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Slavery in Ecclesiastical Archives: Preserving the Records

Mariza Soares, Jane Landers, Paul E. Lovejoy,
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.¹ 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.

1. Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Random House, 1946), 62-65, 98-99.



Figure 1. Careful handling can sometimes result in a digitized document, but oftentimes, records in Cuban and Brazilian churches are damaged almost beyond the point of preservation.

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-

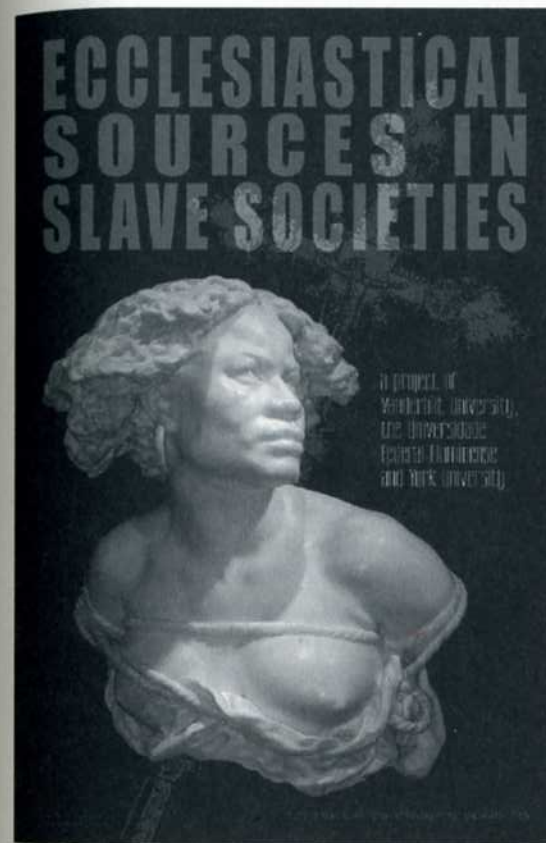


Figure 2. The Ecclesiastical Sources and Historical Research on the African Diaspora in Brazil and Cuba project seeks to preserve and disseminate slave records from the circum-Caribbean.

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 Bishporic of Nova Iguaçu in Brazil. Under

