

Dr. Dorothy Porter Wesley
(1905- 1995)

Dorothy Porter Wesley, a librarian, bibliographer and scholar was born in Warrenton, Virginia in 1905, to Hayes Joseph Burnett, a physician, and, Bertha Ball Burnett. After obtaining her A.B., from Howard University in 1928, she became the first African American woman to complete graduate studies at Columbia University with a Bachelors (1931) and a Masters of Science in Library Science (1932).

Dorothy Burnett came to Howard University in 1928, and in December 1929 married Art professor James Amos Porter. In 1930 President W. Mordecai Johnson assigned her to organize and administer a Library of Negro Life and History which included the 3,000 titles donated in 1914 by Jesse Moorland and was named the Moorland Foundation. In 1946 Howard University purchased the Arthur Spingarn Collection. The library, which later became the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, had over 180,000 books, pamphlets, manuscripts and other primary sources when Porter retired in 1973. For over 43 years, Porter successfully managed a research library that served an international community of researchers and scholars.

An avid writer and researcher, Porter developed research tools and authoritative bibliographies based on her vast knowledge in the field.

Dr. Porter received numerous awards including a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship for research in Latin American literature (1944). She served as a Ford Foundation consultant to the National Library in Lagos, Nigeria (1962-64), and attended the 1st International Congress of Africanists in Accra, Ghana. In 1973 she received a Ford Foundation study and travel grant to Scotland, Ireland, England and Italy. Porter received the Distinguished Alumni Award from Howard University in 1974. In 1980 the Conover-Porter Award was established (the most prestigious award for published works of bibliography or reference on Africa). In 1988-89 she received a fellowship from the W.E.B. DuBois Institute at Harvard University. Also in 1989 the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center commenced the annual Dorothy Porter Wesley Lecture Series. President Bill Clinton presented her with the National Endowment for the Humanities' Charles Frankel Award in 1994.

Porter received honorary degrees from Susquehanna University (1971), Syracuse University (1989), and Radcliffe College (1990).

On November 29, 1979 Porter married historian Charles H. Wesley, the former President of Wilberforce and Central State Universities in Ohio. Dorothy Porter Wesley died in Fort Lauderdale, Florida in 1995 at the age of 91.