

# BETWEEN THE COVERS RARE BOOKS

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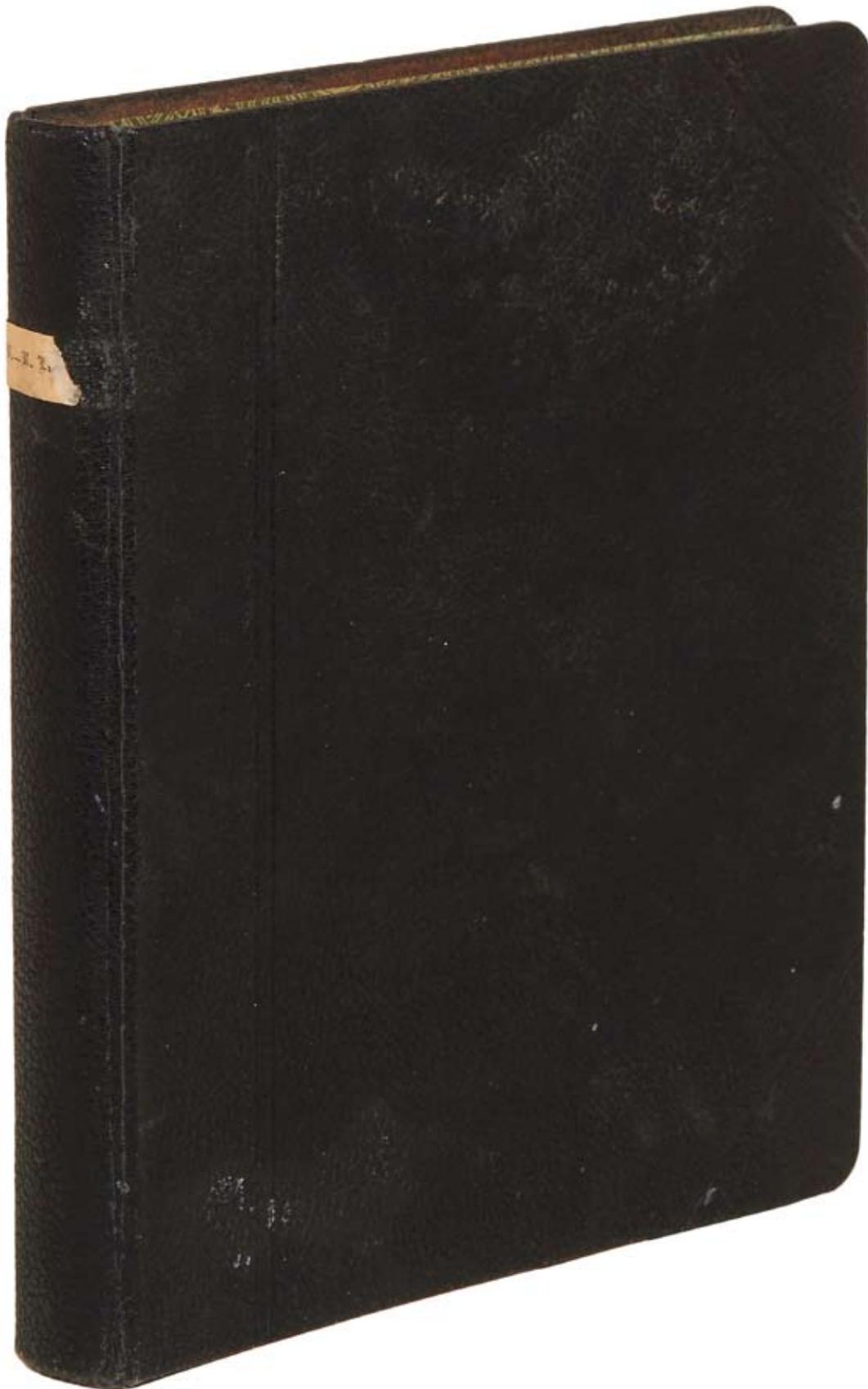
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## **Percival C. Norris and Richard Le Baron Bowen, Jr.**

*Affectionate Correspondence between a Teacher and his former Student*

Providence, R.I. and Princeton, N.J.: 1937-1938

\$4000



Large quarto. Black three-ring binder with affixed paper spine label with initials of Percival C. Norris. Consisting of perhaps sixty or so letters totaling 131pp. (Norris has sequentially numbered the pages of all of his letters) of retained carbon copies of letters typed (and in at least one case signed by Norris). Letters typed rectos only. These are interspersed with Bowen's original responses (postcards, typed and handwritten letters, etc.) to Norris. Norris' letters are mostly on his 181 Angell Street, Providence stationary. Bowen's take various forms. Additionally there are a few additional letters or enclosures, including a copy of a letter to the Registrar at Princeton, a telegram, a train schedule, and a small picture of a body builder cut out from "Life Magazine" (which Norris compares to Bowen). Most have been three-hole punched, or affixed into the binder with tabs. The first few leaves have pulled or partially pulled through the holes, but the letters are otherwise about fine.

At the time of the correspondence Bowen had just graduated from the Providence Country Day School, and had matriculated from there to Princeton, apparently his admittance to the school assisted by efforts from Norris (who also intercedes with Princeton faculty when Bowen falls behind in his courses) as is reflected in the correspondence. Norris would have been about 57 at the time of the correspondence, he apparently lived for many years at the boarding house on 181 Angell Street, and never married.

The vast preponderance of letters are from Norris to Bowen, and display an exceptional affection that might have seemed unusual for the time. Norris most often waxes effusively (or even ecstatically) affectionate. Much less frequently he adopts an avuncular tone (he was obviously acquainted with Bowen's parents, whom he mentions in several letters). This leaves much room for the interpretation of his emotions. Both Norris (who signs and is addressed by Bowen as "Norrie") and Bowen often end their letters with "Love", and many of the descriptions of the affection between the two men suggest that their relationship might have been inappropriately close between a teacher and recent student, or at least raised an eyebrow.

Interspersed with school gossip, accounts of school sporting events, and the news of students and teachers, Norris' letter of January 6th, 1938 to Bowen provides an example of his ardor. Beginning "Dickie, you WONDERFUL PAL!" Norris says he was thrilled to see Bowen at dinner, and relates: "I thoroughly enjoyed our dinner at the Dreyfus and your disposal of the creamed sweetbreads made the dinner seem like the 'old days' when you were at P.C.D.S. and we had so many 'eats' together - then too, as I sat across the table from you, Dickie, old pal, I just could not keep from looking at you - I believe that you realized what I was doing even though you did not look directly at me many times - I was taking you 'all in' and I want to tell you again what I told you then - you are certainly ONE GOODLOOKING 'KID'!!! You have always been goodlooking - from one particular angle, you are one of the best looking boys I have ever known - that is not flattery - that is the truth, and nothing but the truth!!!! but from one particular angle, and I obtained that in one of my #101-film pictures - you are one of the absolutely best-looking boys I have ever seen!!! and as I sat with you Tuesday night at the table at the Dreyfus I simply could not take my eyes from you for some time - and that shirt which you were wearing made your appearance all the more attractive..."

Another letter a few weeks earlier talks about the formal portraits that they had taken by a local photographer, apparently to replace another set of portraits by Bachrach that had been financed by Norris, and which he found disappointing: "The four photos of us together cost me five dollars each... I am certainly satisfied with what we secured from him..."

In Norris' letter of the following day he relates: "As soon as I get a little time I shall make plans to re-arrange my photographs... I shall have some of the new photos of you framed and shall place some of them in this room and some of them in the bedroom upon my bureau.... I shall surely want several of YOUR pictures where I can see them, no matter where I shall be in this room or in the bedroom." Another shortly after sends "Love and good wishes always to the greatest pal in all the world."

Another, in November of 1937 declares "All day today I have been thinking of you - literally dozens of times, OLD PAL!!! ... you WONDERFUL BOY!!!"

In anticipation of a visit to Bowen at Princeton Norris writes: "Here's hoping all our weekend plans turn out as desired - and you surely know how happy I shall be to see again the greatest PAL in all this big round world."

Apparently the trip was satisfactory as Norris shortly writes: "...I want again to tell you that my recent weekend with MY PAL was one of the most delightful occasions of MY ENTIRE LIFE!!!! You and I are now FELLOW PRINCETONIANS and I am as proud of you as I."

Another letter addresses Bowen more severely after a conversation that Norris had with Bowen's mother about a pin-up picture in Bowen's dorm room: "...to my amazement last night your mother told me that YOU had told HER that I had given you that bathing-beauty (???) and had taken it from ESQUIRE to give to you. WHY, you YOUNG

PREVARICATOR!!!” In the first place, I do not buy ESQUIRE... and was just as surprised that I - YOURS TRULY - had given her son such a hideous and questionable picture...”

Whether Norris’ seeming infatuation was requited by Bowen is much less clear. While Bowen’s letters are affectionate and appreciative of Norris’ letters and occasional gifts of money and books, they are less focused on expressing longing and more in keeping with the sort of matter-of-fact, breezy, and brief correspondence one might expect from a busy and distracted college student.

Of modest interest, and in one of his last letters, Norris relates an anecdote about wrestling, which is a frequent topic in the letters (Bowen was a wrestler, both a PCDS and Princeton): “As I write this page there is sitting at my desk a young scalawag named “Caesar” by some, named Chafee by others: I have delivered to him your message from your letter of yesterday, which I found awaiting me here this afternoon; said message reading thus: ‘so you can tell that youngster Chaffe - (it should be Chafee) - that I’ll be up to the [weight] limit pretty soon.’ Chafee has just interrupted to say: ‘tell him that Sinkler is still wrestling in the 145 class’. I suppose that that will interest you - he says that it will.”

This certainly refers to future Rhode Island Governor and Senator John Chafee, who was attending the small private school at the time, and indeed Chafee also warrants frequent mentions in several of the other letters from Norris, including Chafee’s account of Bowen’s dorm room (from whom the description of the offending pin-up mentioned before was related).

Norris, graduate of the Princeton Class of 1902, wrote a Latin textbook published by the Princeton University Press in 1912. He taught Classics at the Episcopal Academy in Philadelphia in 1905, and went on to be Principal of Martin Academy in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania in 1922. He joined the faculty of the Providence Country Day School upon its founding in 1923 (or shortly thereafter - he appears in the Providence City Directory in 1924), which still presents the annual Percival C. Norris Memorial Award “given to that member of the graduating class who has, over the years, shown outstanding loyalty and constructive leadership in the tradition of Mr. Norris.” We could find less about Bowen. The son of a textile manufacturer (he is listed as both a mill owner and leather manufacturer in various census years) and a historian of Rhode Island history, Bowen, Jr. became an archeologist and published several books and monographs on ancient Arab subjects. It appears that he never married and died in Providence in 2013 at the age of 94.

**LIFE**

*PICTURES TO THE EDITORS*

(continued)

October, 18, 1937



**STOMACH MUSCLES**

Sirs:

I am sending you a picture of a young friend of mine who has developed the most perfect control of his stomach muscles of anyone I have ever seen. This picture gives you some idea of what he can do. Except for the two muscles standing out, the skin below his ribs is actually touching his backbone. He is able to control his stomach muscles so as to make each stand out alone and if this is done fast enough, they literally look as if they were dancing. Unfortunately this can only be seen by a movie.

PERKINS BASS  
Peterborough, N. H.

A curious and fascinating correspondence, which while obviously not explicit (presumably such correspondence would be ruinous), certainly displays an example of unusually strong and presumably forbidden same sex attraction.

[BTC#396869]

#1.

P. C. N.—R. E. B., Jr.

Percival G. Norris  
181 Angell Street  
Providence, Rhode Island

Thursday Evening  
September  
Twenty-third  
Nineteen Hundred  
Thirty-Seven.

Dickie, MY WONDERFUL PAL!!!

I have just bidden you good-bye and Godspeed for your coming trip to Princeton and your entrance there into another phase of your life - the greatest experience in your life thus far - your entrance into that part of your life which for the first time throws upon your own shoulders full responsibility without home guidance and daily supervision and oversight!!!! It will be a WONDERFUL experience and I am quite sure that it will hold for you pleasures and benefits beyond your own greatest hopes and expectations!!! My love and earnest prayers go with you into this new life and its new characteristics, OLD PAL!!

Just five years ago you came into my life as you came into my class - who could then have seen the little "brat" grown into a REAL BOY, a faithful student, a WONDERFUL companion - and to end out the five years of wonderfully inspiring associations and friendship <sup>with</sup> entrance into MY OWN Alma Mater - what wonderful things happen in this world and in our lives, old man!!!

As I bade you goodbye at the corner this evening I felt as if I were sending off my OWN SON to college - to MY COLLEGE - to be a FELLOW-PRINCETONIAN WITH ME!!! and how proud I felt and how proud I feel to know that the greatest P.C.D.S. ~~boy~~ boy has been and still is my OWN PAL!!! Your scholastic record at the P.C.D.S. and your C.E.E.B. record have been just what I would have wanted MY OWN SON to produce. Yesterday morning at the

WEEKEND with DICKIE in Princeton, New Jersey; Nov. 5,6,7; 1937:  
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NOV. 5 Fri. leave Providence 4.00 P.M.  
arrive New York City (G.C.T.) 8.00 P.M.  
leave New York City (P.R.R.Sta.) 9.00 P.M.  
arrive Princeton, N.J. 10.06 P.M.  
10.20-11.15 P.M. with Dickie in 442 Pyne Hall  
all night at the Nassau Tavern

NOV. 6 Sat. breakfast with Dickie at the Nassau Tavern  
8.30 - 11.30 A.M. - Dickie at classes - I called  
upon Mr. Kerr at 9.30 A.M. - went to the  
University Store - looked around the campus.  
met Dickie at Turner's at 11.40 A.M. - Turner took  
photographs of Dickie alone and of Dickie  
with me - then Dickie and I had luncheon at  
the Freshman Commons at 12.30 Noon.  
Princeton-Dartmouth Game at 2.00 P.M. - I was in  
section 25 and Dickie in section Dickie was  
in section 26 - after the game Dickie and I  
were in his room until 6.00 P.M.  
Dickie and I had dinner at 6.30 P.M. at the Tavern  
I was with Dickie in his room from 7.30 to 11.15 P.M.  
he was working upon French in preparation for  
the Freshman "Uniforms" November eleventh!!!!  
I spent the night at the Nassau Tavern

NOV. 7. Sun. I had breakfast without Dickie at the Tavern - Dickie  
slept late - I went to his room at 10.30 A.M. -  
we went to the station at 11.20 A.M.

Leave Princeton 11.31 A.M.  
arrive New York City (P.R.R.Sta.) 1.00 P.M.  
leave New York City (P.R.R.Sta.) 2.20 P.M.  
arrive Providence 6.20 P.M.

Thursday Afternoon  
January sixth, 1938

Dickie, you WONDERFUL PAL!

When I arrived here at #181 an hour ago I found that my trusty typewriter had been returned and the first use that I shall make of it will be a letter to you - or, at least, the beginning of a letter to you, you great old pal!

I was certainly thrilled to see you walk in Tuesday night as I had banished - WITH MUCH REGRET, I shall admit!!! - from my thoughts the expectation of seeing you again before February or March. And then to see you come through my doorway was a sight to cure the most desperate illness or to satisfy even the gods!!!

I thoroughly enjoyed our dinner at the Dreyfus and your disposal of the creamed sweetbreads made the dinner seem like the "old days" when you were at the P.C.D.S. and we had so many "eats" together - then too, as I sat across the table from you, Dickie, old pal, I just could not keep from looking at you - I believe that you realized what I was doing even though you did not look directly at me many times - I was taking you "all in" and I want to tell you again what I told you then - you are certainly ONE GOODLOOKING "KID"!!!

You have always been goodlooking - from one particular angle, you are one of the best looking boys I have ever known - that is not flattery - that is the truth, and nothing but the truth!!!! but from one particular angle, and I obtained that in one of my #101-film pictures - you are one of the absolutely best-looking boys I have ever seen!!! and as I sat with you Tuesday night at the table at the Dreyfus I simply could not take my eyes from you for some time - and that shirt which you were wearing made your appearance all the more attractive - the outfit which you were wearing was a thoroughly good-looking and pleasing outfit.

P. C. N.—R. L. B. W., Jr.

Percival C. Norris  
181 Angell Street  
Providence, Rhode Island

#108.

Friday Afternoon  
January seventh, 1938

All day yesterday the rain poured in torrents and when I went to school in the bus I was unable to stop at the Garden Chain Libraries store to get my TIMES and the copy of LIFE. Later in the morning Tony had to come in to this part of town and he secured both for me - LIFE this week is rather "slip" and not very interesting - ~~diff~~ but we must not expect A-No. 1 productions every week - especially of such an expensively produced publication.

As soon as I get a little time I shall make plans to re-arrange my photographs on the desk and the table - I shall have some of the new photos of you framed and shall place some of them in this room and some of them in the bedroom upon my bureau. I shall probably have time next Sunday to look the situation over and draw plans for the new arrangement - I shall surely want several of YOUR pictures where I can see them, no matter where I shall be in this room or in the bedroom. I am sure that I can arrange that scheme satisfactorily.

I shall go this evening to 12 Elgin Street to take dinner with Dave Moulton and his wife - then I shall return about nine-thirty and try to get a good sleep - I awoke yesterday morning at four o'clock and could not get to sleep again - last night I was just finishing the New York TIMES and had decided to go to bed - it was not quite eight o'clock - I was so tired that at the luncheon table at school the boys said I looked as though I would fall asleep right at the table!

Just as I was ready to get up and go to bed in came Dick Ballou - he is a terrible "bore" and never knows when to go home - and he stayed and stayed and stayed and talked and talked and talked - finally I had to tell him that I had had no sleep since four in the morning and was so tired that I really had to go to bed - then when he put his overcoat on, he stood and talked and then at the door he did so again interminably!!!

P. C. N.—R. F. B. B., Jr.

Percival C. Norris  
181 Angell Street  
Providence, Rhode Island

\$10%.  
Saturday Evening  
January eighth, 1938

Most of today has been spent making ~~depe~~ sheets for Mr. Phillips' First Form Latin class - he is teaching the First Form Latin ~~again~~ again this year - he had that class two years ago also. I have written several letters this afternoon and shall this evening - it is seven-thirty now - write this page and a letter to my sister and a note to Dr. Bigelow, the Brown University Director of Admissions. Then I shall read the newspapers until about ten o'clock and then I shall turn in and try to sleep until at least seven to-morrow morning!

The rain cleaned the streets and we are now traveling with no difficulty - but I suppose that the snow will soon mess things up again!

I missed seeing you face-to-face Wednesday morning as I muffed up the new license plate and only Viall's telling me that you were passing us at the corner and waving wakened me to the situation - I did manage to see the back of your head and that of your mother and to wave at you as you passed abreast of the bank on the opposite corner - I had been looking for you all the time that I was on the corner as I thought that you might be passing at that time - and then I was fooled by my failure to recognize the new number on the plate - of course, I am still looking for a GREEN car every time I am looking for any members of the Bowen family - and 37892 is still fixed in my memory!!!

I suppose that you will have mighty busy weeks for the next three weeks and I wish you all the luck possible right down the line and then some, you WONDERFUL PAL! I appreciate far more that I can tell you or you can realize your coming in to take dinner with me the LAST night of your Christmas vacation and I also appreciate that ~~much~~ your taking time off to write me that good letter from Vermont last week, for that letter meant a great deal to me, Dickie. Here comes Rhodes Gamwell and that means FINIS. Love and good wishes always from