

HISTORICAL SOURCES IN COSTA RICA *

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Costa Rica has received greater attention from scholars in recent years than in the past. The nation's relative tranquility and stability compared with its neighbors continue to attract the attention of historians and social scientists seeking explanations for Costa Rican exceptionalism. The following summary of the main domestic sources of materials for studying the history of Costa Rica is presented in the hope of encouraging further research.

Archivo Nacional

The most important repository of historical materials in Costa Rica is the Archivo Nacional. Creating the Archivo was the inspiration of Costa Rica's greatest historian, León Fernández, who edited ten volumes of primary documents compiled in the archives of Seville and Guatemala City.¹ These original documents and their complementary indices comprise the core of the Colonial Section of the Archivo Nacional.

From 1881 to 1888, under the guidance of Fernández, documents from the various municipalities were accumulated and stored in San José. The material was transferred to the old Universidad de Santo Tomás in 1889. The first law regulating the national archives was enacted in 1902. After years of modest activity, between 1966 and 1974 the name of the institution was changed to Archivo Nacional and a major administrative reorganization was undertaken. At that time, proposals were adopted for relocating the present facility to a modern structure in Zapote.

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In 1932 the first issue of the *Revista de los Archivos Nacionales de Costa Rica* was published. This excellent publication is available at many libraries in the United States.²

The materials held at the Archivo Nacional are divided into eight general categories. The majority have been indexed and are arranged chronologically and alphabetically. Card files for most of the documents are contained in rooms next to the researchers' study area on the second floor (exceptions are noted below). The documents themselves are contained in bundles, or *legajos*, each one having an index on the inside cover.

The first group of documents is the Sección Colonial, which runs from 1517 to 1821. The forty separate index files, or *ficheros*, in this group deal with lawsuits, royal instructions, letters, solicitations, tax roles, and civil and commercial registries. This group treats a variety of economic, political, social, and military matters. Materials are arranged in the following subdivisions: Complementario (7,435 items); Cartago, which contains the capital and the principal villages, including Barba, Esparza, Villa Vieja (Heredia), Villa Nueva (San José), and Villa Hermosa (Alajuela), and is sizable (1,147 items); Guatemala, collected by León Fernández (1,180 items); portions of three files entitled Denuncio de Tierra, dating from 1650 to 1931; parts of six files of Testamentos, undated, beginning in 1650 and running sporadically through 1850; and portions of two files entitled Esclavitud, dating from 1607 to 1829 and arranged by province.

The Sección Municipalidades, 1821–1900, is the second major record group, with twenty-seven index files arranged by individual municipality (1,246 items). Most of the records for the twentieth century are still held in municipal archives.

The third major record group of the Archivo is the Sección Poder Legislativo, "Serie Congreso," 1823–1948, with thirty-five index files (21,118 items). This record group also contains an incomplete set of Costa Rican *Leyes y Decretos* for 1821 and others spanning 1826 to 1982.

The fourth major record group is the Período Nacional, which is subdivided into several sections: Provincia Independiente, 1818–1833, has four index files (1,464 items); Federación a México, 1820–1841, has one index file (38 items); Federación Centroamericana, 1820–1847, has one file (979 items); Campaña Nacional, 1855–1857, has two files; Denuncio de Minas, 1826–1923, has one index file; Impresos, 1834–1850 (mostly decrees from the Central American Federation), has no index (155 items).

On a different floor and directed by a separate staff are found the Notarial Indices, 1913–1981 (7000 items). These documents are utilized extensively by practicing attorneys and legal aides. The record group

entitled *Período Nacional* also features documents assembled from private collections by nineteenth-century Costa Rican historians Gerardo Lara and Diego Chamorro. The records are the *protocolos* of individual Costa Rican lawyers, consisting of lawsuits, contracts, and other legal matters.³ The *Protocolos Lara y Chamorro* are divided into individual provinces and *cantones* in two series (2,074 items). The first series, *Protocolos Antiguos, 1602–1850*, is the most extensive; the second continues the *protocolos* through 1888. An index is found at the front of these records, which are located with the general index files next to the main reading room.

The fifth major group of records is the *Registro Civil, 1950–1970*, one of the most extensive series of recent documents acquired by the *Archivo* (64,824 items). More recent records are still held by the *Registro*, which is of limited value to researchers. It is located at *Avenida 2, Calles 6 y 8*, in San José. Lowell Gudmundson notes that the *Registro Público de la Propiedad*, the equivalent of the civil registry for real property, has recently become a source for materials on land tenure and usage.

The sixth group of records is the *Sección Poder Ejecutivo*, which incorporates documents from the following executive branch ministries: *Agricultura y Ganadería, 1898–1929*, with one index file (392 items); *Beneficencia, 1828–1910*, one file; *Culto* (church-related), 1825–1910, one index file; *Economía y Comercio, 1953–1974* (5,138 items); *Educación, 1821–1929*, with 106 index files (4,731 items); *Fomento, 1821–1974*, sixty-two index files; *Gobernación, 1829–1954*, 116 index files; *Policía, 1833–1920*, twenty index files (25,929 items); *Guerra y Marina, 1820–1912*; *Guerra y Marina, 1913–1969* (with particular strength in the 1930s), seventy-one index files; *Hacienda, 1805–1919, 1926*, and other years sporadically, with thirty-four index files and the subsection *Avaluos*, seventeen index files (9,734 items); *Indultos*, one index file; *Justicia, 1842–1897*, one index file; *Gracia, 1882–1925*, two index files (3,187 items); *Matrimonios Civiles, 1909–1954*, fifty boxes of records with indices (910 items); *Obras Públicas y Transportes* (3,472 items); *Relaciones Exteriores, 1821–1970*, nine index files, mostly records of consulates and legations outside Costa Rica; *Salubridad, 1837–1935*, one index file (200 items); *Seguridad Pública, 1820–1972* (10,170 items). *Trabajo*, which is alphabetized by names of individuals, has two index files (2,324 items). Subcategories include *Planillas, 1890–1963* (3600 items), and *Tribunal de Trabajo, 1942–1944* (2,217 items).

A final group of executive branch records deals with the *Ministerio de la Presidencia, 1928–1964*, and 1978–1982. These records are divided into *Correspondencia*, *Consejo de Gobierno*, *Vice-Presidentes*, *Despacho*, and *Oficina de la Primera Dama* for the period 1928–1964

(136 items). An additional thirty-five boxes dealing with the Carazo administration are presently undergoing processing. Materials for 1964 through 1977 are not available.

The seventh major record group contains the greatest volume of material but has been utilized least. The Sección Poder Judicial, post-1821, is arranged by province, with index files located on the first floor of the Archivo. Subsections include Mortuales, thirty-two index files (12,459 items); Alcaldías Civiles y Penales, 1846–1948, with 360 index files alphabetized by the name of the principals (174,817 items); Juzgados Civiles y Penales, 1831–1948, indexed by theme and the name of the principals, with sixty-seven index files (217,898 items); and Corte Suprema de Justicia, 1895–1945 (22,615 items).

The eighth and final major record group is the Sección de Fotografía, Planos y Mapas. The photographs (primarily reproductions) date from 1840. The first of the original photos were taken during the Campaña Nacional in the 1850s. More than two thousand of the collection's six thousand photographs are available for public use. Maps and *planos* (surveys) date from 1839 to 1974 and are arranged by province. Most of the twenty-one thousand items available to the public date from the present century.

In addition to the above materials, the Archivo Nacional also holds several small private collections. The Colección Norberto Castro y Tosí consists of genealogical and heraldic information accumulated by the noted historian when he studied in Europe in the nineteenth century. The material is contained in a file cabinet with two drawers and has a lengthy index at the beginning of the file. The Colección Federico Tinoco consists of documents from the Tinoco era (1916–1918), which are contained in twenty large boxes. These were a gift from the government of Brazil in the 1950s and have no index. The Colección Licenciado Enrique Yzaguirre contains material relative to the Sociedad de Socorros Mutuos in Costa Rica.

Among the miscellaneous records held by the Archivo are seven files of indices to the *Revista del Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica*. In addition are a large number of documents concerning the 1948 Civil War not yet examined by historians. Alphabetical indices are available for Reclamados de Guerra (761 items), Tribunal de Sanciones Inmediatas (2,217 items), and Tribunal de Probidad (392 items). Currently in processing are seventy-two boxes with 812 items from the Junta de Custodia, the wartime agency empowered to deal with more than three hundred Axis citizens, sympathizers, or suspects whose property was seized pursuant to the Allied "blacklist" of presumed Nazis. Archivist Cecilia Arce is presently using this material for her *tesis de grado* at the University of Costa Rica.

Overnight photocopying is available for most of the records held by the Archivo. Several members of the capable staff provided assistance for my research, and particularly helpful were Jorge Alberto Alvarado Marín and Luis Alberto Quesada Palma. Staff offices and the public reading room are located on the second floor. The director of the documents section is Licenciada Luz Alba Chacón León de Umaña.⁴

Biblioteca Nacional Miguel Obregón

The Biblioteca Nacional is an impressive modern structure near the downtown area. The library has closed stacks, with card catalogs located on the main level, and utilizes the Library of Congress system. Materials are indexed by subject, author, and title. After the proper citations are obtained, requests for the material are made at the circulation desk on the west side of the lobby.

The main level also includes a general reference collection, photocopying facilities, and a large reading room. The closed stacks help insure the availability of the requested materials. Permission to check out books must be obtained from the library administration, which is located on the third floor. Experience has shown that permission is not readily granted.

An examination of the titles under the subject heading "Historia" revealed over twelve hundred volumes, including some duplicates. Works dealing with Costa Rican history are located in files numbered 66 through 68. The last file also contains an index of historical periodicals. File 69 contains approximately fifty entries dealing with the history of the Catholic Church in Costa Rica. Indexes to publications of individual government ministries are located in author files 80 and 81. They include *Memorias* from the following government ministries: Cultura, Economía, Educación, Gobernación, Hacienda, Industria, Obras Públicas, Relaciones Exteriores, Salubridad, Salud, Seguridad Pública, Trabajo, and Transportes.

Periodicals held by the national library are located on the second floor in closed stacks. An excellent collection of national publications, particularly newspapers, offers the most extensive and best-preserved examples of this kind of material in Costa Rica. It is recommended that the Biblioteca Nacional be utilized for periodicals and *Memorias* and the Archivo Nacional for older primary materials.⁵

Archives of the Catholic Church in Costa Rica

The most important unexplored source of historical documents is the archive of the Costa Rican Catholic Church. Although scholars are

gradually gaining access to these materials, their use has been restricted by the task of indexing and cataloging two hundred boxes of materials that span more than four hundred years. The following survey provides a brief summary of archival work to date, discussing the various kinds of materials contained in church archives. Most of these materials are located in the archive of the curia of the archdiocese of San José.

Costa Rica was the poorest and most isolated of the Central American colonies and was administered by church officials in Nicaragua during the colonial era. The separate diocese of San José was created 28 February 1850 by the bull *Christianae Religionis Auctor*; and Monseñor Joaquín Anselmo Llorente y Lafuente assumed possession as its first bishop on 2 February 1852. The second bishop, Bernardo Augusto Thiel Hoffman, assumed responsibility for collecting and preserving historical church documents, and over two decades, he compiled a volume entitled *Datos cronológicos para la historia de la Iglesia de Costa Rica (1882–1896)*. Current knowledge concerning colonial Costa Rica reflects the efforts of Thiel and his lay colleague, León Fernández, in the late nineteenth century. Thiel's work was updated by Monseñor Victor Manuel Sanabria's similarly titled *Datos cronológicos*. Archbishop Sanabria's monumental genealogy, *Genealogías de Cartago hasta 1850*, should be mentioned as well.

Any study of the church in Costa Rica must begin with the works of Ricardo Blanco Segura, the principal modern church historian.⁶ Two younger historians currently working in the church archives are Miguel Picado Gattgens and Sandra Chavarría. Both provided valuable assistance in the preparation of this note and are willing to work with future visiting scholars. Picado, a parish priest, is the author of a study on the administration of the Costa Rican church that is available at the curia.

Chavarría has been working for three years on preparing a comprehensive index for the church archives as part of a cooperative venture with the Universidad Nacional in Heredia. She is also involved in publishing the third *Boletín Referativo*, which outlines the contents of boxes number 30 through 40. The boletín can be examined at the curia or at the Escuela Ecumenical of the Universidad Nacional. These first forty boxes contain material from the colonial era, including material utilized by Thiel and Sanabria.

Church records at the curia are contained in legajos of three hundred to five hundred pages, and with the exception of the first thirty-five boxes, they remain disorganized. For the study of colonial history, thousands of documents deal mainly with *capellanías*, *pleitos*, and *demandas*, particularly the first category.

Most of the archival materials concern the modern era. Records generated after the creation of the bishopric are organized by individual parishes and deal with parochial administration. Church investigations

concerning *libertad de estado* (marital status) also produced detailed records offering important data for social historians. A significant portion of the curial archive is devoted to current Catholic periodicals and other recent publications. No photocopying facilities are available.

The most recent church records are maintained by individual parishes, and access is often impossible to obtain. Picado and Chavarría urge researchers to present their credentials to individual archives as restrictions vary by parish. Nearly two dozen parish demographic histories were completed between 1975 and 1982 by graduate students at the two universities, an optimistic total for future researchers.⁷

Asamblea Legislativa

Another interesting yet underutilized source for historical research is the archive and library of the Asamblea Legislativa, which contains materials unavailable elsewhere in Costa Rica. The archive catalogues the records of committee minutes, reports, and legislative debates, as well as legislation. The small library on the second floor of the Asamblea building holds published works, a variety of periodicals, and bound originals of Costa Rican newspapers dating from the nineteenth century. Photocopying facilities, a small reading room, and staff assistance are available within the library. The chief librarian is Licenciada Yadira Chaverri.⁸

Government Ministries

Additional historical materials can be found in the archives of individual government ministries. Experience has shown that the nature and importance of these sources vary significantly, and access is often restricted. One exception is the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (Foreign Relations), which makes its extant records available to researchers. The records are limited, however, because most pre-1950 materials have been transferred to the Archivo Nacional. The ministry has its own library, with a modest collection of reference and historical works, located apart from the main building.⁹

According to Lowell Gudmundson, the Dirección General de Estadística y Censos recently gave some two hundred rolls of microfilm to the Archivo Nacional. This material, which will be made available for public use in the near future, comprises that ministry's entire archive.

The Universidad de Costa Rica

The Ciudad Universitaria Rodrigo Facio was established in 1942 and has become the leading educational institution in the country, with

over twenty thousand students. Its library facilities are superb, the main component being the university's Biblioteca Carlos Monge Alfaro. The first floor contains author, subject, and title card catalogs, an information desk, and the general reference area. Researchers must present their credentials to obtain a *carnet* permitting extended use of the facilities; books may not be checked out without prior authorization from the library administration.

The library holds six hundred separate monographs, texts, and theses dealing with the history of Costa Rica, indexed in subject files 116 and 117. The reference area has a very small individual study area, a separate card catalog of reference works, and a limited collection of abstracts, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and basic reference materials.

The second floor contains secondary works for general circulation in open stacks, catalogued by the Library of Congress system. The hundreds of graduate theses are arranged chronologically in the stacks at the south end of the circulation area. These theses make an excellent starting point for historical research. Work to be photocopied is left at the second-floor information and circulation desk and promptly retrieved at the first-floor copy center, located in the southeast corner of the building. Copies are currently two *colones* each.

The greatest asset of this library is the extensive document and periodical section (Unidad de Documentación), located on the third floor. It includes an information desk, a separate card catalog, and a display of current periodicals for public use. Tables are provided for students, and in the closed stack area, individual study carrels are available for graduate students and visiting scholars. A visitor's *carnet* is required for access.¹⁰

The extent of the periodical materials available is revealed in the library's two-volume guide to current accessions.¹¹ Holdings related to history and geography exceed one hundred titles. Many are complete collections of current publications, while others are incomplete examples of obscure journals that are difficult to obtain elsewhere. A number of national historical journals are available, including those published in Latin American countries and the United States. This section also contains a variety of international bibliographical works. The periodicals and documents section has its own photocopying facilities and charges three *colones* per copy.

The fourth floor of the library contains group and individual study areas used by undergraduates during the school term. The library is directed by Dr. Adrián Araya Marín, and the documents and periodicals section by María Eugenia Solano Méndez.

Other university libraries of interest include the Biblioteca de Ciencias Sociales Eugenio Fonseca Tortós. Its two rooms contain open

stacks and a separate study area with an information desk. The Facultad de Ciencias Sociales is located near the offices of the outstanding student weekly, *Universidad*.

Lowell Gudmundson recommends the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas as a clearinghouse for information on large-scale projects, such as probate and census studies now in progress. Directed by Victor Hugo Acuña, the institute offices are located on the fourth floor of the Social Sciences building. The Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas (located in the building of the Facultad de Ciencias Económicas) might also be consulted.¹²

Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica

The Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica (UNCR) is located in the provincial capital of Heredia. The university's Biblioteca Joaquín García Monge is located on the eastern side of the campus, one of several examples of modern architecture at the Universidad Nacional. Built in 1983, the structure of exposed beams, bright colors, and open spaces is large and well-maintained. The reception area, actually the second floor, contains both card catalogs and a rotating art exhibit.

Although carnets from other national institutions are honored, visiting scholars may obtain a UNCR carnet from the administration office located on the third floor, which authorizes use of graduate facilities. Books may be checked out with the permission of the library director.

The first floor, which has access by stairs and elevators, contains both group and individual study areas, the latter being preferable for research conducted at UNCR. The periodicals and documents section, the Hemeroteca, is located on this level in a separate area. The information desk in this section has copies of the catalog of the collection.¹³

Historical periodicals are classified by the listing 900R (history), and although thirty-one journals are cited in the card catalog, only five are currently being received. The variety of indices and abstracts include *Dissertation Abstracts International*. The individual study area in the documents section maintains a strict quiet, but conversation is permitted in group study areas.

The open stacks are located on the second floor at the south end of the library. Both individual and group study areas are located among the stacks. The two hundred history texts are limited to multiple copies of Costa Rican standards. The reference department is located in a large partitioned section on this floor. It has an information desk and maintains a clippings file with an index, government statistics, reports, and census data, as well as standard dictionaries and encyclopedias. Photo-

copying facilities are available on the second floor. The upper level consists of individual and graduate study areas and the library administration.¹⁴

Other Sources

Numerous minor collections of books and documents are scattered throughout Costa Rica. Of note are the libraries of the Banco Central and the Instituto de Café in San José and the agricultural and scientific library at the Instituto in Turrialba. "Think-tank" sources include CSUCA, FLACSO, CIAPA, and others. The Centro Cultural Norteamericano-Costarricense contains a small library and helpful information about the country.

Costa Rican sources for historical studies remain underutilized by North American scholars, despite the fact that capable staffs welcome foreign researchers and graciously place themselves at the disposal of visitors. These varied and well-maintained facilities offer wide access to historical documents. For historical research, the richness of the archival and library sources in Costa Rica provide an unequalled incentive for studying this unique nation.

NOTES

1. León Fernández, *Documentos para la historia de Costa Rica*, 10 vols. (San José, Costa Rica: Imprenta Nacional, 1881–1907).
2. Ministerio de Cultura, Juventud y Deportes, *Centenario 1881–1981 Archivo Nacional* (San José: Ministerio de Cultura, Juventud y Deportes, 1981).
3. The first scholar to use the Lara y Chamorro materials was Lowell Gudmundson, who subsequently published *Hacendados, políticos y precaristas: la ganadería y el latifundismo guanacasteco, 1800–1950* (San José: 1983).
4. The Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, telephone numbers 33–5754 and 33–5597, is located at Avenida 4, Calles 7 y 9, in San José. There are no public elevators.
5. The national library is located on Avenida 3, Calles 7 y 9, telephone numbers 21–2436 and 21–2479. There are public elevators as well as stairs.
6. See Ricardo Blanco Segura, *Historia eclesiástica de Costa Rica* (San José: Imprenta Nacional, 1967), *Monseñor Sanabria* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1967), *Lo que el Obispo Juzgare* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1981), and *Obispos, arzobispos y representantes de la Santa Sede en Costa Rica* (San José: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1984).
7. The curia is a one-story building next to the cathedral, on Avenida 2, Calles 0 y 1, telephone number 33–6029.
8. The Asamblea is located in front of the Costa Rican Museo Nacional on Avenida 0, at Calles 7 y 9. There is no public elevator. Permission to use these facilities may be obtained from the Secretaría de la Asamblea Legislativa by calling 23–0044; the library extensions are 220 and 221.
9. The Ministry is located at Avenida 7, Calles 11 y 11–b, in the historic Casa Amarilla. The archives of the ministry are found in the same building, telephone numbers 33–0522 and 33–0879. The library is one-half block to the west in the same building as the Instituto Nacional de Seguros.
10. The building has no public elevators, but staff elevators are available.

RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

11. University of Costa Rica, *Boletín de Diseminación de Información, . . . Historia y Geografía*, 2 vols. (San Pedro Montes de Oca: Universidad de Costa Rica, 1978, 1985).
12. The Ciudad Universitaria Rodrigo Facio is located east of downtown San José in the suburb of San Pedro Montes de Oca.
13. Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, *Catálogo de publicaciones periódicas*, 2 pts. (Heredia: UNCR, 1984). See also UNCR's *Resúmenes de tesis presentadas a la Universidad Nacional*, 2 vols. (Heredia: UNCR, 1984–1985).
14. The National University is located on Calle 9, Avenidas 0 y 1, and the current director of the library is Marco Tulio García Cambroner, telephone number 37–3052.