often, local laypersons or parish priests guard the records, and some of these well-meaning individuals are unaware of the documents’ historic significance or fragility. Sadly, few resources are devoted to preserving these treasures, and if not rescued quickly, some may vanish forever. The dispersed nature of the records also makes them difficult for scholars to access, especially those scholars whose home countries can offer little research support. Many of the materials have never been examined, because some small churches in Cuba no longer permit access. On a more positive note, the Curio of Rio in Brazil recently received funding to organize the religious records they began collecting from rural churches in the 1980s. These documents are now well organized but not completely catalogued.

Anxious about the future of these priceless resources, we began to focus on several urgent tasks: (1) to develop a theoretical and methodological framework for preserving and disseminating religious documents regarding the history of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas; (2) to publicize the impor-
tance of ecclesiastical archives and look for means to help modernize them; and (3) to organize digital collections of the religious documents and facilitate research. Considering the volume of documents and the high costs of preservation, as well as the broad scope of the project and the significant contribution it would make to the humanities, Professors Jane Landers of Vanderbilt University, Mariza de Carvalho Soares of the Universidade Federal Fluminense in Rio de Janeiro, and Paul E. Lovejoy of York University presented a Collaborative Research Grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 2003 the NEH awarded two years of funding for the project, entitled “Ecclesiastical Sources and Historical Research on the African Diaspora in Brazil and Cuba” (ESSS) and directed by Jane Landers. The ESSS project specifically addresses collections in two areas: the Cuban archives of the parishes of Havana and Matanzas and the archive of the Bishopric of Nova Iguaçu in Brazil. Under
the direction of Paul E. Lovejoy, the Tubman Centre at York University is also digitizing previously microfilmed ecclesiastical records from Spanish Florida and the circum-Caribbean.

Landers first became aware of the importance of religious sources in 1985, when working in the oldest black parish registers of the Diocese of St. Augustine, Florida. In 1991, she also conducted preliminary research and microfilming of the black ecclesiastical records of the Cathedral of Matanzas and of the parish church of Ceiba Mocha in Matanzas Province, Cuba. Four years later, with funding from the Latin American Microform Project and the Historical Association of South Florida, Landers took a team to Cuba to microfilm black and Indian ecclesiastical records in nine churches in Havana and surrounding towns. Landers’ team compiled a holdings list for each church archive and placed the list and the microfilm on deposit at the Center for Research Libraries and in the libraries of the University of Florida and Vanderbilt University. Using these sources, Landers was able to document the variety of peoples from African nations found in Florida well into the 1820s, long after the supposed embargo of the slave trade to the United States in 1808. The records also allowed her to demonstrate patterns of cross-racial social integration through choices of baptismal and marriage sponsors.2

Meanwhile, as collaborators in the Laboratório de História Oral e Imagem at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (LABHOI, http://www.historia.uff.br/labhoi/memcatecles.htm), Mariza Soares and Hebe María Mattos used similar records to research the ethnic diversity of Africans in Rio de Janeiro. Established in 1984, LABHOI develops new research and teaching methodologies in the histories of slavery and of the African population in Brazil, paying particular attention to the African slave trade, ethnic identity, and memories of slavery. In 1995, Soares and Mattos began digitizing black ecclesiastical records in and around Rio de Janeiro, in the process overturning some common assumptions. Most scholars believed that almost all of the Africans in Rio de Janeiro originated in Angola, but using baptismal records Soares showed that during the first half of the eighteenth century, almost 10 percent of the baptized Africans in the city of Rio de Janeiro were from West Africa, and around the port area their representation reached almost 30 percent.3 Soares has organized and now supervises the field operation at the Archive of the Bishopric of Nova

with the full collaboration of the bishop and of the bishopric’s archivist, Anto-
nio Meneses. The research project is also working in the archive of the Arch-
bishopric of Niterói to digitize church records from around Guanabara Bay. For
the entire project, Soares, Mattos, and Landers employ graduate and under-
graduate students who, like them, speak and read English, Spanish, and Portu-
guese to work in the project offices at Vanderbilt and at UFF.

Noted Africanist historian Paul E. Lovejoy is the other primary partner in
the ESSS project. With impressive funding from a variety of Canadian sources
and from IBM, Lovejoy created the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the
African Diaspora at York University to assist international scholars in technol-
yogy transfer, infrastructure development, institution building, and informa-
tion management related to the African diaspora. The Tubman Centre (http://
www.yorku.ca/nhp) sponsors international conferences and publications, gradu-
ate training programs, and a wide array of projects to collect, preserve, and
archive materials related to the history of Africans in Africa and in the diaspora.

In ESSS’s first year of operation (2003–4), the Tubman Resource Centre
converted Landers’ microfilmed parish registers from Cuba and Spanish Florida
into digital form for archiving. Meanwhile, Soares, Mattos, and their students
at UFF began digitizing the parish registers of Africans and their descendents
from the Nova Iguaçu bishopric in Rio de Janeiro. The Nova Iguaçu team cap-
tured more than three thousand images, currently being transcribed, proces-
sed, and entered into databases by graduate students, with funding from the
Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ). As
an added benefit, these students will be able to use this data in their theses and
dissertations.

International and domestic politics have impeded the progress of the Cuban
phase of this project. Although scholarly reviewers at NEH approved the pro-
posal, the U.S. government initially delayed funding because State Department
lawyers first had to carefully review the proposal to determine that it did not
violate any U.S. regulations on transfer of technology or money to Cuba. Schol-
arly institutions in the United States must now apply for and secure licenses
from the U.S Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Asset Controls—a
tedious process that involves university lawyers and administrators. Although
scholars, journalists, and humanitarians are, in theory, covered by a “general
license” when traveling to Cuba, our team also carries Vanderbilt’s site-specific
license as added insurance. Even so, customs officials in Miami challenged
our right to travel and work in Cuba and have subjected team members—and
other legal travelers to Cuba—to excessive questioning, delays, and searches not
experienced by people traveling to Cuba via other U.S. airports. Such political
impediments have meant that the Tubman Centre must provide whatever technology goes to Cuba. Over the last two years, the Cuban government has also hampered research efforts of U.S. scholars, requiring visiting scholars to purchase expensive academic visas, tightly controlling access to historical materials, and banning the U.S. dollar as currency.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, has greatly facilitated the work being done in Cuba. Florida’s only black bishop, John Ricard of Pensacola and Tallahassee, has supported our project from its inception, as has Monseñor Ramón Polcari, chancellor of the Archbishopric Archives of Havana, who provided letters of support and introduction to the churches in which the team worked. Priests, sacristans, and archivists at individual churches, who have almost no access to the Internet and very limited technology available with which to preserve their own documents, have been very open to efforts directed at saving their precious patrimony.

In May of 2004, a Vanderbilt team composed of Landers, graduate student David Wheat, and professor Andrew McMichael of Western Kentucky University began digitizing records at the churches in Havana and Matanzas using techniques McMichael calls “guerrilla preservation.” Although conditions have improved since Landers first began working in Cuba, on occasion the team worked without water or electricity, or without sufficient electrical outlets or work areas in which to film. Getting food in some locations was a challenge. These are conditions with which Cubans struggle every day, of course, but the urgency was such that we could not afford to lose a single day of shooting. Both church schedules and international politics dictated a frenetic schedule of preservation. 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 would begin a rough inventory of the church’s holdings, while still another would begin shooting, using eight-megapixel digital cameras with extra memory chips and spare batteries. The team worked intensely, snapping images and then downloading them to a laptop for classification and storage—sometimes serenaded by a reggaeton band practicing in the neighborhood. While some of the volumes at some churches remain in excellent condition, other record books have almost disintegrated, the paper consumed by worms and humidity. This slowed the filming process, and in some cases damage was so extensive that the team could not film certain books. As work proceeded, however, some individuals in Cuba managed to capture 700–1,200 images a day, each containing between four to ten individual baptismal, mar-
riage, or burial entries. In the first trip, the team captured over 7,000 images containing almost 40,000 records.

In February 2005, Landers took a larger team to Cuba, adding Vanderbilt’s Latin American bibliographer Paula Covington, graduate students Oscar Grandío Moráguez and Henry Lovejoy of York University, and Nova Iguacu archivist Antonio Meneses. Together, this group captured over 40,000 images from churches in Havana, Regla, and Matanzas. These documents ranged from sixteenth-century black marriages in the Cathedral of Havana to burials of unbaptized “asiáticos” in the Cathedral of Matanzas. The index and digitization schedule for the Cuba project is available online at the ESSS website (http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/page/dKE7rq). During this trip to Cuba, the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre also donated an IBM ThinkPad laptop computer and digital camera to the Provincial Archives of Matanzas and to the Instituto de Historia in Havana.
Team member Grandío Moráguez represented the Tubman Centre in signing agreements with each of these institutions, in which they committed to digitizing their holdings on African and African-descended people for inclusion in the ESSS Web site. Discussions are also underway with church officials in Cuba to allow the project to place records on line. Though temperature, vermin, and other environmental factors threaten the records in Cuban churches, the originals nonetheless remain the property of the church and as such comprise a valuable part of Cuba’s cultural heritage. With this in mind, the Cuban teams have been careful to ensure that although the digitized records will be available via the Internet and through CD-ROMs, the Cuban church will retain copies of the preserved materials through a deposit of all digitized records in the archive of the Archbishopric in Havana. Each of the partner institutions also holds a copy of the digitized records, guaranteeing that they will be preserved and that researchers will have to access them without doing further damage to the originals.

Although both teams work toward the same end, there are significant differences between the Cuban and Brazilian projects. Soares incorporates undergraduate training in history, historic preservation, and paleography into the mission of her project. Because her students work where they live, they work at a slower and more consistent pace. Soares and her student team members can take the time to disassemble a volume to clean and restore the paper. Bishoprics in Brazil, therefore, will receive not only digital copies of their records, but also the restored original volumes. In the meantime, undergraduates from a poor region of Brazil, who might not otherwise have such opportunities, receive professional training not only in historic preservation but also in paleography. They also are able to use the documents—some of which have never been consulted by professional historians—in their own research papers. Having completed work at the Bishopric of Nova Iguacu, Soares’s Brazilian team has begun work in Niterói, across Guanabara Bay from the city of Rio de Janeiro; from there Soares hopes to expand to other archives throughout the state of Rio de Janeiro.

The NEH project has generated some basic information about the ecclesiastical archives in bishoprics across Brazil and Cuba, which both churches and scholars will be able to use. Team members in Brazil and Cuba are conducting surveys of the available documentation, and the Brazilian team also evaluates the conditions of the records in their archives. Soares’s group will use the initial evaluation completed in the archive of the Bishopric of Nova Iguacu as a model for additional surveys and will present fundraising proposals to each archive, focused on organizing and restoring available documents. The costs of this undertaking will necessitate partnerships with different institutions and proj-
ects, but in the end it should allow the parishes and bishoprics to digitize their collections and organize databases that can then be made available to researchers. Her team has also developed training programs financed by local grants and administered under the supervision of the Vice-Reitoria de Pos-Graduação e Pesquisa. The Fundação Euclides da Cunha also funds history students from Nova Iguacu who work on the project. Although funding opportunities for such work in Cuba are more limited, team members there have held discussions with church leaders about the possibility of adapting the Brazilian model for training disadvantaged youth in their own parishes.

As the first phase of the ESSS collaboration nears its end, Landers, Soares, and Lovejoy are preparing to submit a new grant to the NEH for a second phase. If accepted, this renewal will allow Soares to expand her work to include all the churches in the Guanabara Bay area—a part of Brazil once 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 seventeenth-century churches and many black cofradías. The Cuba group hopes to continue to digitize the archives of the many churches in Havana and to expand into additional plantation areas, including Cienfuegos. In addition, drawing on previous experience in Cuba and Brazil, as well as on contacts already established by the Tubman Centre, team members are planning to expand operations into Cartagena, the main slave port for Spanish South America.

The preservation and dissemination of ecclesiastical records from these areas will help scholars refine demographical estimates of the Atlantic slave trade and answer questions about the ethnicity of Africans in the Americas with greater precision. One tool that highlights the compelling need for the NEH project is David Eltis et al., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database*, which derives its data from records of slave voyages. Though immensely useful, this database does not always contain information about ethnicity. That kind of information, however, is regularly included in the Catholic baptismal records our teams are now preserving, meaning that historians can add new tools in their analysis of the African diaspora. Team members are also beginning to construct databases from these records. David Wheat has constructed a rudimentary database of seventeenth-century black records for the Santo Angel Custodio church. Andrew McMichael has begun to assemble a much larger

database of slave records from Matanzas, East and West Florida, and Louisiana. This database will contain an image of the ecclesiastical record, transcriptions in Spanish and English, and fields for age, name, place of origin, and other relevant information from the record, allowing scholars to subject them to statistical analysis. Eventually scholars will be able to compare their data with data from other areas where the Catholic Church worked among Africans, including Africa itself. Historians will be able to perform interconnected analyses of a variety of religious sources, expanding our understanding of the lives of Africans and people of African descent in the Americas.