

*There is joy in being wise and just,
But above all, there is the beautiful,
The immense happiness of serving.*
Gabriela Mistral, “The Pleasure of Serving”

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The Happiness of Serving: Adelina Coppin Alvarado’s legacy

In November of 2012, just a week before her 83rd birthday, Adelina Coppin Alvarado gladly agreed to be interviewed for Project Memoro Puerto Rico.¹ The interview took place in Coppin’s birthplace, the city of Ponce, known as the “Pearl of the South.” It was her last formal interview and a testimony of a life dedicated to promoting the values of librarianship in a country marked by centuries of colonial dependence. The verses above from Gabriela Mistral’s poem, *The Pleasure of Serving*, are a perfect description of Coppin Alvarado’s ethos. In the keynote address she delivered to the Sociedad de Bibliotecarios de Puerto Rico (Society of Librarians of Puerto Rico) in 2007, Coppin Alvarado shared her views on the social and ethical responsibilities of entrepreneurship and underscored the vital importance of community service as an indispensable element for a nation’s progress and the well-being of its citizens. She embodied these ideals through her professional work and civic engagement and is considered one of Puerto Rico’s pioneer librarians. Coppin Alvarado’s commitment and leadership were essential for developing librarians and libraries in Puerto Rico.

This essay aims to highlight Coppin Alvarado’s work in the context of Puerto Rico’s information landscape during the second half of the 20th century. The intent is to show how

Coppin Alvarado's legacy serves as inspiration for Puerto Rican librarians facing present-day challenges.

Adelina Coppin Alvarado was born on November 29, 1929, in the municipality of Ponce, one of the largest cities in Puerto Rico with a rich cultural history. Coppin Alvarado was a frail child: she suffered from poliomyelitis and underwent various hospitalizations, but the treatments were unsuccessful. However, her mother always provided moral support and motivated her to be independent, strong-willed, and believe in herself. Thanks to her mother, Coppin Alvarado never thought of herself as disabled and joked that her only problem was that she was terrible at mathematics. Notwithstanding the hardships related to her physical disability, she graduated from Ponce High School with honors. She continued her studies at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, where she completed a B.A. in Secondary Education.

In the Memoro interview, Coppin Alvarado mentions that during the 30s and 40s, there was no interest in the development of public libraries in Puerto Rico. She remembers that only some schools had libraries, but the books were kept behind closed shelves and were not accessible to students. She had access to books and magazines because her parents bought them. The Insular Library was established in San Juan in 1903. In 1916, the Insular Library was transferred to a new building donated by the Carnegie Foundation, and it became known as the Carnegie Library. The Carnegie Library was directed by a Board of Trustees appointed by the Governor; periodically, the Legislative Assembly authorized the development and expansion of services. Several libraries were established during this period, including the Hostos Library in Barrio Obrero, Santurce (1940), the Agripino Roig Library in Humacao (1949), and the San Juan Traveling Library (1948). However, the development of public library networks faced complex

challenges. In a study published by Thompson and Rivera Ruiz, the situation was characterized by high illiteracy rates and lack of funding:

As a policy, it might be most effective to concentrate on bringing libraries to the youth; for no matter how enthusiastic one may be for adult education, it is impossible to overlook the difficulties involved in making library readers of a people whose illiteracy rate is as high as it is in Puerto Rico. If a Puerto Rican library system is to be constructed with the primary goal of serving children and young people, it would possibly be best approached by reorganizing the high-school libraries to serve as public libraries in addition to their functions as school libraries. The one dark side of the picture for the future of libraries in Puerto Rico is the immediate prospect of declining appropriations as the insular government's income from rum taxes decreases. The appropriations for the University of Puerto Rico have already been cut, and it will not be unreasonable to expect those of other institutions to follow. On the other hand, Puerto Rico today has a more significant number of trained technicians in all fields, including librarianship, than ever before. It is up to them to make up for any budgetary deficiencies by co-operative effort and wise management of their institutions.²

Likewise, a report prepared for the Committee on Design of Public Works, titled *A Program of Public Libraries for Puerto Rico*, stated that "the entire island is practically devoid of all facilities which are conducive to self-education and recreation through the use of books."³

According to this report, the library network in Puerto Rico included the Insular Library and four municipal readings rooms in San Juan, and only five additional reading rooms for the 76 cities and towns. The situation of school libraries was also dire; some of the main problems were lack of trained staff, inadequate spaces and collections, and lack of open shelves. Except for one

library, the Junior High School at Arecibo, “all the others had the books behind strong wire mesh or a wall which kept the students out.”⁴

In the 1950s, the responsibilities of the Carnegie Library's Board of Trustees were transferred to the Secretary of the Department of Public Instruction. This government agency established the Library Service in 1956, directed by Gonzalo Velázquez, to create a network of public and school libraries with a central administration and trained staff. In 1961, three universities offered a certificate in school librarianship, and a librarian exchange program between Puerto Rico and the United States was created. By 1964, the network included public libraries, school libraries, specialized libraries, cultural association libraries, neighborhood libraries, and traveling libraries. Unfortunately, the Library Service faced difficulties in managing existing libraries, establishing new ones, and paying staff, even though federal funding was available for expanding services.

Coppin Alvarado's early career and professional development run parallel with initial efforts to establish a library network in Puerto Rico. After graduating from the University of Puerto Rico, she returned to the south coast to work as a teacher in Santa Isabel and Yauco. It is essential to mention that, at this moment, Puerto Rican universities did not offer formal training in librarianship. Coppin Alvarado took an elective course in school librarianship during her studies in the Faculty of Education and passed state examinations to earn the qualifications to work as a teacher. She was appointed director at the public library in Yauco. However, the mayor did not accept her and chose another person for the job, an example of the rampant clientelism that affects public service today. Coppin Alvarado worked as a teacher for one year and then left the island to pursue graduate studies in library science at Syracuse University in New York. She was a member of the Pi Lambda Sigma and Beta Phi Mu societies. Other Puerto

Ricans who would become noteworthy librarians, like Josefina del Toro Fulladosa, Gonzalo Velázquez, Grace Quiñones Seda, Antonio Matos, and Julia García de Andreu, also went to the United States to pursue graduate studies in librarianship.⁵

Coppin Alvarado returned to Puerto Rico in 1958, becoming the first librarian in Ponce with a Master's degree. Convinced that libraries in Puerto Rico needed professional librarians, she formed part of a group of pioneer librarians under the leadership of Antonio Matos. He joined efforts to establish the Society of Librarians of Puerto Rico in 1961⁶. The main goals of the new association were to develop a school of library science and promote the adequate training of library staff.⁷ Their hard work paid off: during the years 1965-1966, Dr. Thomas E. Benner, Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, and Ms. Josefina Del Toro Fulladosa, Director of the José M. Lázaro Library, worked on the project that would establish the first library science school on the island. As a result, the Graduate School of Library Science was finally established in 1969 at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.⁸

The 1960s were critical years in the history of academic libraries. The development of academic libraries in Puerto Rico had begun in 1923 when the University of Puerto Rico designated its first librarian, Mr. Du Bois Mitchell.⁹ Private universities also selected North American directors in their libraries. This changed during the 1960s when Puerto Ricans finally assumed leadership. Coppin Alvarado began her career in academic librarianship in the College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts, now University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus. She then moved to San Juan and worked in the Department of Technical Services and the Natural Sciences Library at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. In 1966 she worked with the Federal Government as a librarian in Fort Allen, an Army Installation on the island's southern coast. In Fort Allen, she had to deal with the prejudices and misconceptions of others, who

believed she was not fit for the job because of her physical disability. Coppin chose her dignity over a good salary; in the same year, she quit Fort Allen and began working as library director in the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico in Ponce. In 1970, she organized the University of Puerto Rico library in Ponce, where she served as director until her retirement in 1986. In 2002, the library was named in her honor.

After retiring, Coppin Alvarado continued to serve her country. In 1989, she was a founding member of the Institute of Children's Books (Instituto del Libro Infantil) in Ponce to promote children's literature. She published her first book in 1992, *Visión histórico-social de la Liga Cívica de Damas Pro-Ponce*. The book focuses on women and men who strived to solve the social problems that affected Ponce during the 1940s, highlighting the importance of community service.¹⁰ Finally, she founded the Youth's Library in Ponce (Biblioteca Juvenil de Ponce), inaugurated in 2002, and served as its director for four years. The library was a community organization and depended on volunteer work. It offered various services, including book presentations, storytelling, literacy workshops, arts and crafts, and movies.¹¹ Unfortunately, Coppin Alvarado's health problems prevented her from working long hours. This situation, along with a lack of funding and volunteers, led to the library's closure.

Coppin Alvarado continued to participate in various activities, serving her country until her death in 2013. She was, without a doubt, one of the pillars of Puerto Rican librarianship. Her professional career contributed to the consolidation of academic libraries and strengthening relationships among librarians. In addition, her understanding of the social function of libraries motivated her to foster projects based on community service in favor of underprivileged groups, especially children. Puerto Rican librarians keep her legacy alive by participating in professional associations, communities of practice, social activism, and volunteer work. The Society of

Librarians of Puerto Rico is still one of the most important professional associations, with its peer-reviewed journal, *Acceso*.¹² In addition, many students pursue graduate studies in library science in the Graduate School of Information Sciences and Technologies, making Puerto Rican librarians a highly educated workforce. Most importantly, Puerto Rican librarians hold the conviction that the country deserves equitable access to information and have formed advocacy groups that strive to develop public policies that will guarantee the creation of library networks, even in the context of a debt crisis and government indifference.¹³ These actions will keep Coppin Alvarado's legacy alive for generations to come.



Adelina Coppin Alvarado, Biblioteca Adelina Coppin Alvarado at University of Puerto Rico at Ponce, and the dedication ceremony.

Notes

¹ Memoro is an international project for the creation of “memory banks”, an oral history repository that gathers interviews with people born before 1959. The objectives of Memoro Puerto Rico are to describe the experience of incorporating Puerto Rico into the project; outline methodological approaches; share results; and justify the project in the context of the teaching and research activities of the Graduate School of Information Sciences and Technologies, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.

² Lawrence S. Thompson and Jorge Rivera Ruiz, “The Libraries of Puerto Rico,” *The Library Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1946): 238. <https://doi.org/10.1086/617255>

³ Rodolfo O. Rivera, *A Program of Public Libraries for Puerto Rico* (Committee On Design of Public Works, San Juan, PR: Sociedad de Bibliotecarios de Puerto Rico, 1961), 6.

⁴ Rivera, *A Program of Public Libraries for Puerto Rico*, 7.

⁵ The University of Syracuse and the Pratts Institute were the most popular universities among the Puerto Rican students. In Puerto Rico, the Education Faculty in the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, and the Polytechnic University in San Germán (now the Inter American University) offered elective courses in librarianship. Students interested in earning graduate degrees in Library Science had to leave the island.

⁶ Coppin Alvarado served as President of the Society of Librarians of Puerto Rico in 1974-1975.

⁷ Sociedad de Bibliotecarios de Puerto Rico. (1961). *Boletín de la Sociedad de Bibliotecarios de Puerto Rico*.

⁸ In June of 2000, after a curriculum revision, the program was named Graduate School of Information Sciences and Technologies and offered the degree of Master in Information Sciences (M.I.S.). The School was first accredited by the American Library Association in 1989.

⁹ Josefina Del Toro Fulladosa, “Breve Historia De La Biblioteca General De La Universidad De Puerto Rico.” *Boletín de la Sociedad de Bibliotecarios de Puerto Rico* 1, no. 1 (1961): 2–3.

¹⁰ Maribel Caraballo Plaza, “Legado que trasciende pueblos: Adelina Coppin-Alvarado y la Biblioteca Juvenil; Justina Díaz Bisbal y la Feria Puertorriqueña del Libro Usado.” *Ceiba*, 20(1), 82.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 83.

¹² Acceso is an open access journal, jointly edited with the University of Puerto Rico:

<https://revistas.upr.edu/index.php/acceso>

¹³ One of the most notable groups is Puerto Rico Needs Libraries: <https://prprobiblioteca.org/>