



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Association of Curators Project  
Oral History Interviews, 1983

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Washington, D.C.  
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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., <a href="mailto:osiaref@si.edu">osiaref@si.edu</a>
<b>Title:</b>	Association of Curators Project Oral History Interviews
<b>Identifier:</b>	Record Unit 9522
<b>Date:</b>	1983
<b>Extent:</b>	3 audiotapes (Reference copies).
<b>Creator:::</b>	Association of Curators Project (National Museum of American History)
<b>Language:</b>	English

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9522, Association of Curators Project Oral History Interviews

### Use Restriction

Restricted. Contact [SIHistory@si.edu](mailto:SIHistory@si.edu) to request permission.

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## Historical Note

In 1983, the chair of the Association of Curators of the National Museum of American History (NMAH), Harold D. Langley, hosted a series of talks by senior curators "On Being a Curator." Informal remarks were followed by a question and answer period with curatorial staff. Margaret Brown Klapthor, J. Jefferson Miller, II, and John T. Schlebecker discussed their careers at the museum, focusing on development and curation of collections, and reminiscences of their museum years. Klapthor and Miller served on the NMAH Collections Committee and also addressed issues of collecting policies and curatorial methods. Their reminiscences span the years of the United States National Museum (USNM), the formation of a separate National Museum of History and Technology (NMHT), and its renaming as the National Museum of American History in 1980.

Margaret Brown Klapthor (1922-1994) received the B.A. from the University of Maryland and was appointed Museum Aid in the Division of History of the USNM in 1943. She advanced to Assistant curator in 1947, Associate Curator in 1952, and Curator in 1970. After forty years at the museum, she retired in 1983. Her curatorial work focused on the First Ladies gowns collection, White House china, and political campaign contributions.

J. Jefferson Miller, II (1928-2005) received the B.A. from The Johns Hopkins University and the L.L.B. from the University of Maryland. He changed careers after pursuing a fellowship in American decorative arts at Winterthur and receiving the M.A. in American culture history from the University of Delaware. He came to the Division of Ceramics and Glass of the NMHT as Assistant Curator in 1962, after completing

his master's degree. He served as Associate Curator from 1964 to 1969 and Curator from 1970 until his retirement in 1980. He then served as director of the Maryland Historical society from 1984 to 1989. His collecting and research focused on European ceramics and American art porcelains.

John T. Schlebecker, a noted scholar of agricultural history and a key player in the living historical farms movement, graduated from Hiram College in 1949 with a major in social science, earned the M.A. in history from Harvard University in 1951 and the Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1954. He was curator of agricultural history at the American History Museum from 1965 until his retirement in 1984, and also served as chair of the Department of History of Science and Technology in 1978.

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## Introduction

The Smithsonian Institution Archives began its Oral History Program in 1973. The purpose of the program is to supplement the written documentation of the Archives' record and manuscript collections with an Oral History Collection, focusing on the history of the Institution, research by its scholars, and contributions of its staff. Program staff conduct interviews with current and retired Smithsonian staff and others who have made significant contributions to the Institution. There are also reminiscences and interviews recorded by researchers or students on topics related to the history of the Smithsonian or the holdings of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Margaret Brown Klapthor, J. Jefferson Miller, and John T. Schlebecker, Smithsonian curators, were chosen to present their reminiscences because of their long and distinguished careers at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

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## Descriptive Entry

Harold D. Langley, chair of the Association of Curators, NMAH, moderated these sessions in 1983, and they were recorded by Smithsonian Institution Archives Historian, Pamela M. Henson.

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## Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

- Interviews
- Museum curators -- Interviews
- Museum techniques
- Oral history
- Records of meetings, organizations, and professional societies
- Special events

Types of Materials:

- Audiotapes
- Transcripts

Names:

- Association of Curators Project (National Museum of American History)

Henson, Pamela M.  
Klapthor, Margaret Brown  
Langley, Harold D., interviewer  
Miller, J. Jefferson  
Museum of History and Technology (U.S.). Division of Agriculture and Wood Products  
National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Ceramics and Glass  
National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of History  
National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Political History  
National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of the History of Technology  
National Museum of History and Technology (U.S.). Division of Agriculture and Forest Products  
National Museum of History and Technology (U.S.). Division of Agriculture and Mining  
National Museum of History and Technology (U.S.). Division of Extractive Industries  
Schlebecker, John T.  
United States National Museum

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## Container Listing

### Interviews

Interviews                    **Session 1: February 17, 1983**

Interviews                    Reminiscences of Margaret Brown Klapthor covers her role as a curator at NMAH, including: the importance of artifacts to history; how to develop a collecting policy; her role on the Collections Committee; deaccessioning policies; curator/donor relationships; early duties in the Division of History, especially for the *First Ladies Hall* and later the White House china and political campaign collections; curatorial planning for exhibits; documentation of artifacts; and recollections of donors and potential donors, c. 1943-1983.

Interviews                    Transcript, pp. 1-41, of audiocassette tape recording, 1.0 hour.

Interviews                    Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 1 hour

- Note:
- Original Master: 1 5" reel-to-reel audiotape
  - Preservation Master: 2 digital audio .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 1 audiocassette tape and 2 digital audio .mp3 files

Interviews                    **Session 2: April 11, 1983**

Interviews                    Reminiscences of J. Jefferson Miller, II, discuss his education at Winterthur and career at NMAH, including: his training at Winterthur for a museum career; his appointment as Assistant Curator of Ceramics and Glass in 1962; the structure and function of the NMHT curatorial staff; impact of the new History and Technology Building on the staff; his work on the Collections Committee; issues relating to deaccessioning; problem areas in curatorial work; his publications and major acquisitions; and relationship between the Division of Ceramics and Glass and the Division of Cultural History, c. 1960-1983.

Interviews                    Transcript, pp. 1-30, of audio cassette tape recording, 1.0 hour.

Interviews                    Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 1 hour

- Note:
- Original Master: 1 5" reel-to-reel audiotape
  - Preservation Master: 2 digital audio .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 1 audiocassette tape and 2 digital audio .mp3 files

Interviews                    **Session 3: March 21, 1983**

Interviews                    Reminiscences of John T. Schlebecker discuss his career in agricultural history at the National Museum of American History.

Interviews Transcript, pp. 1-34, of audiocassette tape recording, 1.0 hour.

Interviews Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 1 hour

- Note:
- Original Master: 1 5" reel-to-reel audiotape
  - Preservation Master: 2 digital audio .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 1 audiocassette tape and 2 digital audio .mp3 files