

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 23 | Number 1

Article 7

3-20-1997

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Albert Lane

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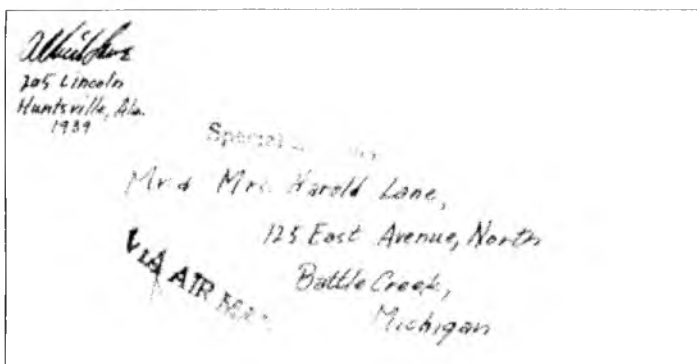
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Recommended Citation

Lane, Albert (1997) "Albert Lane's First Letter Home," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*: Vol. 23: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol23/iss1/7>

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Albert Lane's First Letter Home

Feb. 17, 1939

Dear Mother & Dad:-

Well, I'm here and everything is well and under control. I thought I never would get here, but I enjoyed the ride, and didn't get sick at all, and the minute I arrived, Monroe & Semmes met at the station and brought me to one of the finest boarding homes I ever saw, clean, large, and well looked after. Its only \$30 a month, and my room has everything and is on the front & side, second floor, large windows, and has a nice fireplace in it. There's a good big rug on the floor, nice large dressers, and well—its fixed up very nicely.

Mr. & Mrs. Freeman, who reside here, allow only highly reputable guests—most of whom are young men in the cotton business. Of course, my time will be taken up, so I don't expect to run around with them. The meals so far haven't impressed me like I thought, but I guess that's due to not being used to eating Southern stuff. You ought to hear the Robins singing outside! Its warm & nice here—ahem—the thermometer registered 62° at noon!

When I arrived in Chicago, I sent you your candy from the Stevens Hotel and boarded the Dixie Flyer at about 10:00. I didn't sleep

very well, and felt lazy the next morning, but was alright as soon as I had some breakfast. You know, we go through Evansville at 6:00 in the morning, and I'm telling you I have never seen so much water as there was around that town. After the last catastrophe, the C&E spent over a million dollars on their roadbed, and built a trestle track, a mile long, across all this flooded area. Water just covered everything in the lowlands. There was one funny instance, right in the middle of it all, stood an old deserted school house that looked as though it was planted in the middle of Gull lake, or something. Homes had been deserted, and people trying to live in water-soaked houses.

I changed to coach from Nashville, as I had planned, and incidentally met some very charming people on the observation pullman I was in. It was a pity I didn't go on to Jacksonville. I would have certainly liked to, in fact, was tempted to, almost. But here I am, ...there are about 20,000 people here, ...surrounded by mountains—a little tale of which I'll come to later. Its about the cleanest place in Ala.—and here in this county, they raise more cotton than any other place in Alabama. Most of the streets are paved, and all in all, the place is as modern as Battle Creek. During the Civil War, Union troops held this town, and I was shown many places where troops & officers were quartered—including the First Methodist Church. The houses are quite modern, many with basements and furnaces—(this one too), ...Everyone has been extremely nice, and they go out of their way to be hospitable. Its certainly not like Chicago! ...

People rave about Huntsville, and they have a right to. It deserves a lot of credit for the beautiful little town it is. I'll make up some water-colors of the scenic beauty there is around here, so you can get some idea of what I'm talking about. ...the town is dead, musically speaking. (Looks like its going to rain.) They have no choirs to speak of, and of course no vocal teachers.

This place is about two blocks from the office and is in the best part of the city. The Monroe Letterhead's Company is in an old building which has been modernized to a certain extent. The place

where I work, or the room rather, is very fine, and my drawing table is much like the one at home, only used a great deal. There is one other young man there, who is very good, and works hard, & is very courteous & decent. Mr. Monroe is middle-aged and would double for Edgar Bergen, except that he looks a trifle older, and has a Southern accent! But Monroe is a peach of a fellow and so is his wife. Boy—she's a Southerner if there ever was one. ...

These people are very easy to get along with... But let me tell you something (the street-cleaning dept just went by washing down the street—boy they sure keep it clean here—and there's a robin perched outside my window.) of my experiences last night—the first night M. & S. brought me here to the house where I had supper, and met I don't know how many young men. At about 8:00, they returned and all three of us drove around town where I hadn't been. Then, they decided to show me the mountain (just one of 'em) outside of town on which a lot of people live, and where there used to be a resort of some kind,—health resort—at that time it was nationally known. We got to the top, and saw all the city lights spread out below, and it really was an inspiration. However, it had been raining and there was one spot on the whole mountain that was muddy. And it was dark. And we hit that spot, and there we were. There was no getting out alone—so we walked a mile on top of that mountain one way, and didn't see anybody at home, so we walked a couple of miles the other way to a house and walked back to the car and waited for a wrecker to pull us out. Then, he almost pulled the axle off. After all that walking I slept like a log.

Oh dear, there isn't anything doing around here as far as entertainment is concerned. There are two theaters here and the shows on there are has-beens that the Orpherem wouldn't take...

...Well, keep well, and happy, and if you ever need me for anything—just let me know. God bless you all, and write me back and tell me all the news fit for reading.

Love,



P.S. Tell Dick to cut down on dates.



MONROE BUILDING
Huntsville, Alabama

May 12, 1940

Dearest Folks:

Hello. At first I thought I would make this letter just a few words, but on second thought, perhaps I will make it a little longer, maybe 20 or 30 pages. You deserve a letter that long. It has been quite a long time since I have written anything more than a few words, and there is such a lot to tell you, well anyway, general principles warrant it, I guess! And then, tomorrow is Mother's Day, and to me it is a day full of lonesomeness, of the same old thing I did last Sunday, except this time I am going to sing my "Mother O' Mine" just for you, Mother, ... and now that I have sung, and dinner is over, let me tell you how much it meant for me to have gone to church this morning, in the bright warm sunshine, everything is so lovely, and sweet smelling. I sang my song, and it was worth all the effort.

Before church, I went to the Post Office, found your letter to me, and then waited until after my singing to open it, thinking perhaps it might contain some unwelcome news, and upset me before singing. But, it contains all the love you bestow upon me, and I was happy. It is so wonderful to have a Mother and Father, and brother like the ones I have. I am realizing more and more the real value, the realness of my family. They are so young, there is so much for all of us to look forward to. I hope and pray that both of you continue to grow younger, as you have been doing in the past two years and then, that has given me so much thought.

You don't realize it, but your little sonny boy has given a lot of mental attention to the fact that you two are really getting different. Somehow, both of you are growing into that stage when Life becomes its fullest, when you can appreciate the comical things of daily warfare, and also do something about it. What I mean is that there seems to be more companionship in the family, and probably that is everything in a nutshell. Of course, this isn't the place to go into that subject to any degree, but if you think about it long enough, I think you'll understand what I'm driving at. Being away from you has made me appreciate all the wonderful character you've given me, and nothing could have brought out that idea more clearly than this morning. Of course I always think about you, all the time. You folks continually worry me when I don't hear from you, and you simply cannot imagine how lonely it is for me here regardless of the time or place.

I have made friends with most of Huntsville's best people, and know everybody in town, but that very thing is the one thing that makes me want to leave, to get back to my home town. All these folks are lovely people, they are trying to make me forget Battle Creek as best they can, and they are quite sincere. When I have a good time, and I am always having the best of times here, all of my best friends are people who neither drink and so forth, there is always the faintest shadow of heartsickness, and loneliness which you, Mother, know so very well. You and I seem to be following in like paths of destiny. Back in the World War days you came to Battle Creek from your home in Jackson, (the word "home" should have quote marks around it) because you have had a much harder time than I. Here I came to this place from my home, unknown, and unknowing, during the second World War, and carved out my reputation just as you carved out a fine reputation at the Hospital.

Mother, you have the one real courage I admire. You are not afraid of anybody or anything. I pray that I might be endowed with a little of that courage, to keep me in good stead here in Huntsville. And when I pray for anything, it is also for some of Dad's wisdom, for some of his great love and respect for his fellows. For a little of the ability to accomplish. Those are the things I need far more than

tangible assets like automobiles. Moreover, when I look at Dick's fine picture, all of the qualities I desire and need, are so evident. For one thing, I need to be a little better looking. Well, one look at Dick will tell anyone how much better he favors me! And when it comes to brains, you know for yourself that experience has made him the brainiest of us two. I might have accomplished the relatively easy task of learning the commercial art profession, and can brag of another professional avocation, but, so what? What does it amount to? Sooner or later everyone finds something to do, and sooner than most people, I was lucky enough to fall into this. Just plain luck, That's all. But now, let's take Dick. There he stands, in all the glory of youth on the March. (I can say all this now, and get away with it, because I'm older) Dick has got sense and plenty of it. I spend hours worrying over the possibility of his going the way of most sophisticates and taking up those little nauseating habits like smoking and petty drinking like so many of his chums., If Dick ever starts to drink, I swear I'll beat the living daylights out of him.

You can't imagine of all things the way the "younger set" of Huntsville, in all its sophisticated glory, takes to the habits which seem to be smart, and "modern." It seems to be "the thing." The "Blue Room" at the Russel Erskine Hotel, which is "the" night spot of Huntsville is always chuck full of young people sitting around at tables trying to show off and be smart by smoking and sipping Tom Collins, or playing a marble machine, which I consider, outside of fishing to be the greatest waste of time in the world, or dancing (which of course is fine) to a nickelodeon. Don't get the idea that I am a prude, or a Puritan. Neither. But, seeing both sides of this Life, and I have, has certainly given me a glad heart to know that I have not one time, with the possible exception of a few occasions, touched anything stronger than a little beer, haven't gone to any, but fine parties, and gatherings of a more uplifting nature, have maintained friendships in all walks of life here, been to church every Sunday I've been here, and more than one person has told me that I am respected for the reasons stated.

People here know me for what I am, for what I stand for, not a hypocrite, like so many of these Southerners and it is not debasing to call them that, because they have always been that way, long before the Civil War, and their entire life has been raised to that subtle way of a certain diplomacy. I am speaking of the better element of the Southerner. Even though they are really most gracious, and cordial, warm and friendly, you could not hope to escape some form of criticism, or gossip. They'll cut you up into little pieces, discuss your habits, and generally, most everybody in town knows everybody else pretty well, before you are very much older. Then, and only then, are you admitted into the social atmosphere of a small town like Huntsville. I was admitted quite a while ago.

But now, I'm getting a little fed up with the social atmosphere of Huntsville. It is too much on the stale side, a little too dead, and monotonous. You go into the Blue Room, and Forest [Moore] and I occasionally do for chocolate milk, and a cheese sandwich, or something like that, and the same crowd is sitting around night after night, drinking the same thing, you would imagine, especially one fellow, named Walter Winston, an office lawyer. ... I merely use Walter as an example of the type you find around here. The type that believes in the best time possible, and as little work as possible, and find out as much as possible why you have a date with a girl, the next day the whole city knows it, where you went, what you did, and why. Then the match-makers get busy. They circulate gossip, and rumors concerning possible romance, and before you know, you have practically married the girl you had one date with.

Of course, you must take me not literally but figuratively, and believe it or not, but it is quite dangerous to have a lot of dates with a girl you do not know, or intend to drop after a while, because before you know it...bang! You're hooked! Now, where I fit into this picture is a bit on the sidelines. It is far more entertaining to watch the scramble than to be in it (as Confucius might have said), and the extent of the romantic side of my life is only about one date a month. Then, that doesn't give any busy-bodies a

chance, and it doesn't drain my pocket-book too much, either, although, whenever I do have a date, all I ever can do, is to take her out to dinner, and to the theatre, and then hire a cab, and run her home before she sees anyone she knows. Naturally, I don't bother with any girl I can't enjoy myself with, or someone who won't try to contribute to the conversation, or acts childish. ...

When I visit a girl friend, I intend to have a roaring, good natural time, and when it gets late, I just say, well, "had a swell time, see you later, good-night," and away I go, ... That is the best way. You can't get into any entangling difficulties, or petty jealousies, or situations which might call for—you know what I mean—and at the same time, you (I) stay on the stabilized level, in other words and to make it all plain in one sentence, I don't give myself a chance to fall in love with some girl here, ... That is the whole thing in a nutshell. You must realize, too, that I am in the perfect stage for matrimony, and if I had plenty of money, I would get married tomorrow but forget that temporarily, at least. I haven't even been able to boast of having a "steady" girl friend, like everybody else, and here I am, 23 years old. Have just been too gol-durned busy with more important things, like ekeing out a bare existence—living hand to mouth, than I have worrying about girl friends. And look at the flock I've looked at. I certainly have given the field the once over, and have found one.

Also Thank God that I am in this country! But it makes me so gol-durned mad to think that Holland, in all the blaze of tulip time, with all these beautiful flowers growing, tended so carefully and so religiously, should be suddenly turned into a holocaust of hell let loose by this mad demon, and his bunch of carnage-mongers.

Thank you so very much for the picture of Dick. It is such a good likeness, and shows him much as I had been picturing him. Such handsome eyes! What a good-looking chin. Someone told me, he has that dreamy look, so characteristic of boys! Of course there was nothing I could say, but really, Dick is really getting to be a fine looking man, don't you all think so? [Advice to his younger brother] ...you don't have to take anybody's backwash, and from

now on, you must adjust yourself to the ways of manhood. Whenever you go, try to command respect, and treat the other fellow exactly as you want to be treated. I've tried it, and it works like a charm. It keeps you out of trouble any time. Of course, there are plenty of times when it seems that a rule like that just won't work. But, all of your education is going to come after you walk out the front door of Central High. Central was just a race track, just a little tea party compared to what is in store for you. You are going out to meet the world, to look 'em straight in the eye, to stay on the right track, and to reap exactly what you sow. Yes sah. You'll reap what you sow. So, do what I'm trying to do, sow as much good stuff as you can while you are young. ...

Huntsville, and Alabama, have gone on Daylight Saving Time, so now we are on exactly the same time as you are. There was quite a lot of confusion at first, but I think everyone likes the new time fine. It means that we get an extra hour of the day, and now it stays light until nearly nine o'clock. The only trouble is getting up in the morning, but now my three big east windows have taken care of that. All I have to do is to pull up the shades when I go to bed, and as I face the windows, I usually wake up with the chickens Mr. Tom has way out in the back yard. (I manage to grab a few more seconds of blissful repose, tho).

Lately I have been taking it rather easy, not working so hard, and paying more attention to the outdoors, the sunlight, than staying indoors plugging over the drawing board like a slave. I am feeling very well, paying my sickness and accident insurance policy with religious regularity, cleaning my teeth very carefully...use a good Dr. West's toothbrush, keep my clothes in good shape, eating wheat bread now, instead of hot biscuits. ... Of course, one of the stable dishes are various ways of fixing corn, like corn pudding, corn bread, which is fattening, and tiresome. Corn, corn, corn—and also a food which I don't believe you all have eaten before, and neither have I—its been on the table every time I have sat down to a meal. It just doesn't look good. It is Hominy. Grits are very popular with the evening meal, if you can imagine anything like that, and I can't, but what tops off the whole business of eating

down here is Fried Chicken. Here is the King, the Queen, and the whole damned Court of delicacies put together. It is Universal. It is where the cook reigns supreme—in a kitchen reeking with the odor of fried chicken. And they don't use old hens, either, but you call them "broilers." Now these broilers are as tender as a May night, and about as popular. All the parts of the broilers are well fried, or broiled, I don't know which, until a sort of brittle crust (that must be grease) forms all over the particular delicacy. The platter full of all these pieces of former young chickens is then served amid cheers of applause from the guests at the table. I always grab for the legs, always being sure of taking (Oh, I almost forgot to mention Sweet Potatoes—ugh) two legs because legs are the easiest to eat. And you always eat fried chicken with your fingers. Never with a knife and fork—Lord that would be a gigantic breach of etiquette.

Then let me describe a typical Southern dinner, from way down South. First you politely take a piece of chicken or two **WITH YOUR FORK**, and then help yourself to some corn cakes, break them in two, lay them on your plate, then take a lot of chicken gravy (nauseating looking like thick gray soup), and, with a big spoon, cover the corn bread, or broken pieces of cake, with the gravy. Then, discreetly, pick up the chicken, and, firmly in your fingers, go to town. Be sure to eat the corn bread with knife and fork. Help yourself to some good old black eyed peas, pour ketchup all over them, grab some fresh spring onions, and cut these onions up into little pieces, mixing them up into the peas. Then, if you have any energy left, put some lemon and sugar in your iced tea, and jump into the argument with the person next to you. Mrs. Freeman sails around serving, and sees that everyone is well taken care of, and also joins in the roundelay of conversation, but what gets me is that all the women shout so. Shout is putting it mildly, they scream their conversation back and forth, and interrupt consistently as if they were the only ones in the room. Its a din. The funniest thing about it, tho, is that everybody talks at the same time. You must think I am living in a house full of crazy people. Well, I am beginning to think so, myself.

Getting back to the food, I find, Southerners are not very good cake bakers. They cannot bake good cake, try as they may. At any rate, it isn't as good as your cake, and the icing is punk, too sweet, and highly flavored for me. And that is one of the troubles with the cooking down here as a rule. Too much flavoring. That is why I like your cooking best of all, Mother. It is simple, and sensible, and not loaded down with a lot of salt, vinegar, pepper, nutmeg, and sugar like the slaw I make myself eat for the fresh vegetables. The slaw has only some vinegar, salt, and pepper and something that tastes like the very devil, but I eat it because it is good for me.

The other day one of the pressmen in the Printing Company had his dinner brought in, and he had one of the best looking dinners, with whole wheat bread. Man alive, it was all I could do from buying myself one just like it. I was starved! That was at 12, and we don't eat until 12:30, so I struggled along, and dinner was late that day, everything we had was something I didn't like, and I was so mad, I went downtown, and bought a malted milk. Oh Zeus! That was the ultimate disappointment. Like all Englishmen, I love to eat good food, and on time, and plenty of it!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Arthur".

Albert Lane



May 30, 1940

Dearest Mother, Dad, and Dick:

Well, here it is, the last day of this month, still we feel the cool of the early Spring, the wind has changed to heat, our birds still chitter their jolly times away in the trees. These days I have pretty well kept to myself, which is unusual, feeling somehow an occasional stab of melancholia in the midst of my heavy duties. It becomes difficult to be happy, when the bitter clouds of war find it easy to filter through one's cloak of indifference. Heavy duties are heavier still when clouds hang over your head. But, today, something inside of me happened, as if something in my soul popped. We are all bitter at the turn of events, and the future looks dark and indeed uncertain. Up to today, I have shunned all I could, trying to keep my mind on the present, the happier things of our lives. It really helped to think of other things, and forcing out of my mind the evil influences of Nazi propaganda. But today I could stand aloof no longer. I resolved to quit worrying about the whole thing, and to regard this war as something like a necessary evil, and if we have to get into it, that won't worry me, either. I'm so fed up with the everlasting success of Hitler, and his bullying-you'll notice how all of the nations he has beaten are no bigger than some of our smaller states and much less defenseless. Will you tell me how it is possible to paint little pictures of roses no larger than your finger nail, and listen to statistics flying back and forth through the art dept.? That is the problem I am faced with these days. You know how nervous I am, and regardless of the amount of concentrating I do, painting little roses requires patience, thought, care, and above

all, mental stability. The artist must think about flowers if he is to portray flowers. The florist can think of anything he wants to because his job is to only cut, and seal them... The soldier can be as gastronomical as he cares to be thinking only of ways and means to tear up his fellow brother...but, I have to work all day long at a desk, in an office with seven other people, walking and talking all around me. All day long, I have to be in a position to turn out high class art work, on a par with any other artwork of its kind anywhere in these United States, or better, I have to figure out ways and means of painting this little rose with the utmost accuracy with the delicate foiling it must radiate. Is it possible to give that rose feeling when somebody behind you describes in detail, "The British were badly beaten," "The Allies lacked the mechanized divisions which blasted through" The Blitzkrieg this, the Blitzkrieg that, all about Dive-Bombers---I don't know what they are. Here, this rose petal must have another line down the center. Where is my white paint Somebody behind me shouts to the Front office "Mr. Semmes, the British lost 16 transports today." I lost my patience, and turned around, denying the whole business, calling it baloney.

Yes, baloney, that what it is, I thought, but is it? Going on with my painting, my eyes begin to get a little strained, so I reached into my drawer for my glasses with all the letters I have received in the last two months groped around, and finally found them, way up in the corner, under one of Mother's last letters..,

Forgetting all about the war, it occurred to me all of a sudden I must not have written for the last week. In the midst of all my dreaming, Miss Perry stomped into the art dept., gave me my keys and announced rather pompously, "Lane, there wasn't a thing in your box, then turned around, picked up her papers, and stomped into Edmund's office to get the company correspondence. I have been thinking a lot lately how it is Miss Perry can get so much done and walk through this department so many times a day...

Temporarily, at least, I had forgotten all about the war. The rose I was working on proved a little more difficult than I had at first anticipated. I thought of all the things I would rather be painting than roses. Somehow Roses are made for water colours. I don't use many water colours. I'll have to get back at them, I wonder how a water colour would work as a graduating gift. Let me see...I



I was in such thought about all this that I didn't realize a discussion going on almost over my head. Mr. Semmes had come into the room, waving some letterhead around, getting ready to cut them for mailing, and Reed, the invalid in our art staff trying to explain all about his illness to him, Forrest with his idiotical giggle making the conversation a melee of confusion. I thought that if Forrest should put that laugh on the market he would get rich...God, its loud. I turned around just enough so I could see them all out of the corner of my eye, and there he sat, almost repulsively, in that chair of his, making some ridiculous remark in a giggle, "Reed, button up your collar." After the conversation had turned to the subject of one of the pressmen having a need for a bath, and a change of clothes, With that, Forrest let go one of the longest belly-laughs I ever heard, Mr. Semmes replying rather stuffily, "Forrest, put on your shoes," to which I added, "and put your arms down."

That seemed to quiet things down, and we went back to work, and Semmes left the room, He walks funny. Not like other people. He has a peculiar shuffle, and clumps his heels along when he walks, and sways to and fro like a giant, As I reached for a pencil, I could not help but laugh thinking he is the shortest giant I ever saw, and his feet are as flat as the bottom of a frying pan And that he and Edmund both walk down the street together, one short, one taller, with that same sway, to and fro.

Later on that afternoon, I was able to finish my flowers without any more interruptions, and everything went along as it should. Miss Perry came and went, Mr. Semmes going about his business, and Reed wandering about trying to loosen up the stiffness in his knees caused by rheumatism, so he said. Suddenly the door opened, and one of the boys in the printing Company peered around the edge, and yelled "Telephone Albert!" It angers me whenever they do that, because it jars me, and I have to get up. Why in thunder does that telephone have to ring always at the wrong time! Why don't they leave me alone! Just as I thought, it was a man by the name of Mr. Moore, up at the YMCA asking me to sing some old-time songs at the Confederate Reunion next Thursday here at the Hotel. Well, I said I would, and finally got him to hang up so I could go back to work. Now for heaven Sakes, I thought, what am I going to sing?... Hmm I see they are printing one of my jobs at last, getting on with the second colour. Old Kentucky Home. No. Too hackneyed. Wonder if Camptown Races would do. Oh, oh, excuse me! Almost knocked Mr. Monroe down as I walked around a corner. I noticed he looked a little tired. Maybe business wasn't as good as it should be. Jeannie with The Light Brown Hair ought to get them. Um-umm. That's what I'll sing. I could go on, and write a twenty page letter, telling you all the interesting little anecdotes that happen to us every day, or elaborate upon some little unimportant trivia, dwelling on it, until it looked like Monte Sano. But I won't, it would be fun, I know, but I haven't got the time, and before I know it will be time for all good boys to blow out the candle and crawl in. And I haven't rested enough this last week, Too much private work. For instance, I have just designed a Folder for the Huntsville Chamber of Commerce in three colors that is going to take me several days to do. It is quite a large job, and so you will have to excuse my not writing to you, this next week, very much, if I do not, it is because I have been occupied with this folder. The Chamber appointed a committee on "Beautiful Homes of Huntsville", and we are playing up all the old estates, that carry such an air of grandeur and history, and are so vitally interesting from a Historical standpoint, so you will understand, that, being one of the committee, I have my outside time full to the brim, getting this thing out. Ah, but it is fun, and so relaxing

to write to all of you, you I love, you, I would love to hold out my arms, and pull you to me to quell my loneliness...

I am waiting to hear from you. One of these days very soon I will write that letter I was telling you about, and make it as long as a small book, and I will tell you all about some of my little experiences here in Huntsville, but I won't unless Elizabeth promises to have it published in the paper. It will tell of the Old homes here. For instance, our oldest mansion, on Echols Hill overlooks the city, and the man who built it in 1815 put it there because he could see the Big Spring (about a half mile away) from his home. Somebody else by the name of Whitten in those days hated the man who built Echols, and so built his home on a line between Echols, and the Big Spring, and made it the tallest home in the town, and tall enough so that Mr. Watts of Echols could not see the Big Spring. And there they both stand, today, in fine condition, still habituated by they descendants of the original families. However, Colonel Echols, the descendant of Echols Hill was robbed and murdered in New York just the other day. Perhaps you heard of it over the radio. Anyway, it put Huntsville in a stew.

Au Revoir , and God be with you, give my love to...

Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Richard".