

BETWEEN THE COVERS RARE BOOKS

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Alex Haley

Seven Letters with Photos and copy of Queen

1949-1954

\$15,000



An archive of seven Typed Letters Signed from Alex Haley sent between 1949-1954 (with one from 1967) to a close family friend, along with related photographs and a first edition of *Queen* Inscribed by his brother George Haley. The letters are overall near fine with typical folds from being mailing and light toning, with their original mailing envelopes that show wear including are nick, tears, and chip, but all are present; the photos are fine. The book is fine in a fine dust wrapper.

The letters, which are signed both as “Alex” and “Palmer,” his middle name, were written to Virginia Hannon, a woman who taught Alex Haley French at Alcorn College, before he left to join the Coast Guard. The letters begin after he’s become a journalist writing for *Coast Guard Magazine*, and it seems, after an absence from Hannon. The letters are very familiar and playful with references to her French class, updates on his brothers George and Julius, and although married, some flirtatious comments about her breasts, “they were not as you say, spinsterly,” and his faraway demeanor in class, “believe me, love, I was not, when you observed me, thinking about any damned touchdowns.” There is also lots of talk about Haley’s writing career. The early letters from 1949 included his thoughts on his drive to be a writer: “I’m trying pretty hard and have thus far had some minor successes,” as well as his bad habits: “I’m essentially lazy, but I love to write once I get started.” It’s during an extended hospital stay for the treatment of a pilonidal cyst in 1953 that he seems to really make headway: “I never had so much time on end to write in my life. I have to stand up to type, to be sure, but – boy, am I turning out the words! Things I’ve wanted to work on for ages.” In a letter the next year he excitedly describes what was his first big career break: “The prime accomplishment to date, a milestone in my life, I guess, was the sale two weeks ago, of ‘The Harlem that Nobody Knows,’ a 4,000 word piece, to *Reader’s Digest* ... As a result, I, last week, got taken in the stable of Ruth Aley, probably one of the top 5 literary agents in the country. I am working like a bastard, to put it bluntly.” The job led to a series of articles in the magazine and an assignment with *Playboy* interviewing many of the most important African-Americans of the day. The final letter from 1967 takes the form of two short but sweet holograph notes to Hannon written on the margins of a form letter and a photocopied travel article. They show a busy, successful writer still trying to keep in touch with an old friend.

The letters are accompanied by a black and white photograph of a young Hannon in a military uniform (possibly Red Cross), along with two later color photos of George with Wynelle [Hannon’s sister] and George with President Bill Clinton. Plus, there is a copy of Haley’s book *Queen*, published posthumously, and warmly Inscribed by George: “To my dear sister, Virginia Rose Hannon With love, respect and appreciation Your brother George Haley – and all the rest of the Haley Family 12 June 1993.” An interesting and intimate collection of early correspondence from one of the most influential African-American writers of the 20th Century.

Detailed list:

Letters:

1. TLS, 4pp., New York: January 18, 1949, with envelope and Signed “Palmer.” A playful letter that begins with Haley recounting a dinner at Sweetie’s restaurant while sitting next to an odd French couple, then it switches to thoughts of Virginia’s intention of being a social worker, and his view of his brother George: “He is, of course, a wonderful fellow of sterling character, loyalty and any number of other nice things. But, objectively, I can’t quite follow his train of thought, and action on a number of things.” He also touch on his aspiring writing career: “Yeah, I’m trying pretty hard and have thus far had some minor successes. One thing is for sure; I’m getting some wonderful breaks.”

2. TLS, 6pp., New York: February 5, 1949, with envelope and Signed “Palmer.” Haley boasts about writing this letter instead of an article for the *Coast Guard Magazine* which is already a month late, citing his habit of “never writing anything that I know I have to until it is the very last moment.” He offers a few flirtatious rejoinders to Virginia’s comment about

his daydreaming about sports while in class at Alcorn where she taught French: “I assured myself that they [her breasts] were not as you say, spinsterly. And believe me, love, I was not, when you observed me, thinking about any damned touchdowns.” Also some thoughts on writing: “I’m essentially lazy, but I love to write once I get started ... figure to try my hand at a book in maybe another year now and will count on you to buy one copy to at least salvage that much of the publisher’s gamble.”

3. TLS, 6pp., New York: October, 1949, with envelope and Signed “Alex.” Pleasantries about a trip to Chicago, seeing his youngest brother Julius for the first time in several years, “there is a boy for you! Already, he is rugged a-plenty, to the point of forcing this old hulk to observe with what I image was ill-concealed admiration,” and a night out with his father who lectured him on spending too much money, quoting his father: “Now Palmer, I know you are doing well and all that but, Palmer, let me give you the benefit of Dad’s long experience. You don’t have to go in places like that to eat. I am sure that there are other places you can get

For my dear sister,
Virginia Rose Hannon

With love, respect and
appreciation

Your brother
George Haley —
and all the rest of
the Haley Family

12 June 1993



a meal for that much, not that that sandwich wasn't good or that I didn't appreciate it, but money is hard to get, so. Why when Dad was your age, back down in Savannah on the river, he used to have a good time for a whole week on less than that, and furthermore... .”

4. TLS, 2pp., New York: September 9, 1950, with envelope and Signed “Alex.” Haley apologies about not writing sooner, gives updates on his brother George's travels, Julius's deployment in Korea, and his father's recent divorce and renewed bachelorhood, as well as a joke about a Catholic nun.

5. TLS, 4pp., Staten Island, New York: November 28, 1953, with envelope and Signed “Alex.” A letter written

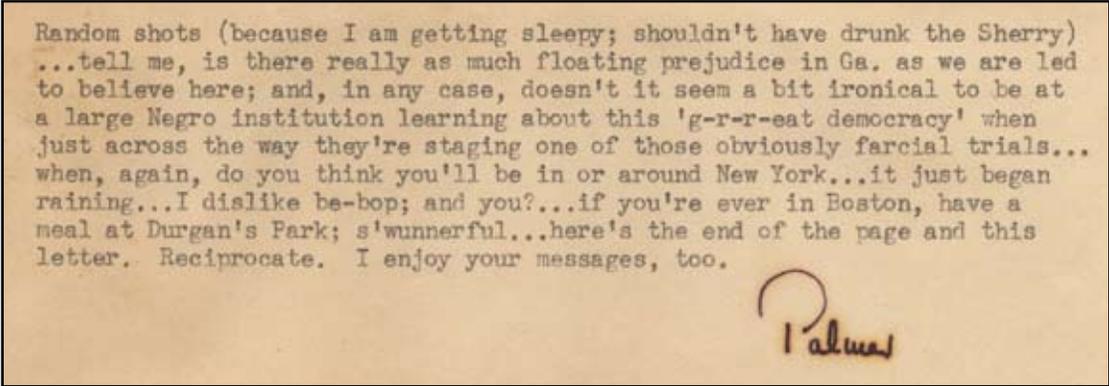
while stuck in a U.S. Public Health Service Home on Staten Island following an operation for a pilonidal cyst: “I never had so much time

on end to write in my life. I have to stand up to type, to be sure, but – boy, am I turning out the words! Things I've wanted to work on for ages.” Most of the letters concerns George, his past relationships and his recent engagement. Haley uses the occasion to ruminate on the institution of marriage in general and his own, which was at the time failing: “Mine's up and down. So's damn near everybody's I know. I have told myself at times if I'd stayed single until now, I'd play it real clever – and in the same flash of thought I know how good would be the chances I'd be [the] essence of misery. Again, who the hell knows? Who's got the answer, the key?”

6. TLS, 4pp., New York: February, 1954, with envelope and Signed “Palmer.” Haley describes his need for absolute quiet to write properly: “I simply cannot write in company; cannot disassociate myself into the vacuum I need and produce best in”; talks about a fancy party he was invited to and the uncomfortable environment it created: “these people, many of them, weren't out to have fun, Virginia – a lot came to be seen; you could see the strain in their faces, and a lot more on pretty faces in many cases, that wasn't pretty”; and his recent success at selling his first article to *Reader's Digest*: “The prime accomplishment to date, a milestone in my life,

I guess, was the sale two weeks ago, of ‘The Harlem that Nobody Knows,’ a 4,000 word piece, to *Reader's Digest*.... As a result, I, last week, got taken in the stable of Ruth Aley, probably one of the top 5 literary agents in the country. I am working like a bastard, to put it bluntly, to justify this break. What I have to be is a reporter, interpret or just tell what I see, magazine-style. What I am trying to do, right now, is make \$5,000 a year at part-time writing before I ‘retire’ - from CG [Coast Guard] '59 - and with luck and health I think I will. Then I will elect whatever the future shall be.”

7. ANS, 1p., Rome, New York: February, 1967, with envelope and Signed “Alex.” A secretarial letter asking friends, both white and black, about their first memories



Random shots (because I am getting sleepy; shouldn't have drunk the Sherry) ...tell me, is there really as much floating prejudice in Ga. as we are led to believe here; and, in any case, doesn't it seem a bit ironical to be at a large Negro institution learning about this 'g-r-r-eat democracy' when just across the way they're staging one of those obviously farcial trials... when, again, do you think you'll be in or around New York...it just began raining...I dislike be-bop; and you?...if you're ever in Boston, have a meal at Durgan's Park; s'wunnerful...here's the end of the page and this letter. Reciprocate. I enjoy your messages, too.

from childhood concerning race for an article he is preparing, with a holograph note at the bottom

apologizing about the form letter and mentioning a recent trip to Paris: “I sure wish I'd paid more attention to you teaching French.” It is accompanied by an article he wrote for the *Rome Sentinel* about a literary tour of Ireland and Rome, which also has a holograph note of pleasantries and final comment about currently working on a script for a Tony Curtis film.

Book:

8. HALEY, Alex and David Stevens. *Queen*. New York: William Morrow and Company 1993. First edition. Fine in fine dust wrapper. Inscribed by George Haley: “To my dear sister, Virginia Rose Hannon With love, respect and appreciation Your brother George Haley – and all the rest of the Haley Family 12 June 1993.”

Photographs:

9. HANNON, Virginia. Black and white photograph. Measuring 3½" x 5". Hannon in a uniform (Red Cross?) with pencil notation on rear “Virginia Hanon.”

10. HALEY, George. Color photograph. Measuring 5¼" x 4". Pencil not on rear: “George with Wynelle.”

11. HALEY, George and Bill Clinton. Color photograph. Measuring 7" x 5". George with Bill Clinton. [BTC#400849]