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Guide to the

Dowridge-Challenor family letters

1904-1917

Sc MG 209

Processed by Steven Fullwood.

Summary

Creator: Dowridge-Challenor family

Title: Dowridge-Challenor family letters

Date: 1904-1917

Source: Gift of Dorothy Challenor Burnham SCM90-22

Abstract: The Dowridge-Challenor Family Letters span the years 1904-1913, and illuminate various aspects of Aletha Dowridge's and Frederick Challenor's lives as immigrants in the United States. The largest group of letter are from Frederick to Aletha beginning with courtship in Brooklyn and continuing throughout his wife's return to her parent's home in St. Michael Parish. Letters from J.L. and Harriet Dowridge to their daughter comprise the second largest group of letters. The smallest group of letters are from Aletha's friends and relatives living in St. Michael and Brooklyn.

Preferred citation: Dowridge-Challenor family letters, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Steven Fullwood; Machine-readable finding aid created by Apex Data Services; revised by Terry Catapano.

Creator History

Aletha Dowridge, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. L. & Harriet Dowridge, was born in St. Michael Parish, Barbados in 1887, and immigrated to Brooklyn, New York around 1903. Although trained as a seamstress, in the United States Aletha worked primarily as a domestic. While in Brooklyn, she met Frederick Challenor, before or around 1906, who like her, had immigrated to the United States to escape the lack of employment opportunities in Barbados. A skilled shoe maker, Frederick made his living in a shoe factory, through infrequent janitorial work, and aboard freight ships traveling between New York and the Caribbean. After a relatively brief courtship, in which he wrote amorous letters to Aletha often conveying marriage, Frederick and Aletha were married in 1907.

Shortly after the birth of their first child Elise, Aletha moved back to St. Michael Parish to console her mother due to the death of Aletha's father. Challenor remained in Brooklyn, and continued to support his wife and daughter with money which he sent to them. Sometime after 1913, Aletha returned to New York, leaving her daughter behind to keep her mother company. Aletha and Frederick brought Elise to Brooklyn shortly thereafter, and had two more daughters, Dorothy and Ida Mae. Dorothy married Louis E. Burnham, a communist and editor of *Freedom* magazine, published by civil rights activist Paul Robeson. The union produced four children Linda, a writer; Margaret, an attorney; Claudia, an educator; and Charles, a musician.

Scope and Content Note

The Dowridge-Challenor Family Letters span the years 1904-1913, and illuminate various aspects of Aletha Dowridge's and Frederick Challenor's lives as immigrants in the United States. The letters cover a wide-range of subjects such as immigration, family support systems, employment, courtship, Barbadians in the United States, black families, Caribbean Americans, relationships, financial hardships and social customs in Barbados.

The letters are separated into three sections: letters from Frederick Challenor to Aletha Dowridge-Challenor (48); letters from J. L. and Harriet Dowridge to daughter Aletha (17); and letters from relatives and friends to Aletha (7). All letters are arranged by date. When no date is listed, the beginning of the first line of the letter is noted. Fragments of letters are treated as letters. Sixteen of the letters have been transcribed by Linda Burnham, granddaughter of Aletha and Frederick Challenor. These letters have been identified with an asterisk on the container list.

See also: Watkins-Owens, Irma. *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930*. Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1990 . This book focuses on the complex interaction of African Americans and African Caribbeans in Harlem during the first decades of the twentieth century. Dr. Watkins-Owens quotes from several letters in the Dowridge-Challenor Family Letters collection.

Key Terms

Subjects

Barbadians -- United States
Caribbean Americans -- New York (State) -- New York -- Social conditions
Courtship
Families, Black -- New York (State) -- New York
Women immigrants -- New York (State) -- New York

Geographic Names

Barbados -- Emigration and immigration
Barbados -- Social life and customs

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Love letters

Names

Dowridge-Challenor family
Challenor, Frederick

Dowridge-Challenor, Aletha

Container List

Letters

b. 1 Frederick Challenor To Aletha Dowridge 1906-1913

The largest group of letters are from Frederick to Aletha beginning with courtship in Brooklyn and continuing throughout his wife's return to her parent's home in St. Michael Parish. Frederick's financial hardships are evidenced in the tone of his letters to Aletha following the birth of their first child. He often complained about his low-wage work perhaps as proof of his inability to send more money to her. He frequently sent clothing to Aletha and her parents, and his own parents when he could.

- b. 1 f. 1 January 18, 1906
- March 12, 1906
- June 3 And 26, 1906
- (Before August 1, 1906) Undated
- August 1 And 20, 1906
- February 8, 1907
- June 7, 27 And 29, 1907
- September 13, 1907
- September 9, 1909
- November 2, 1909
- December 9, 1909
- January 4, 27 And 30, 1910
- February 24, 1910
- April 10, 1910
- May 4 And 23, 1910
- July 1, 1910
- November 30, 1910
- January 1 And 19, 1912
- February 3, 19 And 25, 1912
- March 4 And 8 1912
- (Dated 1902 In Error) March 25, 1912
- April 16 And 21, 1912
- May 1, 4 And 10, 1912
- June 22, 1912
- July 20, 1912
- September 7 And 19, 1912
- October 4, 1912
- November 2, 1912
- December 5, 1912
- January 22, 1913
- March 14, 1913
- April 29, 1913
- May 4, 1913

Letters (cont.)

b. 1 f. 2 J.L. And Harriet Dowridge To Daughter Aletha Dowridge 1904-1911, n.d.

Letters from J.L. and Harriet Dowridge to their daughter comprise the second largest group of letters. These letters concern the general well-being of their daughter, more specifically, their letters deal with their daughter's economic and housing conditions, and keep her abreast of St. Michael Parish's activities.

J.L., a carpenter by trade, appears to have instilled a strong work ethic in his daughter; his letters to Aletha express his happiness over her making a life for herself. Her mother, Harriet had cared for white children when she was a younger woman, and worked intermittently as a caretaker in her elder years. Frequently, Mrs. Dowridge's letters expressed her frustration about her daughter having to work so hard, while at the same time extolling the virtues of hard work.

The frequency of letters written and material goods transported from Brooklyn to St. Michael Parish by friends and relatives convey a strong support system amongst the Dowridge family.

September 4, 1904

June 10, 1905*

August 1907*

November 4, 1910*

August 3, 1911

January 8

March 26*

April 19*

May 14*

(Begins "Dear Lea I Receive 2 Letters...") May

June 4*

September 29*

December 1*

(Fragment Begins "Dearest Lea I Must Now Tell Something...") n.d.

(Begins "My Darest Lea I Am Very Glad To Hair...")* n.d.

(Begins "My Dearest Lea I Have Mist You Very Much...") n.d.

(Fragment Begins On Page 5 With "Lea Has You Been Able To Get The Things I Roat To You...") n.d.

(Fragment Begins With "Dair Lea I Have Seeing Maybell...")* n.d.

(Fragment Begins With "Lea Marie Mother Was To Bring A Letter...") n.d.

(Begins "My Dearest Lea You Will Be Pleas To Know...") n.d.

b. 1 f. 3 Relatives And Friends To Aletha Dowridge-Challenor 1907-1910, n.d.

The smallest group of letters are from Aletha's friends and relatives living in St. Michael and Brooklyn, and cover such topics as pregnancy, economics and romantic relationships. Letter writers in this group include Aunt Con [Constance], Aunt Nett, "G.M.," friends May and Addie, an unidentified woman, and Wilhe [Wilhemina], who died during childbirth in Brooklyn. The letters reveal the story that Aletha assumed responsibility for the child and took him back to St. Michael for permanent care by Wilhe's parents.

"Unidentified," February 22, 1907

"Wilhe [Wilhemina]," September 14, 1907

"May," April, 11, 1908

"Aunt Con" [Constance Payne] May 15, 1910

"G.M." September 6, 1910

"Addie," Fragment n.d.

Letters (cont.)

Relatives And Friends To Aletha Dowridge-Challenor (cont.)

“Aunt Nett,” n.d.

b. 1 f. 4 Transcripts Of Sixteen Letters 1905-1910, n.d.