



Smithsonian Institution Archives

## Louis R. Purnell Oral History 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 Oral History 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>	English

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

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

### Use Restriction

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

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## Historical Note

Louis R. Purnell (1920-2001), was born on April 5, 1920 in Snow Hill, Maryland. He spent his youth in Wilmington, 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.

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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 air pilots
- African Americans -- History
- Interviews
- Military history
- Museum curators -- United States -- Interviews
- Oral history
- Paleontology
- Science -- History
- Technology -- History
- World War, 1939-1945

Types of Materials:

- Audiotapes
- Transcripts

Names:

Arts and Industries Building (Washington, D.C.)  
Civilian Pilot Training Program (U.S.)  
Collins, Michael, 1930-  
Cooper, G. Arthur (Gustav Arthur), 1902-2000  
Davis, Benjamin O., Jr., 1912-2002  
Gibson, Terrica M., interviewer  
Johnston, S. Paul (Samuel Paul), 1899-  
Lincoln University (Pa.)  
National Air and Space Museum (U.S.)  
National Air and Space Museum (U.S.). Department of Astronautics  
National Air and Space Museum (U.S.). Department of Space Science and Exploration  
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.)  
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.). Division of Invertebrate Paleontology and Paleobotany  
Purnell, Louis R.  
Smithsonian Resident Associate Program  
Smithsonian Resident Associate Program  
Tuskegee Airmen  
United States Book Exchange  
United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Group, 332nd  
United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Squadron, 99th  
United States. Army. Air Corps  
United States. National Aeronautics and Space Administration  
United States. Office of the Quartermaster General

Geographic Names:

Cape May (N.J.)  
Tuskegee Army Air Field (Ala.)  
Wilmington (Del.)

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## Container Listing

### Interviews

- Interviews                    **Interview 1: December 15, 1993**
- Interviews                    Covers childhood in Delaware, experiences at Lincoln University, and aviation training, including: Differences in education between Wilmington, Delaware, and Cape May, New Jersey; family life during the Great Depression; experiences as one of few African-American students in school; social and educational experiences at Lincoln University; reminiscences about Lena Sklar School; recollections of aviator Hubert Fauntleroy Julian ("The Black Eagle"); jobs worked throughout school and college; reminiscences about early interest in aviation; the CPTP; training and life at Tuskegee Army Air Field, Alabama; experiences with segregation and living in the southern United States; and a trip to New Orleans, Louisiana, for Mardi Gras in 1943.
- [Digital Content: Louis R. Purnell in U.S. Air Force Uniform, c. 1942. \[Image no. SIA2011-0143\]](#)
- [Digital Content: Louis R. Purnell in Airman Uniform, c. 1942. \[Image no. SIA2011-0144\]](#)
- Interviews                    Transcript, pp. 1-40, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.
- Interviews                    Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours
- Note:
- Original Masters: 3 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 3 digital .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 3 digital .mp3 files
- Interviews                    **Interview 2: December 22, 1993**
- Interviews                    Covers experiences in Tuskegee, Alabama; civilian and military aviation training; missions during World War II; reminiscences of individuals met during military service; and return from the war, including: Relationship between the town and base in Tuskegee, Alabama; time stationed in Camp Shanks, New York; Oued N'ja, Morocco; Oscoda (Army Air Field), Michigan; Tunisia; and Sicily; reminiscences of Commanding Officers of Tuskegee; recollections of Tuskegee Airmen, including Philip Cochran and Charles Hall; discussion of a book on the Tuskegee Airmen; descriptions of aircraft flown, including the P-51 Mustang; experience of completing his B.A.; and marriage to Mildred Purnell.
- Interviews                    Transcript, pp. 41-85, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.
- Interviews                    Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 4 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files

Interviews **Interview 3: December 28, 1993**

Interviews Covers his return to Lincoln University; move to Washington, D.C.; work at Quartermaster General and U.S. Book Exchange; reminiscences of work and interactions with staff at the NMNH and NASM, including: Circumstances surrounding article he wrote for *Air and Space Magazine*; his experiences as a veteran returning to college; coursework at Howard University; work methods when Chief Investigator of the Identification Section of Air Force Casualties; reminiscences about office at the Library of Congress; work at National Gallery of Art; transfer to NMNH; construction of wings to NMNH; reminiscences of NMNH supervisors Erle G. Kauffman, G. Arthur Cooper, and Richard L. Cifelli; work on nautiloids and cephalopods; fieldwork and oceanographic expedition assignments; racial issues relating to hiring of and work with Smithsonian staff; and his creation and publishing of the *Catalog of the Type Specimens of Invertebrate Fossils*.

Interviews Transcript, pp. 86-133, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.

Interviews Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 4 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files

Interviews **Interview 4: January 5, 1994**

Interviews Covers his tenure at NASM, the growth of NASM's collections and exhibit space; reminiscences of staff, and increasing public interest in astronautics, including: NASM's use of the Arts & Industries Building; construction of the NASM building; challenges of exhibiting artifacts; work as a Museum Specialist; promotion to Assistant Curator; teaching; qualifications and backgrounds of staff; process of selecting, collecting, storing, exhibiting and preserving astronomical artifacts; relationships and agreements with NASA and McDonnell Douglas; events at NASM during the Apollo 11 landing; attendance at space launches at Cape Kennedy; Silver Hill, Maryland, storage facility; reminiscences of Fred Durant and Mike Collins; artifact loan program; arrangements of exhibits sent to Japan; and second marriage to JoAnn Purnell.

[Digital Content: Louis R. Purnell, Jr., Curator of Astronautics, in Front of Airplane at the National Air and Space Museum, c. 1980s. \[Image no. SIA2008-3012\]](#)

Interviews Transcript, pp. 134-171, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.

Interviews Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours  
Note: 

- Original Masters: 3 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
- Preservation Masters: 3 digital .wav files
- Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 3 digital .mp3 files

Interviews **Interview 5: January 14, 1994**

Interviews Covers the changing meaning of the term "Tuskegee Airmen"; selection, preservation, loaning, and exhibition of artifacts; construction and opening of NASM building; public interest and response to artifacts; acquisition and installation of Apollo 11 lunar module (LM), including: Move from A&I Building; installation of offices and exhibits in NASM building; use of mannequins in the exhibition of planes; ribbon cutting ceremony for NASM; the Apollo-Soyuz project exhibit; ideas and criterion for selecting artifacts; travel to facilities to advise on care of on-site artifacts; NASA tour of Apollo 11 LM to NASM; inspection of loan sites; foreign loans of artifacts; details about Gemini 12, spacesuits, moon rock, Redstone missile, and Lindbergh plane, *The Spirit of St. Louis*; and recollections of loans from individuals and corporations.

Interviews Transcript, pp. 172-224, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.

Interviews Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours  
Note: 

- Original Masters: 4 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
- Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files
- Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files

Interviews **Interview 6: February 4, 1994**

Interviews Covers creation of the *Black Wings* exhibit; Paul E. Garber Facility in Silver Hill, Maryland; public appearances; foreign tours of NASM artifacts; ideas on exhibit design; reminiscences of NASM staff; changes in Astronautics Department; preparation for retirement, including: Robert Tripp and his concern of black representation in aviation at NASM; use of black mannequins in plane exhibits; meeting with staff of Congressmen Ronald V. Dellums and Barry Goldwater; Dellums' commitment to exhibits about African American contributions to aviation; reminiscences about his wife; Silver Hill facility opening to the public; discussion of Silver Hill staff's expertise and backgrounds; reminiscences about directors of NASM, Michael Collins and Noel W. Hinners; automated collection inventory to replace handwritten records; Japanese and European tours of NASM artifacts; celebration of tenth anniversary of Apollo 11; discussion of race and professional advancement at NASM; effects of changes in departmental staffing including curatorial positions; thoughts on departmental name changes; creation of the *Space Suits* exhibit; guest appearance on the Shelly Tromberg show



(WRC Radio) talking about the 99th; experiences being interviewed about his time as a "Tuskegee Airman"; gun-camera footage of 332nd planes shooting down Nazi aircraft; reminiscences about NASM staff, Greg Kennedy, Derek Elliot, Don Lopez, and Walter Boyne; and preparation for retirement.

Interviews Transcript, pp. 225-271, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.

Interviews Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 4 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files

Interviews **Interview 7: February 28, 1994**

Interviews Covers his final years at NASM; thoughts on his experiences at the Smithsonian, and retirement, including: Discussion of the black mannequins placed in *Sea-Air Operations* exhibit; reminiscences of his time working at the Smithsonian and its value to the public; thoughts on the founding and focus of the Anacostia Community Museum; comparison of his time at NMNH and NASM; importance of educational background, experience, and race; and participation in the Public Program Advisory Committee after his retirement.

Interviews Transcript, pp. 272-291, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Interviews Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour

- Note:
- Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 2 digital .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 1 cassette audiotape, 2 digital .mp3 files