


Article

Housing the King's Enslaved Workers in the Spanish Caribbean

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Abstract: The construction of military edifices in Spanish Caribbean was overseen by engineers, as previous studies have largely shown, but forced labor played a key role in the processes, an understudied aspect. Hundreds of enslaved workers in San Juan de Puerto Rico or San Juan de Ulúa (Veracruz, Mexico) and thousands in Havana (Cuba) helped create the built environment of the Spanish empire in the eighteenth century yet both their significant physical presences and housing situations have not been discussed at large. Furthermore, general maintenance of these structures was one of the duties of military engineers serving in Spanish Caribbean and, thus, archival material should be rich in describing this aspect, yet very few plans or reports offer any information concerning enslaved workers' habitations, apart from Havana's *galeras* and some sections of San Juan de Ulúa, both unpublished until now. Recognizing that Spanish authorities paid little attention to the lodgings of their enslaved workers, this paper considers the forms of structures created by enslaved peoples for their lodgings. Through examples discussed in Havana and for San Juan de Ulúa, this study demonstrates that European architectural traditions were eschewed in favor of native and, likely, African customs. These examples offer unique insights into enslaved peoples' living environments and expand our discussions into how race contributed to the diversity of architectural practices in the early modern Iberian world.

Keywords: military engineers; enslaved African workers; fortifications; Caribbean; eighteenth century



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1. Introduction

The discourse concerning the history of architecture has long privileged certain groups—e.g., European—and the subsequent impact of the favored group's architectural standards upon other peoples, communities, and locations. This perspective stripped different historical and cultural building practices of meaning by often labeling them as exotic foreign productions. Only recently, through interrogation of the privileged cultural models from a more wholistic and global approach to architecture, have new methodologies and models arisen that seek to explore underrepresented forms of non-European production; particularly, those that are seemingly absent in historical documents. In the case of Hispanic American architectural history, these interests in non-traditional modes of building have begun to shed light on the lives and contributions of the enslaved communities. These efforts are enlivening the current discourse of architectural history that decenters our understanding of the early modern period as it relates to enslaved communities (Greenblatt 1990; Schiebinger 1998; Davis 2011). In this context, this paper explores these historically unprivileged modes of building traditions to provide a richer cultural understanding of the history of architecture.

During the early modern period, the impact of racialized peoples on the architecture in Iberian colonies can be difficult to decipher. Within historical government archives and religious repositories, material centers on elite, governmental, and religious building activities with very little recognition about the enslaved Africans or forced laborers who built many of these architectural projects, and much less so on these peoples' domiciles.¹ However, in certain instances where enslaved Africans and forced Indigenous laborers

were directly under the authority of the king, monarchical policies required housing for these peoples. This is particularly found in some military building programs, where many enslaved workers were directly forced to create defensive networks for the monarchy. More than likely due to the lack of interest of local Imperial administrators, little information exists concerning how this labor force was housed despite these Imperial requirements. The lack of information concerning their housing stands in contrast to increased academic interest on the daily lives of workers in Caribbean fortifications as documented in the works of Pérez Guzmán (1990), Vidal Prades (2010), Venegas Delgado (2015), Venegas et al. (2016), Solana (2020), Jennings (2020), and Paolo Solano et al. (2021). Informed by their research, I intersect with their work through the examination of unconsidered archival sources preserved at the Archivo General de Indias (hereafter AGI) and the Archivo General Militar de Madrid (hereafter AGMM) that record eighteenth-century information concerning enslaved Africans and forced laborer's housing in the colonial ports of Havana (Cuba) and Veracruz (Mexico). In so doing, I analyze how African and forced laborers were housed at military fortifications throughout the Caribbean during the eighteenth century. I do so to consider how military engineers responded to the demands of the Spanish colonial administration that stressed the ethical housing and care of their laborers.

It is universally agreed that the participation of enslaved African workers was crucial for the construction of the early-modern Spanish Caribbean's fortification network. Their roles in this process, although recognized, are rarely detailed, as scholars instead emphasize the importance of architects, engineers, and other professionals. In contrast, I will evaluate and define (1) how the number of enslaved Africans or prisoners (*forzados*) working for military engineers evolved throughout this broad time period; (2) how some of their needs were addressed, namely their food, clothing, housing, and social organization, etc.; (3) if any were trained as master builders and masons, as either enslaved workers or freedmen, as some research has claimed.² Through analysis of archival documents, including both texts and plans, at AGI and AGMM, a general understanding of the monarchy's approach to these issues can be formed. Only by incorporating enslaved workers' contributions to the building processes of these monumental edifices is it possible to rewrite the canonical discourse of history, moving beyond the traditional Eurocentric interpretation toward a fairer and more comprehensive vision.

2. Workers in Numbers

Beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century, references to enslaved workers in Spanish fortifications in the Caribbean were commonplace. During these early decades, the exact numbers are not detailed in many cases, which can be further complicated by the instance that governors only acquire enough slaves to complete a project.³ This stipulation resulted in a range of enslaved workers, generally between 20 to 150 individuals.⁴ Furthermore, the specific activities that enslaved Africans were to carry out were not always well defined, despite being regularly forced to work in the construction of fortifications and in mining complexes.⁵ Regardless of the industry in which they toiled, all enslaved men and women legally belonged to the Crown. When these enslaved workers escaped, the authorities were careful to maintain control.⁶ Only in the seventeenth century did private ownership of enslaved people come about in Spanish America.

From the outset of the construction of ports and fortifications at Cartagena and San Juan de Ulúa—the two locations with the highest number of enslaved workers in this period—the leading military engineers at both ports were responsible for these laborers. The engineer had to oversee or provide all the necessities for these workers, including housing, religious services, medical care, food, and clothing. Engineers kept very detailed fiscal records and dutifully provided the monarch with relevant documentation, which today is preserved in two different archives.

Take, for example, Batista Antonelli. While working at San Juan de Ulúa in Veracruz, Antonelli drew the oldest depiction of a *galera* (literally galley, but in this historical usage it is more similar to barracks) for enslaved workers (Luengo 2022). Organized around a

small square, it was built as a *palapa* (open-sided thatch-roofed structure) made of palm and wood in contrast to the rest of the buildings, which were in stone and brick. In the middle of the courtyard, a small chapel was situated. The chapel was attended to by the Brotherhood of the Virgin of the Rosary, who attended to religious needs of the enslaved African community. In this exceptional case, a list of the enslaved workers of both sexes is provided, with men outnumbering women.⁷

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the practice of tracking enslaved peoples for the construction of fortifications waned, making it difficult to ascertain exact numbers. The documents that exist predominantly focus on the transfer of slaves between areas. For example, a group of enslaved workers were transferred from Havana to Cartagena de Indias in 1608.⁸ One year later, an engineer joined the forced workers.⁹ Apart from a way of reducing the expenses to the Crown, these movements would allow the Crown to take advantage of already trained workers at diverse points in the region. Similar sources from Havana in 1646 inform us about the sort of food provided to these communities—"bread, cassava, salted pork meat, salted turtle jerky, live turtles,"—which was distinct from the usual diet of military officials.¹⁰ Some of these foods are still common among some African communities in the Americas, although they are not typically found in pre-contact Spanish and Native American cuisines.

With the available data, the number of enslaved workers seems to slightly decrease during the first half of the seventeenth century (Figure 1), in parallel to the reduction of fortification building. At the beginning of the century, significant numbers of enslaved peoples resided in numerous locations, including 316 people in Panama, 200 persons in Cartagena de Indias, and 80 individuals in Havana. About these enslaved people we know that in Havana, for the year of 1631, 41 African men were accompanied by 8 women, while in 1635, there were 26 men and 5 women. During this decade, 49 Africans worked with 18 *forzados*, while a bit later, the number of Africans decreased to 31 and the forced laborers increased to 26. Similar numbers persisted into the last years of the decade. Between 1636 and 1639, on average, Havana housed 28 enslaved men (16 of whom were newly purchased slaves), along with 4 women, and 36 *forzados*.¹¹ During the second half of the century, these numbers significantly increased. Santiago de Cuba reached 200 enslaved workers, while Panama more than doubled its slave numbers from 80 to 200.¹² The increase is partially connected to the Spanish's desires to renovate fortifications that were increasingly under threat of attack from other European powers.

However, the large increase of relying upon enslaved labor was not universal. At some ports like Matanzas, a total of 83 workers—both freedmen and slaves—resided (López Hernández 2019, p. 57); however, no information is provided about the other ports, despite defensive works that were enhanced and created, and therefore, likely required enslaved workers for these projects.

At the end of the seventeenth century, the reliance on slave labor was complicated. A 1681 report from Panama suggests it is better to sell all enslaved workers who contributed to the city's fortifications.¹³ There were multiple reasons for this. First, purchasing slaves was expensive. The colonial regime, through military engineers and governors, had to provide basic subsistence for them. That is, these officials had to create a town for them, including building a church and retaining a priest. The new settlements were deemed necessary, to supposedly correct their immoral behaviors; however, after five years, officials abandoned this project due to its supposed low successfulness.¹⁴ The program's cost was estimated at more than 7000 pesos per year, a number that included the expenses for feeding and clothing enslaved workers. According to the archival source, another reason to sell these workers was that ill Africans could not work and that during the feast days no one, sick or well, could work. For these reasons, horrific reasons, officials argued that the slaves should either be sold as nuclear family units or leased to private owners. Leasing them for buildings clearly piqued the interest of the Spanish bureaucrats, as it was enacted in late eighteenth century Cuba (Pérez Guzmán 1992, pp. 374–75, Lopes dos Santos 2017). Although such ideas were not adopted at large in the Caribbean, the proposals offer data

that allow for us to account for the numbers of enslaved peoples used to build some fortification complexes.

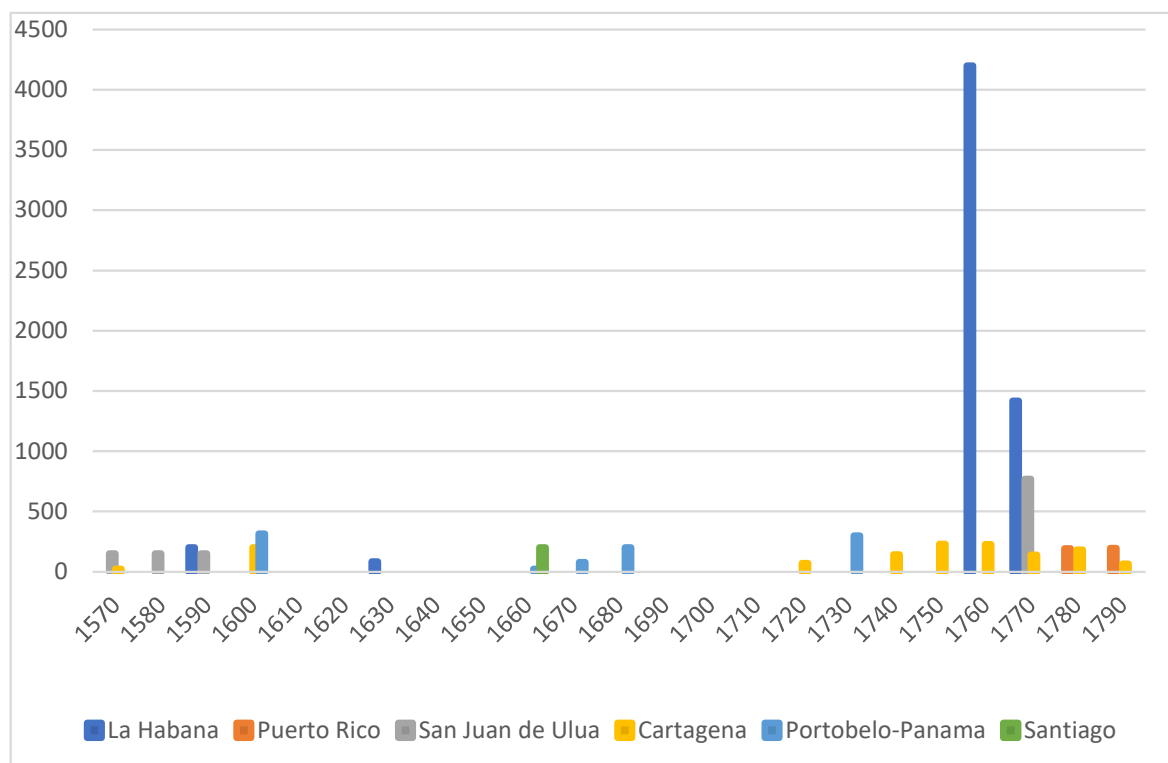


Figure 1. Growth of the number of forced workers in fortifications at different Caribbean ports. Organized by decades, the data is derived from archival and secondary source materials cited herein.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Spain's dynastic family changed; to initiate a new era of Spanish dominion, the Bourbons instituted a progressive transformation in the metropolitan control of colonial works. Military engineers, originally selected from their previous experience as architects or as soldiers, were now specifically trained in international academies, mainly Barcelona, Ceuta, and Oran. Although preserved government records or published treatises do not provide any information about how workers on these projects were chosen, it is evident that solutions were created in these academies, homogenizing their later production.

If earlier in the colonial period, 200 enslaved workers were traditionally considered enough to address a fortification, this quantity seemed insufficient by the eighteenth century as fortifications were increasingly larger and needed to be built more quickly because of competing interests among the European powers. Despite this significant need for more workers, both engineers and governors faced many challenges in managing enslaved peoples. A report from Panama in 1741 considers both the advantages and disadvantages of relying on slave labor (Cruz Freire et al. 2020, pp. 182, 211–212).¹⁵ The anonymous author notes that the most expensive part of building fortifications in Panama was manpower, although paying the salaries of freedmen to build fortifications was cheaper. Relying on freedmen resulted in a much slower process of building as it frequently resulted in a shortage of funds. To offset these issues, it was proposed to use enslaved Africans, who were easily found in the region, because despite the initial cost at in purchasing enslaved laborers, they could be sold at the end. Furthermore, the barbaric practice was made worse by ethnic profiling: indeed, the anonymous source suggested that Africans of Araraes, Terranovos, and Carabalues ethnicities should be specifically rejected, because they were feared by colonial audiences who claimed that these Africans were thieves.

To supplement enslaved laborers, ironically, the informant suggests relying upon white convicts, a practice that became widely used during the late eighteenth century. The author justified the use of penal labor because they need not be purchased, and they only had to be transferred from their prisons to the construction sites, while being offered modest food rations. Not all convicts were eligible for this labor; only those who had been sentenced to the harshest penalties were forced to take part. The author of the 1741 document also notes that food rations were the same for enslaved Africans, forced laborers, and convicts: “beef, corn, and bananas.”¹⁶ According to Pérez Guzmán (1990, p. 251), in Cuba, laborers were provided *cazabe* (bread), beans, peas, and chickpeas.¹⁷

A Panama engineer offers additional information. He notes that he had to provide enslaved peoples, with religious instruction and health services via missionaries; this requirement was also found in Cuban programs as well (Pérez Guzmán 1990, pp. 255–56). The author goes on to discuss clothing as well, noting that he had to provide clothing to all the workers used in the building of Panama’s fortifications. The clothing was simple canvas materials: men wore a jacket (*chamarreta*), and women were given long skirts (*pollera*) and the same jackets. Similarly, in Cuba, workers were provided with breeches, shirts of twine fabric (*bramante*), a coat made of green or blue baize cloth from Antequera, and two straw hats twice yearly (Pérez Guzmán 1990, p. 252). No references were made to footwear, but the engineer notes he had to provide laborers with tools to carry out their work. These tools were maintained by an enslaved worker responsible for the forge.¹⁸

Although centered on Panama, this information is likely applicable to other Caribbean fortification building programs. For example, by 1740, forced workers were commonplace throughout the Caribbean. Indeed, the process was carried further with some fortifications’ sections transformed into prisons, including locations in San Juan de Ulúa, Havana, and San Juan de Puerto Rico. These transformations led to a significant increase in the number of forced workers being used, which soon matched or exceeded that of enslaved Africans. More specifically, a letter from 1772 written in Havana notes that there were 424 forced workers, 23 African freemen, 321 royal enslaved workers, and 7 privately held enslaved Africans working at the Cabaña fort.¹⁹ Furthermore, for the entirety of Havana, there were 982 forced laborers and 436 enslaved peoples there. Two years later, the situation remained similar: in February 1774, 450 forced laborers were working at the Cabaña fort alongside 271 enslaved Africans, and 26 African freed people.²⁰ Of the 271 enslaved men, 265 belonged to the King, while 6 were privately owned. These trends continued through the last quarter of the eighteenth century.²¹ It is important to note that while these numbers are meaningful, at neighboring works such as San Severino Fort in Matanzas, only eight enslaved workers were active in April 1776.²² This data reinforces that the Crown and engineers made concerted efforts to transport enslaved workers from one fortification to another, as engineers recognized and valued the builders’ skills that they obtained through previous construction projects. It is plausible that these enslaved workers acquired techniques that were rare among forced laborers or local artisans. Moreover, the archival data suggests that some enslaved Africans were utilized at more critical military infrastructure programs, thereby, their skills were more highly valued than those of prisoners and other forced laborers.

The Seven Years War between 1756 and 1763 reshaped many Caribbean fortifications, resulting in significant increases in the number of workers at fortifications. Havana’s defenses were paramount, which not unexpectedly resulted in a huge relocation of human laborers there, with estimates reaching up to 4198 men building there (Cruz Freire 2018, p. 228). The total surpasses all other major ports by far: San Juan de Ulúa had 770 laborers, Cartagena maintained 228 builders (Gámez Casado 2021), and San Juan de Puerto Rico relied upon 198 workers ((Hinarejos Martín 2020). Of these numbers, the division between enslaved Africans and forced laborers were close to equal with one another. After the British devolution of Cuba in 1763 and the completion of most of its defensive structures, large numbers of enslaved and forced workers were sent to other points of the Caribbean, mainly San Juan de Ulúa and Cartagena de Indias. In the final years of the eighteenth

century, it seems likely that the general numbers of forced workers decreased as well as demand waned at various fortification complexes. This is parallel to a decline in the use of enslaved labor by the Imperial administration. At least in Havana in 1797, only 326 enslaved workers were dedicated to the fortifications.²³

3. Housing Workers

Despite the fluctuation in the numbers of enslaved laborers under control of the military, and the increased documenting of the slaves' activities and associated expenses, there is no record of their physical presences by way of their residences and public spaces, apart from Antonelli's sixteenth-century drawing of San Juan de Ulúa. Only the simplest of spatial organization is gained through scattered archival information. [Castillero Calvo \(2016, pp. 83–84\)](#), for example, has documented that the neighborhood called Triana in Portobelo was populated in 1606 by poor families and enslaved workers who worked on San Juan's fortifications. The scant information suggests that the engineers were unconcerned about the enslaved laborers' housing. Over a hundred years later, the military engineer José Tantete wrote about the "houses" for forced workers in Havana in 1734 ([Pérez Guzmán 1990](#)). At least from 1765, these houses were built of guano and wood, more specifically "jócumá," "yaya," and "guairage." These building materials and techniques were not commonly used in Havana's urban architecture during the eighteenth century ([Cuza Pérez and Carreras Rivery 2014](#)). Indeed, the only mention of *jócumá* is connected to the building of latrines and framing floors ([Cuza Pérez and Carreras Rivery 2014](#), p. 107). Thus, it is highly probable that *jócumá* was a relatively inexpensive wood.

While these materials are rare for building structures for the primary Europeanized communities, they were common in the traditional houses, or *bohíos*, of the Caribbean peoples ([Soraluce Blond 2003](#); [Adán Castañón 2021](#)). Apart from a material connection between structures and indigenous communities, it is important to recognize that specific skills were required to make these structures; abilities that were common among African and Caribbean groups. It is probable, then, that members of the African and Caribbean communities controlled the building of these structures, even when they were sponsored by the Imperial or local administrations.

Thus far, the data presented suggests that the various port laboring communities resided in small shacks; during the second half of the century, some locations began to adapt the military barrack structure to house laborers and slaves, likely for expense purposes and observation of the labor force. These barracks were referred to as either a *galera* or a *palenque*, measuring 50×7 varas (ca. 42×6 m) ([Pérez Guzmán 1990](#), pp. 252–53). The first identified *galera* was found in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) in 1773 (Figure 2). The *galera* does not differ significantly from military barracks. Each complex had its own water tank, kitchens, and bedrooms with windows, with both an exterior and the inner courtyard of similar size. The same concepts in design are found through the analysis of a profile elevation from 1795. The primary difference between slave and military barracks is the means of controlled and centralized access. Slave barracks had one exterior access point, and a single connection to the rest of the barracks through the sergeant's room. This design practice restricts entry into and departure from these spaces.

Although different chronologically, another a *galera* was also used as an *atarazana* (shipyard) built in Veracruz (Figure 3). Again, it was a single-story building with limited window access, strategically situated to allow for oversight of the large open space and the rear of the building abutted the sea. Although its name as house-shipyard makes it difficult to discern its true function, the building shape is much closer to the aforementioned *galeras*. A single module is divided to house two rooms, where the forced laborers likely lived. However, the building was difficult to supervise because of its location next to the port and the incorporation of four accesses at every corner. In this instance, the usage of the term *galera* is likely connected more to the materials used in its construction by the enslaved peoples.

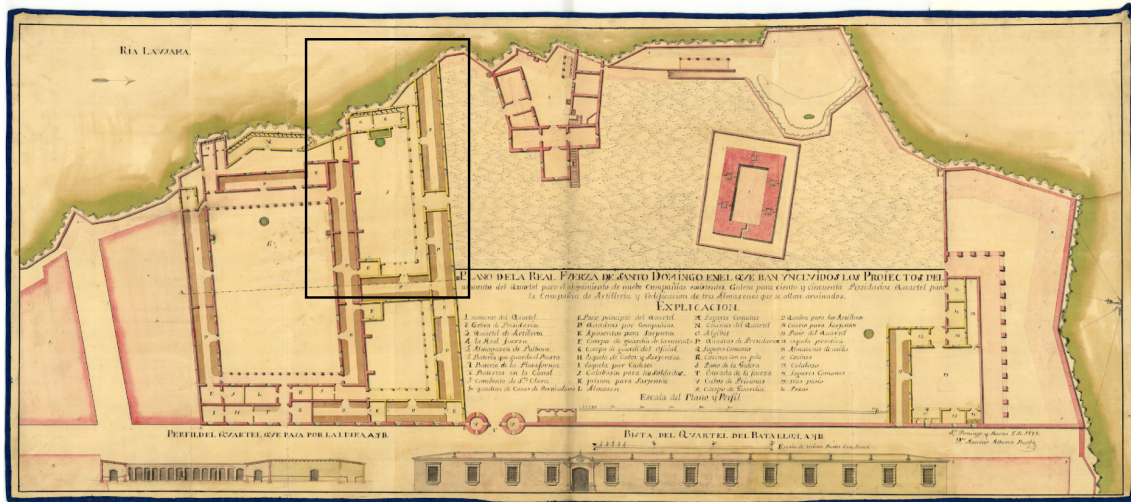


Figure 2. Álvarez Barba, Antonio. Plano de la Real Fuerza de Santo Domingo: en el que van incluidos los proyectos del aumento del cuartel . . . , galera para ciento y cincuenta presidiarios. . . (Plan of the Royal Fort of Santo Domingo, which includes the projects to increase the size of the barracks..., galera for one hundred and fifty residents) 1773. Centro Geográfico del Ejército, Ar.J-T.3-C.4-34. Note the following elements from the legend (explicación): 2: Galera de presidiarios; E: aposentos para sargentos; P: Cuadras de presidiarios; Q: Lugares comunes; R: cocinas con su pila (2: Prisoner’s galley; E: sergeants’ rooms; P: Prisoners’ blocks; Q: Common places; A: kitchens with their sinks).

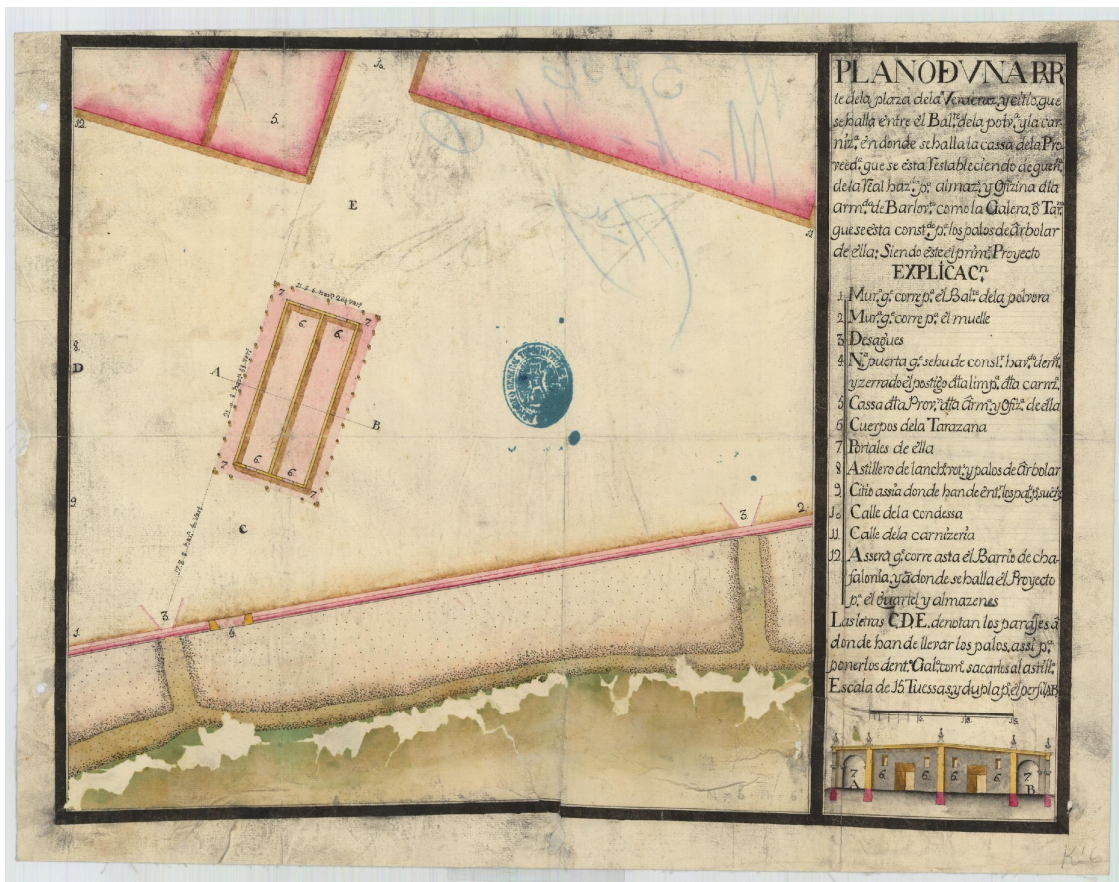


Figure 3. Plano de una parte de la plaza de la Veracruz y sitio que se halla entre el Baluarte de la pólvora y la carnicería. en donde se halla la casa de la Providencia. que se está restableciendo de

cuenta de la Real hacienda para almacenes y Oficina de la Armada de Barlovento (Plan of a part of the plaza of Veracruz and the site between the powder bastion and the butcher shop, in which the Storehouse is located, which is being recreated by the royal treasury as warehouses and the windward naval office). 18th century. AGMM, MEX-4/7. Note the following elements from the legend (explicación): 6: Cuerpos de la Tarazona; 7: Portales de ella (6: Parts of the shipyard; 7: its portals).

To house the large number of slaves and laborers for Havana, 4198 workers and engineers designed specific structures for them. The city commissioned a *palenque*, or a group of houses for the enslaved community, in 1795 (Figures 4 and 5). It was located in a corner of the inner walled city, next to the wall and the bay, the present location of the National Archives of Cuba. The plot was organized with long one-story structures with a square in the middle and a small church within it. In contrast to the typical design of previous houses for enslaved workers, which contained long communal interior spaces, it seems that this building was divided into small houses, each with a door and a window. The plan names them as *casitas* (little houses) and they were built of “cuges, guano y embarrado cubiertas de teja” (wooden slats, guano and mud covered with tiles). Because of its division and materials it is related to the Cuban *bohío*, with the only meaningful difference in that of the roof. While the traditional *bohío* was covered by a vegetal layer, here tiles were used. Furthermore, similar structures with vegetal coverings are found in neighboring Santiago (Cruz Freire 2013, p. 146). The shift to tile from vegetation was likely supported by the local administration, as the colonial administrators often considered vegetal roofs as unhealthy, dingy, and suitable for animals and not people.

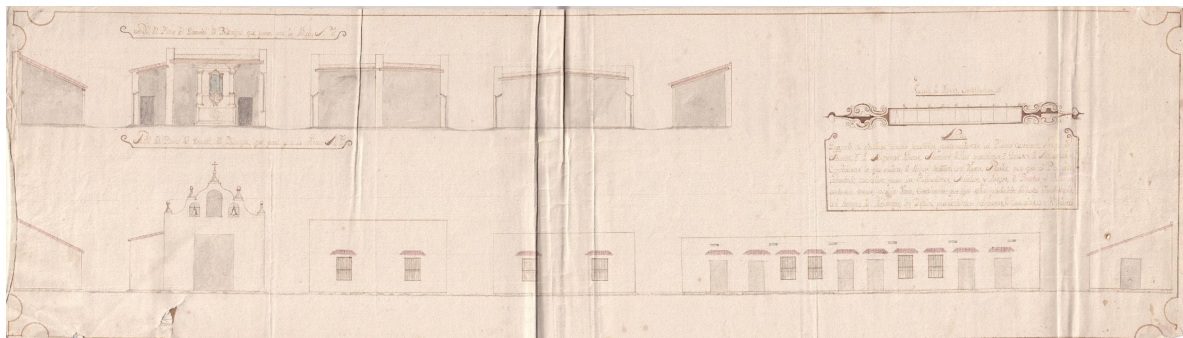


Figure 4. Perfil del Plano, del Quartel, del Palenque que pasa por la Linea No. 5 [y] Perfil, del Plano, del Quartel, del Palenque, que pasa por la Linea No. 7 (Profile of the Plan of the Barracks of Palenque that passes through Line No. 5 [and] Profile of the Plan of the Barracks of Palenque that passes through Line No. 7). 1795. AGMM, CUB-119/17.

Apart from these eighteen residences, located at the right of the plan, there were three pavilions. On the plan, two of the pavilions (20 and 22 houses) are represented vertically while the third (12 houses) is horizontal. At the boundaries of the plot, other spaces were located that were used for many uses including a storehouse (top at rear of chapel). In the middle of the plan, a vertical gallery was used as pigsty. It is noteworthy that it is very close to the houses and maintains the same architectural display. At the right section of the plan, a space was reserved for latrines. On the other side, where the entrance and the main spaces were found, both the kitchen and the dungeon were installed. It seems that the spaces for the soldiers and gunners (located at the bottom of the map) were far away from the storehouses, pigsty, and latrines, probably to avoid the bad smells and filth.

Even though this housing solution was practical for Spanish purposes, it did not correspond well to living environments designed by enslaved communities in similar areas, specifically, African villages in Santo Domingo and Guatemala. In these locations, houses were set far apart from each other, situated near a path, and rarely organized around squares or shared public spaces. Similar community organization is found near Havana for

the British camps of Guantanamo, which included sections for enslaved workers. While the European troop housing was organized on an orthogonal plan, enslaved communities tended toward more organic solutions, avoiding the design of clear streets and squares, and public spaces just marked by geographic elements, especially trees. Thus, enslaved communities continued their building traditions all around the continent. When possible, it seems that their organized public spaces were likely closer to the solutions found in Santo Domingo or Guatemala. These models stand in contrast to those supported by the administration and military engineers, who imposed European urban forms that necessitated a cultural alignment and with it, a social control of enslaved communities.

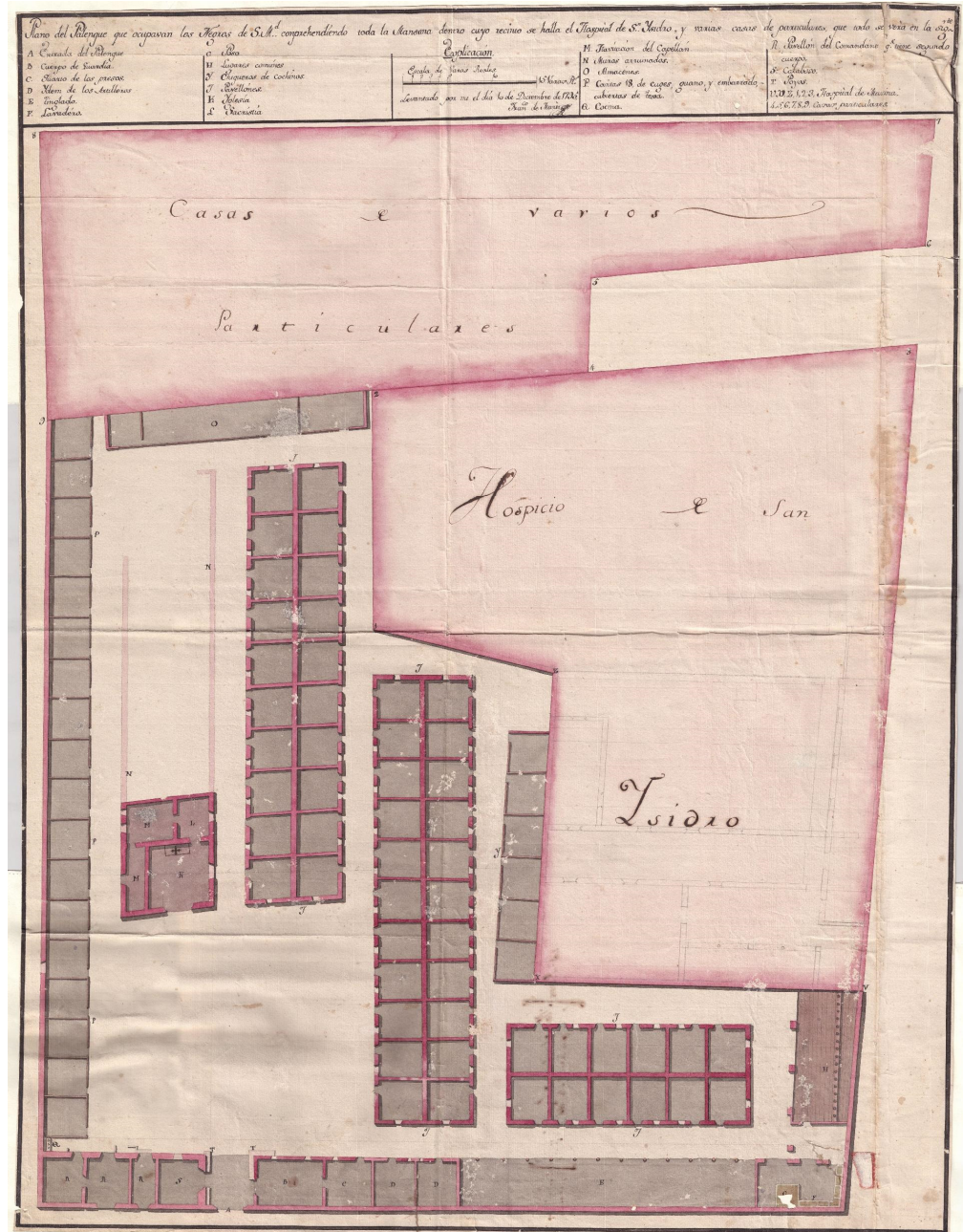


Figure 5. Plano del Palenque que ocupaban los Negros de Su Majestad comprehendiendo toda la manzana dentro cuyo recinto se halla el Hospital de Sn. Ysidro, y varias casas de particulares, que todo se verá en la siguiente (Plan of the Palenque that was occupied by His Majesty’s Blacks, including the entire block within which is the Hospital of San Ysidro, and several private houses, which will all be seen in the following). 1795. AGMM, CUB-119/18.

Building inside the wall was not the only means to house the thousands of Havana's enslaved workers. At least in the final decades of the eighteenth century, a similar solution was in place in Casa Blanca, as sources of the early nineteenth century confirm (Figure 6).²⁴ Currently, the exact location for Casa Blanca is unknown. It is very likely that Casa Blanca refers to the area between the hermitage of Nuestra Señora de Regla, a place which maintained a profound connection with African cults (*santería*), and the city's largest fortification, San Carlos de la Cabaña. In the sixteenth century, a white house was constructed there to store goods, but the connection with enslaved communities and this white house is not evident in contemporary society (Pinillo León 2017). The nineteenth-century structure has an L shape, with a single story, a gabled roof, and an open gallery supported by pillars. It seems likely that the inner distribution of spaces would have been close to the one at the walled city, having private doors and numerous windows to differentiate houses.

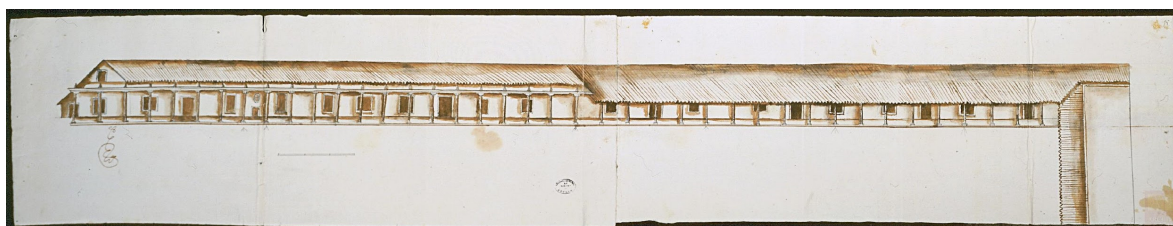


Figure 6. Plano de la galera de presos de Casa Blanca (Plan of the White House prisoner's gallery). 1801. AGI, MP-Santo_Domingo, 631.

According to the source, the edifice was still used to store construction materials for public works and to house workers, despite being in ruins. The dilapidated building had no proper roof, and therefore, a budget was provided to restore the edifice.²⁵ The new building was restored by Juan Martínez, Francisco Correa, and Manuel Angulo, “maestro arquitecto albañil y cantero” (master architect, mason, and stonemason) as well as Francisco de Paula Castro, “maestro carpintero de lo blanco, alarife” (master carpenter and builder).²⁶ None of these names have been found in the city's contemporaneous works, and it has been suggested that these men were probably not the most reputable. Through budget analysis, it is possible to confirm their knowledge on local building techniques, though. The lists of required materials, repeated several times due to administrative delays, were divided into masonry and carpentry. In the first, lime, *coco*, sand, gravel, clay tiles, bricks, and stone for pillars can be found. The importance given to *coco* shows that it was a local technique approved by military engineers. Regarding carpentry, the required woods were cedar (*cedro*), pine (*pino*), and *Manilkara albescens* (*ácana*) for pillars and windows. The previously used materials—guano, *jocuma*, *yaya*, and *guairage*—no longer appear.

Due to administrative spending cuts, the works did not proceed as planned, and the building's preservation deteriorated. Nevertheless, in 1803, the structure was still in use despite its incomplete restoration. The neglect resulted in the renovated wood and materials being eaten away by pests and humidity, thus requiring replacement.²⁷ Therefore, a new budget was provided, which also noted changes in wood species.²⁸ Informed by previous issues that lead to wood rot, the builders attempted to avoid wood species that could be corrupted easily by high humidity. Thus, cedar was removed and only *Calophyllum antillanum* (*ocujé*), *ácana*, *Copaifera hymenaeafolla* (*quiebrahacha*), and pine were chosen. Based on the archival materials, we know the building should, functionally, be airy and breezy both for the building's conservation and the residents' health.²⁹

On the heels of the significant increase in the numbers of workers, and the first real attempts to provide them with housing, ironically, new warfare techniques developed that decreased the need for laborers. The increasing number of revolts and uprisings, many resulting in new independent Republics, inspired Spanish military engineers to denounce the usefulness of the potentially rebellious enslaved workers in favor of forced laborers.

4. A Black Overseer-Architect

Some historical sources suggest that these forced workers were talented subordinates for engineers for whom they worked. However, despite these claims, recent studies have not been able to identify any successful examples of this social mobility. Nevertheless, new sources appear to contradict the edicts of some Imperial bureaucrats.³⁰ In 1804, the King appointed a Black worker, likely a freeman of enslaved African origins, as overseer, but the *intendente*, Juan José de la Hoz, wrote the King to re-evaluate the decision. José María Seben or Ceben was born in Havana (Cuba), likely around 1755, because he entered the military service in 1778. After more than two decades of service, he was appointed Casa Blanca overseer on 30 July 1803, by Royal decree.³¹ According to Seben, he had an extensive, impoverished family for whom he had to care. The job to which he was appointed was akin to a fortification overseer, working hand in hand with military engineers trained in Spanish academies. De la Hoz insisted that he was a *mulatto*, when all previous overseers were white and qualified (“de calidad”) men. The *intendente* accepted that Seben fulfilled the other qualities required by the law, but he contends that he was on sick leave for years. De la Hoz doubts that Seben could maintain his colleagues’ level on the job, due to their distinction.

5. Discussion

The cases analyzed here demonstrate that military engineers used forced workers in their architectural works in Spanish America. The historical problem is not only their numbers, usually mentioned in passing by scholars, but how authorities dealt with their housing, healthcare, and architectonic training, among other factors, leading down a path toward new historical scholarship. These aspects of care, even though it was an Imperial responsibility going back the sixteenth century, seem to have gained interest among engineers in the eighteenth century. Future studies might explore this evolution through the lens of an Imperial plan to provide public works where these spaces appear, the emergence of workers, a moral demand, fear of neighboring maroon uprisings, or merely an improvement of administrative control from the metropolis.

6. Materials and Methods

The first section of this paper aims to find quantitative information about the number of forced workers at fortifications. As official reports provided to the administration, they are likely to be accurate, even as the repetition of some quantities, such as “200”, can be understood as a common occurrence. Unfortunately, this information is exceptional, making it difficult to achieve a definitive chart for such evolution. The second section, about forced workers’ housing under the authority of Spanish military engineers, required a different approach. Due to the lack of archival sources, this research opted for a qualitative approach to both written and drawn materials. In both cases, the information is provided to the Imperial administration, asking for funds to cover the costs, and thus, it is likely reliable. Even so, it has its limits. Most of the mentioned sources are not rich in providing information about the daily lives of enslaved or forced workers, their functions or skills, their residential overcrowding, or their ethnic differentiation. Instead, they were focused on budgets, administrative procedures, and bureaucratic responsibilities. Likely due to the challenging problem of Havana, most cases are located there, but it seems likely that similar structures were built in other Caribbean ports. Most of the mentioned cases are from the late eighteenth century, probably as a consequence of higher numbers of laborers in fortifications, and a more detailed control of these works, but it is likely that similar problems and solutions appeared from the beginning of the Spanish defense of the continent.

7. Conclusions

It can be said that the number of enslaved African or forced workers toiling on Spanish military fortifications in the Americas was usually around 200 during the late sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries. The numbers increased in the first half of the eighteenth century, reaching 300. During the second half of this century, the amounts increased drastically, reaching 4198 in Havana or 770 in San Juan de Ulúa. From the late seventeenth century onward, the percentage of forced laborers relative to enslaved workers increased, surpassing the enslaved Africans during the second half of the eighteenth century. In the final decades of this century, numbers generally decreased. From the beginning of the Spanish presence in the Caribbean, military engineers were responsible to care for the needs of their workers, including food, clothing, spiritual matters, healthcare, and housing, although not much information has been preserved among their long reports. Unfortunately, nothing is said about women's roles or experiences, apart from occasional references to their number. Finally, it seems that enslaved Africans were trained by engineers as builders and were in some cases esteemed. According to the available sources, they were never trained as engineers or drawers, even when most military engineers privately owned enslaved Africans. Overwhelmingly, their space seems to have been the field work at the fortifications.

With this essay, apart from raising interest in the contribution of African and American forced laborers to the building of most of the current touristic monuments of the Caribbean, I would like to recommend including details about their role in the historical explanation provided to current societies. It was not merely Spanish men, trained in European academies, who were responsible for these defensive structures. African and American hands were likewise crucial to edify this land, albeit with a much different experience.

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Notes

- ¹ In this article the term "enslaved" will be used to denote those workers that are being acquired as slaves. In contrast, a forced laborer is one who committed a serious crime and was sentenced to forced labor.
- ² This paper does not attempt to address other issues concerning the treatment of Africans, Americans, Europeans, and enslaved individuals in the Caribbean, including the physical transfers of peoples from community to community.
- ³ In 1573, 24 enslaved Africans were sent to Cartagena and Santa Marta. Cabildos seculares: Audiencia de Santa Fe. Esclavos para la fortificación. AGI, Santa Fe, 62, N. 35. 1585.
- ⁴ "Porque habiéndose de proseguir/las fortificaciones que están comenzadas en aque/lla tierra y llevado como lleváis oficiales can/teros, albañiles y carpinteros serán menester/peones os mando que de los negros que envían a Cartagena/o a cualquiera de los puertos de las dichas provincias/de tierra firme Pedro Gómez . . . toméis los que precisamente fueren menester" (Because having to continue the fortifications that are begun in that land and carried out, as you are bringing officers, stonemasons, masons and carpenters, it will be necessary to have laborers, I command you, Pedro Gómez, to take what is precisely necessary of any of the Blacks that they send to Cartagena or to any of the ports of the said provinces from the mainland . . .). Esclavos para las fortificaciones. 1597. AGI, Panama, 237, L. 12, ff. 275v–276r.
- ⁵ Cédula al gobernador de Cuba para que informe si los esclavos que se encargan de la fortificación serían útiles para minería. 1573. AGI, Santo_Domingo, 1122, L. 5, ff. 8v–9r. Something similar is found in Sobre aplicación de los seis negros de la barca real a las fortificaciones. 1620. AGI, Santa Fe, 52, N. 155.
- ⁶ Testimonio sobre la fuga de once esclavos negros de las obras de fortificación. 1602. AGI, Panama, 15, R. 3, N. 31.
- ⁷ AGI, México, 257. Something similar was already studied for other contexts such as *haciendas* (Pineda Alillo 2014).
- ⁸ Envío de esclavos de las obras de La Habana a Cartagena. 1607. AGI, Santo_Domingo, 869, L. 5, ff. 149v–150r.
- ⁹ Envío de Cristóbal de Roda y los negros necesarios para las obras de fortificación de Cartagena. 1608. AGI, Santo_Domingo, 869, L. 5, ff. 196r–197v.
- ¹⁰ Cuenta de los esclavos y forzados del Rey. AGI, Contaduría, 1117.
- ¹¹ Cuenta de los esclavos y forzados del Rey. 1636–1639. La Habana. AGI, Contaduría, 1118, ff. 89–109.
- ¹² "Ordeno por auto de sin embargo que se comprasen veinte y cuatro piezas de esclavos de unos navíos de arribada que llegaron a Portobelo y que solo fueron veinte y dos que se hallaron a propósito cuyo precio se ajustó en nueve mil novecientos y cincuenta y dos pesos" (However, he ordered that twenty-four pieces [sic] of slaves be purchased from some arrival ships that arrived in

Portobelo and that there were only twenty-two that were found for that purpose, whose price was adjusted to nine thousand nine hundred and fifty-two pesos). *Compra de esclavos para las obras públicas*. AGI, Panama, 230, L. 5, ff. 227v–228v. 1661. This governmental purchase seems to continue without significant additional information for this investigation here: *Reintegro a la caja real del importe de ciertos esclavos para las fortificaciones de Portobelo*. AGI, Panama, 230, L. 5, ff. 206r–207r. 1661.

- 13 Solicitud de doce mil pesos para comprar esclavos negros para la fortificación de Chagres. AGI, Panama, 231, L.8, ff. 171r–171v.
- 14 “Formándolos un pueblo en que tenían mucha conveniencia y puniéndoles capellán que los doctrinase les sirvió esto de ocasión para que entrando en alhuez y en un modo de servicio soberbio que introduciéndose poco a poco por espacio de cinco años se reconoció imposible de corregir por cuya causa y por el gasto de más de siete mil pesos que hacían todos los años a mi real hacienda en su sustento y vestuario y que con esta cantidad rebajadas las quiebras de los enfermos y de los días de fiesta en que no se trabaja podían alquilarse casi otros tantos negros jornaleros se tuvo por conveniente en juntas de hacienda el venderlos referidos con sus familias esclavas y puesto en ejecución por el justificado camino que manifiestan los papeles de estas materias” (Creating a town for them in which they were very convenient and providing them chaplains who indoctrinate them served as an opportunity for them to enter into “alhuez” and into a superb mode of service that, introducing them little by little for a period of five years, was recognized as impossible to correct for whose cause and for the expense of more than seven thousand pesos that they made every year to my royal estate in their sustenance and clothing and that with this amount reduced bankruptcies of the sick and of the holidays in which they do not work they could rent almost as many Black day laborers it was considered convenient among the boards of finance to sell them referred to their slave families and put into execution by the just manner that the papers of these matters manifest). *Motivos para vender esclavos negros de la Real Hacienda trabajando para la fortificación de Panamá*. AGI, Panama, 231, L. 8, ff. 222r–223r.
- 15 Project about the reconstruction of the fortress of San Felipe at Portobello and San Lorenzo el Real at Chagre (Panama). 1741. *Archivo General Militar de Madrid (AGMM) 5-2-5-2*.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Something similar was found by Vila Villar (1985).
- 18 Project about the reconstruction of the fortress of San Felipe at Portobello and San Lorenzo el Real at Chagre (Panama). 1741. *Archivo General Militar de Madrid (AGMM) 5-2-5-2*.
- 19 *Correspondencia del Capitán General de Cuba*. AGI, Cuba, 1151, f. 650r.
- 20 *Correspondencia del Capitán General de Cuba*. AGI, Cuba, 1152, f. 212.
- 21 March: AGI, Cuba, 1152, f. 219; April: AGI, Cuba, 1152, f. 242; May: AGI, Cuba, 1152, f. 262, etc.
- 22 *Relación de negros forzados que trabajan en la fortificación*. 1775–1777. AGI, Cuba, 1155.
- 23 *Relación de los esclavos remitidos a las obras de fortificación de esta plaza*. AGI, Estado, 1, N. 23.
- 24 “Testimonio del expediente promovido sobre composición de la casa de vivienda del sobrestante mayor de Casa Blanca y galera de forzados negros de su majestad, año 1804”. AGI, Santo_Domingo, 1685, N. 500.
- 25 “Y sus colgadizos hasta poner dicha fábrica con la mayor solidez por hallarse en el día desplomados sus techos y apuntalados para contener la ruina que amenaza y se ha empezado a experimentar” (And its hangings until putting said factory with the greatest solidity because its roofs were collapsed during the day and propped up to contain the ruin that threatens and has begun to be experimented with). *Ibid.*, f. 1r.
- 26 Budget of November 8th, 1801. *Ibid.*, f. 15v.
- 27 *Ibid.*, ff. 29v–30r.
- 28 *Ibid.*, f. 31r–32r.
- 29 “conseguirse la claridad y ventilación de la galera que es tan necesaria para su beneficio y duración y para la salud de sus habitantes por ser un paraje de bastante humedad” (to achieve the clarity and ventilation of the galley that is so necessary for its benefit and duration and for the health of its inhabitants because it is a place with a lot of humidity). *Ibid.*, f. 33r
- 30 Letter about the Royal Decree appointing Jose Maria Ceben as overseer. 1804. AGI, Santo_Domingo, 1685, N. 405. El intendente de ejército interino de La Habana. Contestando la Real orden de 17 de julio último sobre la colocación de José María Ceben en plaza de sobrestante, dice que este individuo es mulato, que los que sirven iguales destinos son personas blancas y de calidad, y pide que su Majestad se sirva suspender los efectos de su citada real orden. Excelentísimo señor. José María Ceben a quien su Majestad se sirvió mandar por real orden de 17 de julio último se le confiriera la primera vacante de sobrestante con el sueldo de doce reales diarios siendo ciertos sus servicios, y teniendo las demás cualidades que previenen las leyes, no existe en esta ciudad, pero es constante que en 12 de julio de 1778 se alistó en el batallón de pardos libres de esta plaza, y en la revista de inspección parada en diciembre de 1791 se // le dio la respectiva licencia por enfermo. Los empleos de sobrestantes de obras de fortificación, y de intervención de Real hacienda son de reglamento, y en la actualidad no hay vacante. Son servidos por personas blancas y de calidad en razón de ser destinos de suma confianza y la clase de mulato de José María Ceben me parece lo inhabilita para confiarle encargos de intereses de la Real Hacienda y de la alternativa que necesariamente tendría que guardar con los demás compañeros a la intermediación de jefes de // distinguido carácter. Enterado Vuestra Excelencia de las circunstancias de Ceben, le suplico se digno hacerlas presentes a Su Majestad y prevenirme lo que fuera de su soberano agrado en orden a la colocación de este individuo en el caso de que parezca y se me presente. Dios guarde a Vuestra excelencia muchos años. Habana, 20 de

enero de 1804. Excelentísimo señor, Juan José de la Hoz (rúbrica). The interim army quartermaster of Havana. Responding to the Royal order of July 17th regarding the placement of José María Ceben in the position of foreman, he says that this individual is a mulatto, that those who serve the same destinations are white people of quality, and asks that His Majesty please suspend the effects of his aforementioned royal order. Your Excellency sir. José María Ceben, to whom His Majesty was pleased to order by royal order of last July 17th, that he be granted the first vacancy for overseer with the salary of twelve reales per day, his services being specific, and having the other qualities that the laws provide, does not exist in this city, but it is constant that on July 12, 1778, he enlisted in the free *pardo* battalion of this place, and at the inspection parade in December 1791 // he was given the respective sick leave. The jobs of overseers of fortification works, and intervention of the Royal Treasury are by regulation, and currently there are no vacancies. They are served by white and quality people because they are highly trusted destinations and José María Ceben's class of mulatto seems to me to disqualify him from being entrusted with assignments of note from the Royal Treasury and the alternative that he would necessarily have to stay with the others' companions in the vicinity of bosses of // distinguished characters. When Your Excellency is aware of the circumstances of Ceben, I beg you to deign to present them to His Majesty and advise me of whatever is to your sovereign's liking to place this individual in the event that he appears and presents himself to me. God keep Your Excellency many years. Havana, January 20, 1804. His Excellency, Juan José de la Hoz (signature).

³¹ *Expediente de José María Seben*. 1809. AGI, Ultramar, 327, N. 27.

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