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Their friendship had deep roots; Research: When Alex Haley came to Annapolis to work on his epic novel, he found a first-rate archivist -- and a friend for life -- in Phebe *Jacobsen*.

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SUN STAFF

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Phebe *Jacobsen* happened to be on duty the spring morning 32 years ago when Alex Haley walked into the Maryland Hall of Records in Annapolis, lugging suitcases stuffed with yellowed photographs and documents.

Haley, whom the state archivist didn't know at the time, sat down, opened the suitcases and, in his deep, resonant voice, began telling the epic tale of his long search for his roots.

His enslaved ancestor had been the son of important people, he said, kidnapped by slave traders in Gambia and shipped to Annapolis City Dock in 1767. The man's name was Kunta Kinte, and Haley was seeking records of his arrival.

That spring day, *Jacobsen* dug up a handwritten port ledger with details of ships that sailed into Annapolis in the autumn of 1767. The second-to-last entry was the sole arrival from Gambia, the Lord Ligonier, bearing a cargo of 98 "Negroes."

The discovery was a pivotal moment in Haley's research for his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "Roots," and it began a friendship between writer and archivist that grew during the next 25 years through home-cooked dinners at the the *Jacobsen* house, visits to Main Street for crab cakes and handwritten letters discussing research, the progress of his book and, often, their personal lives.

Today, Annapolis, Anne Arundel County and state officials will honor the late author in a ceremony unveiling a bronze statue at City Dock.

The 77-year-old *Jacobsen* says she is proud to have had the

chance to know the man who has become an icon of African-American genealogy.

To her, though, he always will be her dear friend Alex.

"I think Alex would be very pleased with the statue," said **Jacobsen**, a frail, soft-spoken woman who plans to go from her Annapolis house to City Dock today. "He was very special. I don't think you'll find another person like Alex for many years."

The archivist and the author became friends almost instantly that day in 1967.

Haley, by then the co-author of "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," had crossed the Atlantic several times, to London, Gambia and back, gathering stories of his ancestors' lives. **Jacobsen** had traveled only up and down the Eastern seaboard, but she was a lifelong history buff who indexed records and documents with a passion. She also was interested in genealogy.

Haley's account of his journeys fascinated her. She had met blacks trying to piece together family histories back to Colonial times, but Haley was the first she knew who was venturing back to the motherland.

Arrival from Africa

Her work with Haley began when she found an ad in the Oct. 1, 1767, Maryland Gazette announcing the arrival of the Lord Ligonier from the River Gambia, Africa, with a "cargo of choice, healthy slaves." Then she found the Sept. 29 port record, showing that among the pounds of "elephants' teeth," beeswax, cotton and Gambian gold were 98 slaves -- among whom, presumably, was Kunta Kinte.

"I remember it like it was yesterday," **Jacobsen** said recently, leaning back in a well-worn chair in her living room. "He just went through the roof. He said something like, 'This puts it together. The circle is rounded.' He knew from his grandparents that 'Naplis' was the name of the port where his ancestor came. This would have been proof that his ancestor was here. I remember the Times of London called later and said, 'Are you sure he found it?' because they didn't believe it. I said, 'Look, I saw it.' "

Haley, who died in 1992, described the day with similar excitement in an Oct. 28, 1975, letter to **Jacobsen**: "I never will forget long as I live how one morning Phebe lifted up a little 3 X 5" index card bearing the ship name 'Lord Ligonier' I never will forget the look on your face when you saw the look on mine.

Loved you ever since! And you know that. You ain't heard the last of that yet."

Haley wrote dozens of letters to **Jacobsen** for 25 years, dashing them off while writing "Roots" in Jamaica, doing book tours abroad or taking a breather at his San Francisco home. (**Jacobsen** donated her letters from Haley to the Hall of Records, where they are available to the public.)

"My Uncle George always said how Phebe was very special to Uncle Alex," said Chris Haley, 40, the author's nephew and the associate director of reference services at the Maryland Hall of Records. He has lunch with **Jacobsen** once a week. "Once you're a celebrity, there's always a sense of, 'Why is somebody talking to me? Is it because I'm famous?' My Uncle Alex saw in Phebe that she just really wanted to help him. She really had a love for research. For him to have lucked into meeting her was a very fortunate thing for him."

Haley's warm letters -- sometimes written on planes or ships -- reflect a fondness for his archivist friend in Annapolis, whom he mentioned in "Roots."

He wrote often of looking forward to trips to Annapolis or Washington, when he planned to stop by the **Jacobsen** home to have dinner with Phebe and her husband, Bryce.

Insight into the book

His letters also provided insight into his research and writing of the book. Later, as the miniseries script based on the book progressed, he shared his feelings on each step with **Jacobsen**.

"I think that what I most dislike about the drive for 'success' in my profession is that writing is such a jealous mistress that really too little time is left for the visits and communications with my special people," he wrote in a May 24, 1970, letter from San Francisco in which he told **Jacobsen** he expected the book to be published the next spring.

"Roots" hit bookstores in 1976. Before its publication, Haley lamented in many letters that the process was so lengthy.

"My prime pursuit is now, of course, finally finishing my seemingly interminable book Roots, and I've mixed visceral reactions to this," he wrote from a cruise ship heading to Taiwan from Hong Kong on Jan. 1, 1973. "One, it embarrasses me (as it ranges between perplexing and piquing many friends) that this new 1973 ushers in the eighth year since this book's initial notes were made."

Haley also logged his growing sense of the impact his book would have.

Writing from Jamaica on June 7, 1974, about reactions to copies of his unpublished book, he told *Jacobsen*: "The average is 'I hadn't realized -- and 'I didn't know,' and such as that. It promises that *Roots* is going to address itself to some positive changing of at least one facet of the fact that all ethnic groups' histories have overwhelmingly, preponderantly been written by the winners."

His words in that June letter foreshadowed the last line of "*Roots*," in which he expressed the same thought.

Last contacts

Jacobsen received her last letter from Haley in May 1991 and spoke to him once more on the phone before he died the next year. She said that while she didn't get to see him again before he died -- their last meeting was at her retirement party in 1990 -- she was grateful their paths had crossed that day in 1967 at the Hall of Records.

"I think I was very lucky," she said. "I do think other people in the Hall of Records could have helped him just as well."

1. Helping history: Retired state archivist Phebe *Jacobsen* will be on hand today when author Alex Haley is honored at the unveiling of a statue in Annapolis.
2. Letter: Of a key research discovery, Haley (left) wrote to *Jacobsen* (right), "I never will forget the look on your face when you saw the look on mine."

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