

Date: 1538, April 10. Santo Domingo, La Española.

Theme: Comment by the Real Audiencia of Santo Domingo on the use of enslaved black labor in the construction of the main defensive structures of Santo Domingo City.

Source: PARES, Portal de Archivos Españoles, Archivo General de Indias, SANTO_DOMINGO,49, R.9,N.59

The *Audiencia* judges of La Española praised in 1538 the port of Santo Domingo as being “all the fortification and defense of these Indies” deeming that, if enemies were to take it over, “everything else would be at risk.” They were confident that, because of the natural structure of the city’s port, flanked by two rocky heights, it was unlikely for enemy ships to access the city through it. At the same time, the flat, relatively low and open lands immediately west of the town (and more specifically a small beach described as “half a league from this city”) were considered very easy to access militarily from the coasts further to the west and therefore a weak flank of the town’s defenses.

These flatlands west of Santo Domingo extended along one thousand steps from the shore itself in the south to the nearest heights to the north, and the city officials reported proudly to the Crown that a ditch had been dug across the entire width of the distance, twenty feet wide and two *estados* deep, plus a dirt and wood wall of another two *estados* in height and sixteen feet in width that had been built or elevated at the upper edge of the ditch using the dug-out material, making the necessary climb from the bottom of the ditch of one of four *estados* that any possible assailants would have to overcome. They were also in the process of building four *bastiones* (strongholds) on which to place some artillery along the same façade of the city.

The thrust of the work, the authorities say in passing “has been done with some blacks that have been “assigned” among the denizens and they have worked for a little more than a month and a half.” What was left of the *baluartes* was going to be erected with “the blacks that the city has.”

Three decades after the first mentioning of enslaved blacks being used to build the initial defensive walls of Santo Domingo City, the contribution of black laborers was still fundamental for the military defense and survival of La Española’s capital city. Thus at this early times at least, the walls of the colonial city that we see today had the hands of African black people all over them.