

President's Letter to Martin Luther King's Widow to Be Auctioned

A condolence letter from President Lyndon Johnson to the widow of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. following the civil rights leader's 1968 assassination is set to be auctioned on Thursday after a legal battle.

The typed letter from Johnson to Coretta Scott King is dated April 5, 1968, the day after King was gunned down in Memphis, Tennessee, by a white supremacist and riots erupted across the United States.

"We will overcome this calamity and continue the work of justice and love that is Martin Luther King's legacy and trust to us," Johnson, who was president from 1963 to 1969, said in the letter on White House stationery.

Quinn's Auction Galleries in Falls **Church**, Virginia, is selling the letter. It has set a minimum price of \$60,000, and expects the letter to fetch from \$120,000 to \$180,000, according to the company's website.

Auctioneer Matthew Quinn said the letter had special resonance given the 50th anniversary this month of the "Bloody Sunday" march at Selma, Alabama, a turning point in the U.S. civil rights movement, and the release of the King-centered movie "Selma."

"You know, we get to sell high-value items all the time. Rarely do we get a hold of a piece of history, and it's been humbling," Quinn told Reuters Television.

Coretta Scott King held on to the condolence letter until 2003, when she gave it to singer and social justice

activist Harry Belafonte. She died in 2006.

When Belafonte tried to sell it through Sotheby's auction house in 2008, King's children objected and the sale was canceled. The two sides became embroiled in a legal battle.

A 2014 settlement allowed Belafonte to keep the letter and other items, and Belafonte gave the letter to his half-sister Shirley Cooks. She and her husband Stoney Cooks, who was a staff member of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, are selling it along with other memorabilia.

Stoney Cooks said the letter was remarkable because Johnson, who had signed landmark civil rights legislation, wrote it even as he grappled with a wave of rioting and arson sparked by King's murder, including in the streets of the U.S. capital.

"I thought that quick response showed something about the nature of the relationship between the two men," he told Reuters Television.

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