

Schindling, James, David Wheat, and Jane Landers. "African Baptisms in Havana, Cuba, 1590-1600." *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 3, no. 2 (2022): 9-15.

<https://doi.org/10.25971/XQ5H-H204>.

African Baptisms in Havana, Cuba, 1590-1600

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

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Description

This dataset contains information on over one thousand Africans and people of African origin as depicted in Havana's earliest extant baptismal register, a bound volume titled *Libro de Barajas: Bautismos* (Miscellaneous Book: Baptisms).¹ Presently held in the Sagrada Catedral de

¹ SSDA would like to express our appreciation to Monseñor Ramón Suárez Polcari, Chancellor of the Archbishopric of Havana, and his staff for welcoming our teams and supporting our efforts to digitally preserve the records of the Catholic Church in Havana and across Cuba. We would also like to gratefully acknowledge the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, British Library Endangered Archives Programme, Mellon Foundation, Diocese of St. Augustine, Florida, and Historic St. Augustine Research Institute for their financial support over the years. Their

San Cristóbal de La Habana in Havana, Cuba – and viewable online in digital format via the *Slave Societies Digital Archive* – the *Libro de Barajas* contains 1,223 baptismal entries that were recorded in Havana's main church (*iglesia mayor*) between January 1590 and January 1600, a period of rapid growth.² Granted the title of "city" in 1592, Havana was already one of the major ports associated with the Spanish Atlantic convoy system known as the *Carrera de Indias* and was typically the final port of call for Iberian vessels sailing from the Caribbean toward Europe. Though it was of minor importance as a slaving port during the sixteenth century, slave trade *asentista* Pedro Gómez Reinel (who in 1595 contracted with the Spanish Crown to deliver 38,250 African captives to Spanish America) had an agent based in Havana by 1597 and several transatlantic slaving voyages arrived in the city during the 1590s.³

As with Catholic parish records in other colonial Latin American contexts, the *Libro de Barajas* baptisms indicate that, for residents of Havana during the 1590s, the rite of baptism and the corresponding godparentage system served to formalize or reinforce social relationships that enhanced the status of godparents and provided both security and potential opportunities for socioeconomic advancement for the newly baptized. The latter possibilities held particular salience for the city's enslaved parishioners and their children.⁴ In addition to its significance as a source offering ground-level insight into Havana's social dynamics during the 1590s, the *Libro de Barajas* baptismal register is invaluable in that no other Havana baptismal records are known to exist for years prior to 1590. In fact the only other extant baptismal register for Havana prior to the 1690s – a full century later – pertains to rural areas outside of the city, beginning in 1666.⁵ Unlike Havana's sacramental records during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, baptisms in the *Libro de Barajas* were not segregated by race. Each baptismal entry includes the name of the person or persons being baptized, the date of baptism, the name of the priest or sacristan administering the baptism, the names of the baptized person's parents if known, and the names of their godparents. If a godparent, parent, or person being baptized was enslaved, the name(s) of their owner(s) are included as well. Many entries also include details such as racial descriptions, places of birth, occupations, and family ties. Africans and people of African origin,

grants have allowed SSDA teams to also preserve endangered ecclesiastical and secular records in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Florida and Cabo Verde and to host donated collections from Angola, Benin, and Uruguay.

² *Slave Societies Digital Archive* (SSDA), <https://archive.slavesocieties.org/volume?id=6490>. Ferdinand Stibi's genealogical guide *El "Libro de Barajas" de la Catedral de La Habana* (Madrid: Hidalguía, 1974) includes transcriptions of the baptismal records but leaves out information on African origins.

³ Marc Eagle, "The Early Slave Trade to Spanish America: Caribbean Pathways, 1530-1580," in *The Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic World in the Long Sixteenth Century*, eds. Ida Altman and David Wheat (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 139-160; Georges Scelle, *La traite négrière aux Indes de Castille: Contrats et traités d'assiento* (Paris: Larose & Tenin, 1906), 342-383; Enriqueta Vila Vilar, *Hispanoamérica y el comercio de esclavos* (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 1977), 254-255, 281.

⁴ See for example Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 121-123; Alejandro de la Fuente, with César García del Pino and Bernardo Iglesias Delgado, *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 165; David Wheat, "Biafadas in Havana: West African Antecedents for Caribbean Social Interactions," in *Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic World*, 163-186.

⁵ The "Libro del Monte" (1666-1698) contains records of baptisms performed by priests during occasional visits to the ranches, corrals, sugar mills, and other outlying areas within Havana's jurisdiction.

who together comprised over sixty percent of all individuals baptized in Havana during the 1590s, were typically described by the racial descriptors "negra" or "negro" (black), "morena" or "moreno" (brown), or "mulata" or "mulato."⁶ Nearly 500 baptized individuals were ascribed African "naciones" (lands) or "castas" (castes) such as "Biafara" or "Angola," and one or both godparents were ascribed similar ethnonyms or toponyms in nearly one-third of the baptisms. Children born to women of African origin comprised nearly one-fourth of all individuals baptized.

Whether as godparents, parents, or new arrivals, the majority of Africans and people of African origin who appear in Havana's baptismal records are described as "slaves," or as being owned by ("de") someone else, with their owners listed by name. The occupations assigned to enslaved people within their owners' households or elsewhere are rarely specified, even among the fairly large number of "royal slaves" owned by the Spanish crown. Yet enslaved Africans in Havana and other early Spanish Caribbean settlements worked a vast range of occupations that included not only the production of export crops such as sugar, ginger, tobacco, etc., but also domestic service, farming, ranching, health care, construction, maritime labor, mining, logging, and artisanal crafts such as carpentry and smithing, among many others.⁷ In addition to patterns of slave ownership, the baptismal register depicts free and enslaved Africans and their descendants interacting with a wide variety of Havana residents, including soldiers, carpenters, servants, and "workers," who in most cases served as godfathers for newly baptized Africans or for children of women of African descent. Free and freed people of African origin (described as "libres" and as "horras" or "horros") frequently appear in the baptismal entries as parents, spouses, and godparents for enslaved people and, in rare cases, as slave owners. The baptismal records list over one hundred free or freed Africans and people of African origin, the vast majority of whom were women.⁸

Dates of Data Collection

2003-2004

Dataset Languages

Spanish

⁶ Havana had only one church and parish until the 1630s; see de la Fuente, *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century*, 169. Since there are some gaps in the baptismal register, and Havana's parishioners occasionally had to rely on itinerant priests, it is possible that additional Havana parish records for the 1590s or earlier periods may exist elsewhere.

⁷ Juan Giusti-Cordero, "Beyond Sugar Revolutions: Rethinking the Spanish Caribbean in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Empirical Futures: Anthropologists and Historians Engage the Work of Sidney W. Mintz*, eds. George Baca, Aisha Khan, and Stephan Palmié (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 58-83; David M. Stark, *Slave Families and the Hato Economy in Puerto Rico* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015); David Wheat, *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean, 1570-1640* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 181-215.

⁸ María Teresa de Rojas, "Algunos datos sobre los negros esclavos y horros en la Habana del Siglo XVI," in *Miscelánea de estudios dedicados a Fernando Ortiz v. II* (Havana: Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, 1956): 1275-1287; de la Fuente, *Havana and the Atlantic*, 103-106; Wheat, *Atlantic Africa*, 261, 287-303.

Geographic Coverage

Havana, Cuba

Temporal Coverage

1590-1600

Document Types

Sacramental or Religious Registry

Sources

Libro de Barajas: Bautismos [1590 – 1600], Catedral de San Cristóbal de La Habana, Havana, Cuba.

Methodology

The *Libro de Barajas* was one of many volumes of sacramental records digitized under the auspices of a 2003 National Endowment for the Humanities Collaborative Research Grant directed by Jane Landers, in collaboration with Mariza de Carvalho Soares and Paul E. Lovejoy. On two trips to Cuba, Landers led teams that digitized parish records in Havana, Regla, Guanabacoa, Ceiba Mocha, and Matanzas, with the permission of Cuba's Catholic church.⁹ Digital copies of these records are viewable online and maintained by the *Slave Societies Digital Archive* (SSDA), which is directed by Jane Landers and hosted at Vanderbilt University.¹⁰

In 2005-2006, David Wheat partially transcribed the entire baptismal register into modern Spanish, using the following six categories for each entry: (1) baptized individual, (2) parents, (3) godfather, (4) godmother, (5) priest or sacristan, (6) date of entry. In Wheat's transcription, each individual is listed as they appeared in the original source, with their first name, surname, racial description, African ethnonym, owner, and any other available information all listed together. Wheat's 159-page transcription is currently available online as a PDF file on the SSDA.¹¹

⁹ Mariza Soares, Jane Landers, Paul Lovejoy, and Andrew McMichael, "Slavery in Ecclesiastical Archives: Preserving the Records," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 86, no. 2 (2006): 337-346.

¹⁰ <https://slavesocieties.org/>. SSDA holdings presently include close to 1,000,000 digital images drawn from parish and notarial records and other sources from Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Florida, Angola, Uruguay, Benin, and Mexico, dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Images of the source document informing this dataset can be found at <https://archive.slavesocieties.org/volume?id=6490>.

¹¹ Transcriptions can be found at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Vskm3XvJNocjg-SWwK0do4FkEEypyze0/view>. The link can also be accessed on SSDA by selecting "transcriptions" in the dropdown menu under "Cuba" in the menu bar.

In 2021, Jim Schindling used a software system called the Spatial Historian, which he created, to extract detailed content from the transcriptions.¹² Additional details related to individuals were imputed during the process. These include enslavement status, sex, age category, occupation, and legitimacy. The extracted data are stored in a cloud-based relational database designed to facilitate querying and data analysis.

The initial step in the content extraction process was to account for the use of alternate spellings and abbreviations. This process produced a new version that was used to facilitate subsequent disambiguation processing. For example, one of the early entries identifies a slave owner as "*Al° Çuares de Toledo.*" In this case the abbreviation "*Al°*" was converted to "*Alonso.*" In addition, there are often differing spellings for the same name, such as "*Fernández,*" "*Fernandez,*" and "*Fernádes,*" where phonetically similar letters are interchanged or diacritics are applied based on the preference of the scribe.

The process is similarly applied to words in the transcription that are not formal names. For example, the following date for a baptism recorded on Folio 1 Recto contains several spelling variations.

Original: *Savado que se contaron veynte de henero del dho ano*

Standardized: *Sábado que se contaron veinte de enero del dicho ano*

In this case, the standardized spelling yields the date "Saturday January twenty of said year [1590]."

Using the standardized text, the following generalized rules were applied to interpret content and impute specific details.

- 1) Duplicate (or similar) names were merged into single entries only when there was very little uncertainty. Disambiguation was based on several factors, including comparison of the names of family members and slave owners.
- 2) Enslavement Status
 - a. Children were assigned the same enslavement status as their mother, or that of their father if no mother was listed.
 - b. People listed as "*horro*" (freed) were given an Enslavement Status of Freed.
 - c. People were assumed to be free unless specifically identified as being owned by someone. Ownership is indicated by phrases such as "*moreno de,*" "*negra de,*" or simply "*de*" followed by the name of the supposed owner. For example, based on the phrase "*Mateo Criollo y Ysabel Criolla su mujer, negros de Alonso Çuares de Toledo,*" recorded in Folio 1 recto, *Mateo* and *Ysabel* are both considered to have been enslaved.
- 3) Age Category
 - a. Recorded as adult if no parents were listed.
 - b. Recorded as infant if one or more parents were listed.

¹² James P. Schindling, "The Spatial Historian: Creating a Spatially Aware Historical Research System," PhD diss., West Virginia University, 2020.

- c. The only Age Categories assigned were Infant and Adult.
- 4) Legitimacy
 - a. Considered legitimate if two parents were listed and it was stated that they were married. For example, "Xpobal" (Cristóbal), whose baptism was recorded on Folio 142 recto, was classified as legitimate because his parents were identified as "Juan Muñoz y Ynes de la Parra su mujer."
 - b. Recorded as illegitimate if one parent was listed.
 - c. Recorded with unknown legitimacy if no parents were identified or there was no specific statement that the listed parents were married.
- 5) Sex
 - a. Based on roles in the events. For example, *Godmothers* are considered *female*, *Cura* (or officials) are *male*.
 - b. Based on sex for known names. For example, "Juan" is *male*, "Maria" is *female*.
 - c. Based on language specific gendered names. Because the *Libro de Barajas* is written in Spanish, many proper names will end in "a" when feminine and "o" when masculine.
 - d. Based on gender-specific adjectives such as "*moreno*" and "*morena*" and the definite articles "*el*," "*la*," "*los*," and "*las*."
- 6) Name Assignment
 - a. Normalized versions of abbreviated names were used. For example, "Fran^{co}" is converted to "*Francisco*."
 - b. When a person was referenced more than once but with different names, one of the names was selected and the others were put into the Alternate Names field. For example, the wife of "Anton Rezio" is alternately recorded as "*Ana de Soto*" and "*Ana de Sotolongo*" In this case "*de Soto*" is recorded as the Surname and "*de Sotolongo*" is recorded as an Alternate Name.
- 7) Surnames
 - a. When Ethnicity was given but no other last name specified, the Ethnicity is used as the last name. For example, from the phrase "*Ysabel Angola negra de Gomez de Rojas*" in Folio 1 Recto, "*Ysabel*" is assigned the surname "*Angola*."
- 8) Occupations
 - a. A person officiating a baptism ceremony was given an occupation of "*Priest*"
 - b. People listed as "*Capitan*," "*Teniente*," "*General*," "*Alferez*," or some combination thereof, were given an occupation of "*Officer*," which is a sub-type of "*Military*." The Rank for the occupations were set to the text in the transcription. For example, Folio 24 recto records the name of the godfather as "*Capitan Pedro Albares de Ruesga*"; in this case, the occupation was recorded as "*Officer*" and the Rank as "*Capitan*."
 - c. People listed as "*Soldado*," "*Sargento*," "*Artillero*," or some combination thereof, were given an occupation of "*Enlisted*," which is a sub-type of "*Military*." Ranks were set to the text in the transcription. For example, Folio 104 verso records the name of the godfather as "*Sargento Alonso de Reyna*," in this case, the occupation was recorded as "*Enlisted*" and the Rank recorded as "*Sargento*."

- 9) Ethnicity
 - a. Assigned if specifically stated using terms like "Angola" or "Brame." The implied place of birth indicators "Criolla" and "Criollo" (meaning born in the Americas, not Africa), are also recorded as Ethnicities.
 - b. Alternate spellings were normalized. For example: "Yngola" and "Engola" were recorded as the Ethnicity "Angola."

Date of Publication

August 2022

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Data Links

Project Website: Slave Societies Digital Archive [<https://slavesocieties.org/>]

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse [<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/V3HWTX>]

Linked Data Representation: Enslaved.org [[Summary Visualization](#)]

Acknowledgments

National Endowment for the Humanities
American Council of Learned Societies
British Library Endangered Archives Programme
Mellon Foundation
Diocese of St. Augustine, Florida
Historic St. Augustine Research Institute

Cite this Article

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<https://doi.org/10.25971/XQ5H-H204>.

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