The Geigel Puerto Rican Collection

Francisco A. Scarano, Assistant Professor, History

The University of Connecticut Library recently obtained a major collection of books, pamphlets, periodicals, and government documents appropriate for the study of Puerto Rico’s history and cultural development during the past 150 years. Comprising well over 2,000 volumes, the Geigel Puerto Rican Collection is the latest addition to an already impressive array of Spanish-language material housed in the Special Collections Department of the Library. This magnificent research collection, painstakingly nurtured by the Geigel family of Saúl Juan for three generations, constitutes a bibliographic resource of national scholarly significance. Excelled only by the superb Puerto Rican holdings of the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library, the Geigel Collection is the largest of its kind owned by an academic institution in the United States. As such, it fills a notorious gap in library resources available outside Puerto Rico to students of the island and of the Caribbean in general.

Although a brief overview could not convey the richness and breadth of this (as yet) uncatalogued collection, I will attempt in these notes to provide an historian’s perspective on the usefulness of the Geigel materials for investigation of certain aspects of the Puerto Rican experience. Scholars who approach the island and its people from other disciplinary viewpoints should be encouraged to pursue the preliminary checklist; they, too, will find numerous sources of particular interest. Indeed, the primary aim of the Geigels — to assemble a comprehensive library of _portoricenses_ — is precisely revealed in the variety of intellectual endeavors that found an hospitable niche in the family library: from scientific and technical works like the massive _Scientific Survey of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands_ prepared by the New York Academy of Sciences between the 1910s and the 1950s, to rare editions of poetry from lesser-known authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, since works by Puerto Rican authors on general and international issues, or by foreign writers marginally related to Puerto Rico, were also collected, students of several other Latin American and Caribbean countries, as well as of Spain and the United States, would be well advised to search through the Geigel library for complementary sources. Cuban specialists in particular will find here a wealth of materials from the Spanish colonial period, ranging from more than twenty volumes of the works of Rafael María de Labra, the Cuban-born politician and spokesman for Antillean causes, to colonial legislation which pertained to both colonies of the nineteenth-century Spanish Caribbean.

Undoubtedly, however, the Geigel Collection will be most useful to researchers of the socio-historical evolution of Puerto Rico during the last phases of the Spanish regime and the early decades of American rule. The chronological spread of these materials is fair even for the years 1870 to 1940; holdings from the pre-1898 period constitute nearly two-fifths of the Collection, while the remainder divides almost equally among each of the first four decades of the present century. Thematically, on the other hand, some preferences are evident. There is, for instance, an excellent 18-volume set concerning agriculture and agrarian questions, which the Geigels appropriately called their Biblioteca _agricola_. This specialized set, which includes scores of technical reports on agricultural techniques, assorted publications of agrarian interest groups, e.g., the powerful Association of Sugar Producers, and even some annual reports of sugar corporations dating from the 1910s and 1920s, is part of the rich legacy that engineer Ramón Cano de Córdova bequeathed to the Geigel library, perhaps in recognition of its unique value. Although the Biblioteca _agricola_ stands alone in both size and scope, it is a perfect example of the manner in which the family handled those items or topics they held in special esteem. Other thematically organized sets include the Biblioteca _médica_ and _jurídica_, the 11-volume set of historical documents (Documentos _históricos_), and a variety of discrete tomes on religion, civic organizations, political parties, and important personalities.

These thematic preferences notwithstanding, the Collection garners a wealth of printed primary sources for the historian, whether he is interested in social and economic conditions, in political developments, or in the intellectual history of island elites. Works relevant to the nineteenth
century are particularly comprehensive and broad-ranging. As indicated, for the period before the American invasion of 1898, the more abundant works are those covering the final three decades; earlier history was not, however, neglected, as the previous pages of the most used printed sources testify. Foremost among these is Fray Inigo Abad y Lasierca's Historia geográfica, civil, y natural de la Isla de San Juan Bautista de Puerto Rico (1782), which is included here in José Julián Acosta's annotated 1866 edition—a classic, if unusual, source for the study of both the author's and the annotator's times. Others in this category are Andre Pierre Leduc's Voyage aux Iles de Teneriffe, la Trinité, Saint-Thomas, Sainte Croix (1783), which chronicles a French scientific expedition and includes keen sociological observations on each of these islands; Pedro Tomás de Córdova's Memoria sobre todos los ramos...de la Isla de Puerto Rico (1838), an insider's look at the operation of the Spanish colonial bureaucracy; and various landmark government documents such as the famous "Real Cédula de Gracias" (1778) and the "Atonencio" (1818). Along with other contemporary sources included among the volumes of historical documents, these pre-1850 materials comprise one of the more distinguished and complete sets of its kind in the United States.

In truth, however, these early primary sources pale in comparison to the immensely rich holdings covering the latter decades of Spanish domination. The abundance of items on this period reflects several factors: the enhancement of the elites' literary and scientific universe, the relaxation of censorship, and a gradual but perceptible expansion of the literate public readily come to mind. But perhaps the most significant reason was the beginning of the Gégel's systematic collection of items in the national bibliography, an initiative undertaken by the journalist and politician José Gégel and found (1842-1892). A founding member of the prestigious Atonencio Puertorriqueño and the first librarian of this influential circle of the intelligentsia, Gégel y Zenón occupied an especially appropriate position for the task of collection-building. Shortly before his death in 1892 he had compiled, in collaboration with Abelardo Morales Figuer, the first annotated Puerto Rican bibliography ever; he was reputed to own one of the most complete private collections of puertorriqueños then extant. That celebrated library became the nucleus of the present Gégel Collection.

Understandingly, then, possibilities for research on the late Spanish colonial period are numerous. The Collection is especially rich in sources for social and economic history, the study of which has recently afforded renewed energy and as a result historians the elements of development. All will surely delight in locating so many invaluable sources under one roof, including José Ferrer de Couto's Los negros (1864); the anonymous Cuba y Puerto Rico (1886), by a "conscientious negrophile"; the fiery Informe sobre la abolición inmediata de la Isla de Puerto Rico (1870), by the abolitionist leaders Acosta, Ruiz Belvis, and Quiñones; and three volumes of the Revista Hispano-Americana (1866-68), a journal published in Madrid by a diverse group of Cuban, Spanish, and Puerto Rican abolitionists.

These topics may be explored on their own or in conjunction with an examination of the underlying economic structures. The evolution of the sugar and coffee industries may be approached through such works as Manuel A. Uribarri's Manuscrito sobre la agricultura de la isla de Puerto Rico (1854), Fernando López Turen's Cuatro de azúcar (1893), and an assortment of pamphlets and position papers of sugar planters and coffee and tobacco growers. Pedro de Angela's Misceláneas Puertorriqueñas (1894) and Martiano Slicher Salas' Viaje por la costa noroeste de la Isla de Puerto Rico (1886) both include keen observations on the state of the agrarian economy. These technical or descriptive works may be complemented with the early sociological studies of Salvador Brau (La campesina, 1886) and Manuel Fernández Juncos (Costumbres y tradiciones, 1883), as well as by an abundance of literary texts that offer, in the finest costumbrians tradition, insightful commentary on the manners and ways of life of various strata of the society.

Sources for the study of political life both before the American occupation (1898-1900) are likewise numerous. The Collection includes salient works from the pens of liberal leaders (Román Baldorioty de Castro, Francisco Cepeda Tabarés, José de Celis Aguilera, Luis Muñoz Rivera, José Celso Barbosa, among others), but it does not neglect the writings of the conservative, pro-Spanish forces, e.g., José Pérez Morín. A similar balance is struck in the coverage of the military regime that dominated the American century on the island. Scholars focusing on the institutionalization of United States rule will find in the Gégel library a host of key documents, including a copy of the War Department's Military Notes on Porto Rico (1899), published just weeks before the invasion; printed correspondence between the military governors and their superiors in Washington; and Henry Stimson's Report on the Island of Porto Rico (1899); and at least a dozen books by American visitors intended as popular introductions to America's "new possessions." The local response to American actions is chronicles in J. J. Henna and Manuel Zeno Gandía, El caso de Puerto Rico (1899), M. Lucchetti, Exposición al Congreso de Washington... (1890), and many others.

Just as the dawn of the new century brought profound changes to society and policy, the transfer after Gégel y Zenón's death of the Collection to the youngest son, Fernando Gégel Sabaté, impressed a new direction on the growing library. For reasons that are not clear, the post-1900 materials show an unmistakable sharper focus on the social and economic conditions of the Puerto Rican people—without neglecting, that is, the global character of the bibliographic enterprise. Fernando appears to have directed greater attention to the sharply divergent effects of economic growth on different sectors of the island society. Accordingly, the Collection contains a mine of information and analysis on both the deteriorating living and working conditions of the poor majority and on the flourishing lifestyles of the wealthy minority. There are numerous treaties on the ravages of diseases like tuberculosis and tropical anemia, on housing of the poor, on the problems of unemployment and underemployment, and on the people's recourse to migration as a desperate measure. Yet, these somber side effects of the accelerated penetration of capitalism into the countryside contrast radically with the gaiety of society balls at the exclusive Casino de Puerto Rico, the excitement of fishing tours to the Escambray Yacht Club, and the pageantry of the San Juan Carnivals. These were, after all, the contrasting realities of pre-industrial Puerto Rico; Fernando Gégel may have consciously attempted to preserve these contradictory images for posterity, and he would seem to have succeeded.

In addition to the Biblioteca agrícola mentioned above, the historian of social and economic developments in this period will likely rely on widely scattered government publications, labor-union documents and other working-class literature, and several important journals of social inquiry. The government publications are relatively few, although they comprise several standard documents such as censuses, governors' annual reports, agency reports and the like. More interesting and usually less accessible, the labor literature includes some of the classic memoirs of top union leaders (e.g., Santiago Igalias Paniñ, Luchas emancipadoras, 1929, and Rafael Alonso Torres, Cuarenta años de lucha proletaria, 1939), as well as lesser known documents and literary works from an anarcho-syndicalist perspective. Furthermore, there are abundant sources for the study of social structure in journals like Tierra and Revista Geográfica de Puerto Rico. The latter was, incidentally, founded and edited by the prolific Raúl Mitjavila Córdova and Luis Gégel's father-in-law and the donor of the rich agricultural materials.

In keeping with his father's thoughtful compilation of political documents, Fernando Gégel assembled an impressive array of party materials from his own day. A leading member of the pro-statehood Republican Party in San Juan and one-time city manager, Gégel naturally included a larger sample of printed materials from his own party, though he did not neglect important documents originating from the opposition. The Republican Party documents are grouped in one thick volume featuring the Party's successive constitutions and platforms from 1906 to 1956; these are, of course, in addition to widely scattered writings by the Party leadership and other materials touching on electoral performances. Other party documentation of significant value are the records of a short-lived Party of Independence (1913) and published propaganda of the Unionist and Liberal parties spanning the 1900's to the 1930's. Individual political treatises by the patriarchs of some of these parties—Luis Muñoz Rivera, Rosendo Matienzo Cimtrón and Antonio R. Balsells, to name a few—also figure prominently in the Gégel Collection. Given the sharp political divisions prevalent on the island (then and now), the inclusion of such a broad range of viewpoints from the political spectrum is perhaps the best indication of the breadth of vision and overriding sense of national pride which nurtured this superb Collection for more than a century.

Editor's Note:
Francisco Scarano was instrumental in the acquisition of the Gégel Puerto Rican Collection. The purchase of the Collection was made possible through the generous support of the Research Foundation, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Center for Latin American Studies, the Puerto Rican Center, the Class of '26, and The University of Connecticut Foundation.