



Smithsonian Institution Archives

**Louis R. Purnell Interviews, 1993-1994**

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Smithsonian Institution Archives  
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>	Louis R. Purnell Interviews
<b>Identifier:</b>	Record Unit 9578
<b>Date:</b>	1993-1994
<b>Extent:</b>	13 audiotapes (reference copies).
<b>Creator::</b>	Purnell, Louis R., interviewee
<b>Language:</b>	Language of Materials: English

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9578, Louis R. Purnell Interviews

### Use Restriction

Restricted.

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## Historical Note

Louis R. Purnell (1920-2001), was born on 5 April 1920 in Snow Hill, Maryland. He spent his youth in Delaware and Cape May, New Jersey. While beginning his undergraduate degree at Lincoln University, in Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, he was able to pursue his dream of becoming a pilot when the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) was instituted on campus. In 1942, he enlisted and was accepted into the seventh class of African American Army Air Force aviation cadets stationed at the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Alabama [the Tuskegee Airmen]. He joined the all-Black 99th Fighter Squadron in 1943. During World War II, he completed two tours of duty in North Africa and southern Italy with the 99th, and later the 332nd Fighter Group. He was presented the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal with Eight Oak Leaf Clusters.

After his return to the United States, Purnell returned to Lincoln University and completed a B.A. in Psychology. He took a position as a Speech Therapist at the Lena J. Sklar School in Germantown, Pennsylvania. He eventually moved to Washington, D.C., and held positions at the Office of the Quartermaster General and the United States Book Exchange at the Library of Congress. Purnell worked in a variety of jobs at the Smithsonian, eventually joining the Division of Invertebrate Paleontology and Paleobotany in the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) in 1961. In 1968, he moved to the Department of Astronautics of the National Air and Space Museum (NASM). During his career in the Astronautics Department (renamed the Department of Space Science and Exploration in 1980), he progressed through the ranks from Museum Specialist to Curator, a position he held until his retirement in January 1985.

## 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 interviews conducted by researchers or students on topics related to the history of the Smithsonian or the holdings of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Louis R. Purnell was interviewed for the Oral History Collection because of his long career at the Institution, including fifteen years as Curator of Astronautics at the National Air and Space Museum, and his pioneering work as an African American professional.

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## Descriptive Entry

Purnell was interviewed in seven sessions between December 1993 and February 1994 by Terrica M. Gibson, an Intern with the Institutional History Division, Smithsonian Institution Archives. The interviews cover his childhood in Wilmington, Delaware, and Cape May, New Jersey; his education, love of flying, service during World War II; reminiscences of prominent Army Air Corps personnel, including General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.; careers with the Office of the Quartermaster General, U.S. Book Exchange, NMNH and NASM; the circumstances surrounding the first lunar landing; the move of NASM from the Arts & Industries (A&I) Building; relationship with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA); and reminiscences of colleagues including G. Arthur Cooper, S. Paul Johnston, and Michael Collins.

This collection is comprised of approximately 12 hours of recordings and 291 pages of transcript. In total, this collection includes 24 original 7" reels, 24 preservation digital .wav files, 13 reference copy audio cassette tapes, and 24 reference copy digital .mp3 files.

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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:

- Aeronautics
- African American history
- History of science and technology
- Military history
- Museum curators -- United States -- Interviews
- Paleontology
- World War, 1939-1945

Types of Materials:

- Audiotapes
- Interviews
- Oral history

Names:

Army Air Corps  
Arts and Industries Building  
Civilian Pilot Training Program  
Collins, Michael  
Cooper, G. Arthur (Gustav Arthur), 1902-2000  
Davis, Benjamin O., Jr., 1912-  
Department of Astronautics (NASM). Department of Space Science and Exploration (NASM)  
Division of Invertebrate Paleontology and Paleobotany (NMNH)  
Gibson, Terrica M., interviewer  
Johnston, S. Paul (Samuel Paul), 1899-  
Lincoln University (Pa.)  
National Aeronautics and Space Administration  
National Air and Space Museum (U.S.)  
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.)  
Office of Quartermaster General  
Purnell, Louis R.  
Tuskegee Airmen  
United States Book Exchange  
United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Group, 332nd  
United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Squadron, 99th

## Container Listing

### Box 1

#### Transcripts of Interviews

- Box 1 of 1 Interview 1: 15 December 1993:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 2: 22 December 1993:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 3: 28 December 1993:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 4: 5 January 1994:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 5: 14 January 1994:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 6: 4 February 1994:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 7: 28 February 1994:

#### Audio Recordings of Interviews

- Box 1 of 1 Interview 1: 15 December 1993:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 2: 22 December 1993:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 3: 28 December 1993:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 4: 5 January 1994:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 5: 14 January 1994:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 6: 4 February 1994:
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 7: 28 February 1994: