



Smithsonian

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Guide to the James Baldwin Collection

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Collection Overview

Repository:	National Museum of African American History and Culture
Title:	James A. Baldwin Collection
Date:	1935-1988
Identifier:	NMAAHC.A2017.47
Creator:	Baldwin, James, 1924-1987
Extent:	4.29 Linear feet
Language:	English .
Summary:	James Baldwin was a writer and an activist and is one of the most prominent voices from his generation to bring light to issues of racial and sexual discrimination. This collection contains correspondence, photographs, manuscripts, and awards. The collection provides insight into his family, writing process, and travels during his lifetime.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Acquired as a purchase from Baldwin's sister, Paula Baldwin Whaley in 2017.

Processing Information

Collection processed, arranged, and described by Ja-Zette Marshburn, Alana Donocoff, and Deborah Tulani Salah-Din in 2019 and 2020.

Preferred Citation

James Baldwin Collection, National Museum of African American History and Culture

Restrictions

Collection is open for research. Access to collection materials requires an appointment.

Conditions Governing Use

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Biographical Sketch

James Arthur Baldwin (1924–1987) was born in Harlem, New York, on August 2, 1924, to Emma Berdis Jones, originally from Princess Anne, Maryland. He was reared by his mother and stepfather David Baldwin, whom Baldwin referred to as his father and whom he describes as extremely strict. He did not know his biological father. As the oldest of nine children, Baldwin took seriously the responsibility of being a big brother and his mother's right hand. He cared for and protected his three younger brothers and five sisters

in a household governed by the rigid rules of their father, a Baptist preacher, originally from New Orleans, Louisiana.

Between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, Baldwin, himself, became a preacher at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly, where he developed a celebrated preaching style. Baldwin's brief experience in the church would have a sustained impact on his rhetorical style and on the themes, symbols, and biblical allusions in his writings. Baldwin's Pentecostal experience is, in fact, essential to understanding his complex views on Christianity, which he espoused in his speeches and publications. His experience would also serve in part as the underpinnings of his stance on religion. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin proclaims, "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, it is time we got rid of Him." During his early teen years, Baldwin attended Frederick Douglass Junior High School, where he met his French teacher and mentor Countee Cullen, who achieved prominence as a poet of the Harlem Renaissance. Baldwin went on to DeWitt Clinton High School, where he edited the school newspaper *The Magpie* and participated in the literary club, just as Cullen had done when he was a student there. By high school graduation, he had met his close friends at DeWitt Clinton—Richard Avedon, Emile Capouya, and Sol Stein.

The 1940s marked several turning points in Baldwin's life. In 1942, he graduated from high school, and a year later he witnessed the New York Race Riots and experienced the death of his father. After this emotional loss, Baldwin felt more than ever it was important to play father figure to his siblings. He worked at menial jobs during the day, and at night he played guitar in Greenwich Village cafes and wrote long hours, trying to fulfill his dream of becoming a writer.

In 1944, Baldwin met Richard Wright, whose written work spoke to his heart and who would also become a mentor. Baldwin appreciated Wright's strong opinions about race in America, and he greatly valued their intellectual exchange. Wright helped Baldwin to obtain a fellowship to write his first novel, which enabled him to leave for Paris in 1948, where the older writer had relocated a few years earlier. However, the two were often at odds about the ways in which they approached race in their work. Baldwin wrote three essays explicating his critique of Wright's "protest art." This conflict eventually led to the demise of their friendship.

In 1948, at age twenty-four, Baldwin left the United States to live in Paris, France, as he could not tolerate the racial and sexual discrimination he experienced on a daily basis. Professor Kendall Thomas of Columbia Law School explains that Baldwin left his country because of racism and Harlem because of homophobia—two aspects of his identity that made him a frequent target of beatings by local youth and the police. Years later, when asked about his departure, Baldwin explained in a Paris Review interview: "My luck was running out. I was going to go to jail, I was going to kill somebody or be killed" (1984). In Paris, Baldwin began to interact with other writers. He reconnected with Richard Wright, and for the first time, he met Maya Angelou, with whom he maintained a close relationship.

Baldwin would spend the next forty years abroad, where he wrote and published most of his works. Between 1960 and 1970, Baldwin lived regularly in Istanbul, Turkey. Still, the violence and assassinations in the United States during the politically turbulent 1960s took an emotional toll on Baldwin. After the assassination of his three friends—Medgar Evers in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965, and Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968—Baldwin suffered an emotional breakdown and eventually moved to the South of France to recuperate. In 1970, he settled in a house in the village of St. Paul de Vence, where he would live the rest of his life.

During his years abroad, Baldwin returned to the United States frequently and considered himself a "transatlantic commuter." In 1955, he signed a lease for an apartment at 63 West 97th Street in New York, and from the mid 1960s on, he maintained a home at 137 West 71st Street in Manhattan. When Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, Baldwin was actually living in California. Many of Baldwin's extended visits were to spend time with his large and beloved family and to participate in Civil Rights Movement events. He attended the March on Washington in 1963 and the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965. Baldwin also participated in literary events, such as the 1965 conference titled "The Negro Writer's Vision of America" sponsored by the New School of Social Research in New York. During his presentation, Baldwin addressed the conference theme, stating, "I know a story which America denies. And it denies it for the very good reason that my story, once told, confronts it with the truth about itself. In fact, my story, once told, will liberate

America. The possibility of liberation—the necessity of becoming responsible for one's own life—is what most people most profoundly fear."

Baldwin passed away on November 30, 1987, in his house in St. Paul de Vence after a short battle with stomach cancer. A week later, he was laid to rest at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City and buried at the Ferncliff Cemetery in New York. Family members and friends participated in a large service during which Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka, and Maya Angelou delivered touching remarks about their friend and brother. Angelou stated that Baldwin's love "opened the unusual door for me, and I am blessed that James Baldwin was my brother."

Literary and Civil Rights Timeline

1924	Born August 2nd
1938	Graduates from Frederick Douglass Junior High School, where his early ambitions in writing were encouraged by his teacher Countee Cullen, the Harlem Renaissance poet
1942	Graduates from DeWitt Clinton High School, where he was a member of the literary club and edited the school newspaper <i>The Magpie</i>
1944	Meets writer Richard Wright, who refers Baldwin's first draft of <i>Go Tell It On The Mountain</i> to Harper and Brothers publishing house
1945	Receives a \$500.00 Saxton Fellowship from Harper and Brothers; the first draft of <i>Go Tell It On The Mountain</i> is rejected by Harper and Doubleday; Baldwin begins writing reviews for <i>The Nation</i> and <i>The New Leader</i>
1947	Publishes essay "History as Nightmare" in <i>The New Leader</i>
1948	Publishes essay "The Harlem Ghetto" and short story "Previous Condition" in <i>Commentary</i> ; Baldwin moves to Paris
1949	Publishes "Everybody's Protest Novel," in which he criticizes Harriet Beecher Stowe's <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> and Richard Wright's <i>Native Son</i> ; jailed in Paris for eight days for theft (falsely accused of stealing hotel bed sheets)
1951	Publishes "Many Thousands Gone" in the <i>Partisan Review</i> ; attack on Richard Wright leads to breakup; Baldwin completes <i>Go Tell It On the Mountain</i> in Switzerland, where he stayed three months with Swiss friend and lover Lucien Happersberger
1953	Publishes "Stranger in the Village" in <i>Harper's Magazine</i> ; the essay is based on his stay in Switzerland
1954	Wins Guggenheim Fellowship; attends MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire
1955	Attends Yadao, an artists' community in Sarasota Springs, New York; revises <i>Amen Corner</i> during Howard University rehearsals and publishes it the same year; also publishes the collection of essays <i>Notes of a Native Son</i> and an autobiographical narrative "Equal in Paris," about being jailed in Paris in 1949, originally published in <i>Commentary</i> magazine
1956	Publishes <i>Giovanni's Room</i> with Dial Press; accepts National Institute of Arts and Letters Award and a Partisan Review fellowship; covers First Conference of Negro and African Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne, sponsored by Presence Africanize

- 1957 Publishes "Sonny's Blues" in the *Partisan Review*; Travels to the South on assignment for the *Partisan Review*, where he interviews student protests and meets with Martin Luther King, Jr.
- 1959 Awarded a two-year Ford Foundation grand to complete *Another Country*; Interviews film director Ingmar Bergman in Sweden; publishes essay "A Letter From the South: Nobody Knows My Name" in the *Partisan Review*; apprentice on Elia Kazan's productions of *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *J.B.*
- 1960 Covers sit-ins in Tallahassee, Florida; interviews student at Florida A & M; published "They Can't Turn Back" in *Mademoiselle Magazine*; Richard Wright dies suddenly
- 1961 Publishes second collection of essays *Nobody Knows My Name*, Dial Press; publishes the essay "Alas, Poor Richard," another scathing critic of Richard Wright's work; appears on radio and television to promote *Nobody Knows My Name* and to speak about civil rights; meets Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X; completes *Another Country*; Swiss television produces "Stranger in the Village"; publishes the "Black Boy Looks at the White Boy"; makes first visit to Turkey at the invitation of Turkish actor Engin Cezzar
- 1962 Publishes *Another Country*, Dial Press, and it becomes a national best seller; Baldwin travels to West Africa; "Letter from a Region in My Mind" published in *The New Yorker*, later printed in *The Fire Next Time* as "Down at the Cross"
- 1963 Publishes *The Fire Next Time* to national acclaim; appears on the cover of May 17th issue of *Time* magazine; NAACP Field Secretary and friend Medgar Evers is assassinated on June 12 outside his home in Jackson, Mississippi; starts lecture tour for CORE in the South and the North; registers voters in Alabama for SNCC; wins Polk Memorial Award for outstanding magazine journalism; participates in March on Washington; travels to Nairobi, Kenya, with Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier to celebrate Kenya's independence
- 1964 Elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters; publishes the play *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, Dial Press, and theater production of *Blues for Mr. Charlie* appears at the historic American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) in New York; publishes *Nothing Personal* with photographer and high school friend Richard Avedon, Atheneum Books
- 1965 Debates William F. Buckley at Cambridge and receives standing ovation for his response to "Is the American Dream at the Expense of the American Negro?"; Malcolm X is assassinated in the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem while addressing his Organization of Afro-American Unity; Baldwin attends Selma to Montgomery March; publishes *Going to Meet the Man*, Dial Press; The play *The Amen Corner* is performed in New York, Israel, and Europe
- 1968 Publishes the novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Dial Press; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee; Baldwin speaks at the World Council of Churches in Sweden against apartheid in South Africa; testifies at a Congressional hearing in support of a commission to establish a

- national museum of African American history and culture; receives personal attacks from *Soul on Ice* author Eldridge Cleaver
- 1969 Publishes *New York Times* article "The Price May Be Too High" about black writers in a white publishing industry; directs John Herbert's "Fortune and Men's Eyes" in Istanbul, Turkey
- 1970 Becomes the subject of photographs and a short film *From Another Place*, both by Sedat Pakay in Istanbul; holds conversations with anthropologist Margaret Mead titled "A Rap On Race"
- 1971 Baldwin and anthropologist Margaret Mead publish the transcript of conversations held in New York in 1970 in a co-authored book titled *A Rap On Race*; publishes "An Open Letter to My Sister Angela Davis" in *New York Times Review of Books*; moves to a house in St. Paul de Vence in the South of France
- 1972 Publishes *No Name In The Street*, Dial Press; publishes the screenplay *One Day When I Was Lost*, based on Alex Haley's bestselling classic *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.
- 1973 Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates secures rare interview with James Baldwin and Josephine Baker together in James Baldwin's house in St. Paul de Vence, France; Baldwin appears with television host and poet Nikki Giovanni on "Soul," and the transcript is published as a dialogue
- 1974 Publishes *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Dial Press; becomes the third recipient (after writer Tennessee Williams and dancer Martha Graham) of the prestigious Centennial Medal awarded to "The Artist As Prophet" by the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York
- 1976 Publishes what would be his only children's book *Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood*, with illustrations by Yoran Cazac, Dial Press; publishes the book-length essay *The Devil Finds Work*
- 1978 Teaches a spring course in contemporary literature at Bowling Green State University in Ohio (returns in the fall of 1979 and 1981); awarded the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Medal
- 1979 Publishes *Just Above My Head*, his sixth and last novel, Dial Press; goes into seclusion after friend and mentor Beauford Delaney dies in March; teaches at UC Berkeley in the spring and speaks in Los Angeles, San Diego, and Santa Barbara; begins writing and lecturing on black English; publishes "Open Letter to the Born Again" in *The Nation*; meets Chinua Achebe at the University of Florida, African Literature Association; travels throughout the South
- 1982 Film makers Dick Fontaine and Pat Harley release television documentary of Baldwin's trip through the South "I Heard It Through The Grapevine"
- 1983 Publishes selected poems in *Jimmy's Blues*, St. Martin's Press; teaches Afro American Studies at University of Amherst in the fall
- 1984 Hospitalized for exhaustion; works on the play *The Welcome Table*
- 1985 Publishes "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" in *Playboy*; American Playhouse dramatizes *Go Tell It On The Mountain*; publishes *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Holt, Rinehart &

Winston Publishing; publishes *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction, 1948–1985*, St. Martin's Press

1986

Receives France's highest civilian recognition, the Legion of Honor; travels to the Soviet Union for an international conference and to London for a production of *Amen Corner*; suffers fatigue and becomes ill

1987

Returns to St. Paul de Vence and is diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus, which spreads to the stomach; grants his last interview to poet and journalist Quincy Troop in mid-November in bed at his home; dies November 30 and his friend and assistant publicly announces his death December 1; memorials are held in St. Paul de Vence and Harlem; is eulogized by Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Amiri Baraka at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York; body buried at Ferncliff Cemetery, Hartsdale, New York

Scope and Contents

The James Baldwin Collection provides insight into Baldwin's life as a writer and activist. The collection contains correspondence, photographs, manuscripts, and awards. A significant portion of the collection are photographs by photojournalist Frank Dandridge. The collection focuses on Baldwin's grade school educational career, his writing process, as well as his thoughts about social equality and civil rights.

Arrangement

The materials in this collection have been kept at the folder level and separated into six series. The materials have been ordered and organized based on the content. Series 6 has been broken down into a smaller subseries dedicated to the Frank Dandridge photographic prints. Series 8: Oversize Materials acts as an extension of the first five series, with materials that could not be housed with their corresponding materials due to size constraints. Within each series and subseries, the folders are organized as close to the collection's original order as when it was acquired.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Activism
- Architecture
- Awards
- Civil rights
- Communication
- Education
- Families
- Funeral rites and ceremonies
- Identity
- Journalism
- Justice
- LGBTQ+

Literature
Mass media
Photography
Politics
Poverty
Race discrimination
Sexuality
Theater
Travel
finance

Types of Materials:

Correspondence

Names:

Baldwin, Daniel
Baldwin, David
Dandridge, Frank
Evers, Charles
King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968
Whaley, Paula Baldwin

Places:

France
Harlem (New York, N.Y.)
Turkey
Venice (Italy)

Container Listing

Series 1: Educational Materials

Scope and Contents: Materials include award certificates and diplomas awarded to Baldwin during his primary and secondary school years.

Box 1, Folder 1	Award Certificate, 1935
Box 1, Folder 2	Certificates from Frederick Douglass Jr. High School, 1938; undated
Box 1, Folder 3	DeWitt Clinton High School Diploma, 1942
Box 1, Folder 4	Award Certificate from DeWitt Clinton High School, 1942

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Series 2: Writings

Scope and Contents: Materials in this series include handwritten notes, drafts of later published writings, reviews of Baldwin's works, and speeches

Box 1, Folder 5	Are We Weak and Heavy Laden?, undated
Box 1, Folder 6	Notes written on stationery related to the "Amen Corner", undated
Box 1, Folder 7	In Defense of Stokely Carmichael, 1968
Box 1, Folder 8	"The Negro Writer's Vision of America," additional handwritten notes, 1965
Box 1, Folder 9	"James Baldwin: Another Country" (1962), 1962
Box 1, Folder 10	Typed draft of an article slated for Playboy magazine, 1963
Box 3, Folder 3	"Amen Corner" musical annotated manuscript, 1983
Box 3, Folder 4	"Blues for Mr. Charlie by James Baldwin" annotated manuscript, 1964

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Series 3: Correspondence

Scope and Contents: Materials include telegrams and letters to and from James Baldwin. Most notably, there is letter from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to James Baldwin.

Box 1, Folder 11	Telegram from Charles Evers (Medgar Evers' brother) to James Baldwin, 1964
Box 1, Folder 12	Telegram from Ed Doctorow (E.L. Doctorow) to James Baldwin, 1965
Box 1, Folder 13	Telegram to Clarence Jones (Baldwin's Attorney), 1963
Box 1, Folder 14	Letter to Paula Baldwin from James Baldwin, undated
Box 1, Folder 15	Letter to James and David Baldwin from Orilla Winfield (Bill Miller), 1986
Box 1, Folder 16	Letter from Dr. Martin L. King to James Baldwin with related clippings about Nobody Knows My Name, 1961

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Series 4: Clippings

Scope and Contents: Materials in this series in clippings from magazines and newspapers discussing Baldwin, his writings and his accolades.

Box 1, Folder 17	"Happersberger, in whose Lausanne chalet ... , undated
Box 1, Folder 17	"Baldwin Lectures", undated
Box 1, Folder 17	The Fire Next Time , James Baldwin, The Dial Press, 1963
Box 1, Folder 17	"Author, Author", undated
Box 1, Folder 17	"WINNERS!", 1962

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Series 5: Ephemera

Scope and Contents: This series includes an invitation and related ephemera, such as a menu and an envelope from a dinner that Baldwin attended at the White House in 1961.

Box 1, Folder 18

["The President requests the pleasure of the company of Mr. Baldwin at the luncheon..." Invitation to the White House, 1961](#)

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Series 6: Photographs

Scope and Contents: Materials in this series are split between two series of photographs. The first series are personal snapshots of Baldwin during his various travels around the world. These photographs were sent to his family while he was abroad. The second series of photographs were a gift to Baldwin from noted photographer Frank Dandridge.

6.1: Personal Photographs

Box 1, Folder 19	Venice, April '54, 1954
Box 1, Folder 19	Venice, '54, 1954
Box 1, Folder 20	Carrie Lee, undated
Box 1, Folder 21	Untitled (African American servicemen), undated
Box 1, Folder 22	Meilleurs Voeux Pour La Nouvelle Année, 1948

6.2: Frank Dandridge Photographs

Box 2, Folder 1

[Image\(s\)](#)

Summary: A collection of eighty 1968 black and white photographs taken by photojournalist Frank Dandridge that document African American life. Subjects and themes of these photographs include African American men, women and children in urban settings.

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Series 7: Miscellaneous

Scope and Contents: This series includes various types of media including receipts, a press release as well as writings related to Baldwin's funeral in 1987.

Box 1, Folder 23	"El Faro" Restaurant" bill, 1962
Box 1, Folder 24	"S. McMillan, Inc: Funeral Directors and Embalmers" receipt, 1943
Box 1, Folder 25	"Old Westbury Faculty Commendation of James Baldwin..." press release, C. 1984
Box 1, Folder 26	"Dean James P. Morton, Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine..." letter, 1987
Box 1, Folder 26	"James Baldwin" poem written by attorney William Kunstler, 1987

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Series 8: Awards (Oversize)

Scope and Contents: Materials in this series are large format awards, including a proclamation of James Baldwin Day in Berkeley, CA and a posthumous award from the State of New York in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Box 3, Folder 1	"City of Berkeley" Proclamation, 1979
Box 3, Folder 2	New York State Martin Luther King, Jr. Medal of Freedom Award...", 1988

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