



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Oral history interviews with
Paul Edward Garber, 1974

Finding aid prepared by Smithsonian Institution Archives

Smithsonian Institution Archives
Washington, D.C.
Contact us at osiaref@si.edu

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Historical Note.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Descriptive Entry.....	2
Names and Subjects	2
Container Listing	4

Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title:	Oral history interviews with Paul Edward Garber
Identifier:	Record Unit 9592
Date:	1974
Extent:	8 audiotapes (reference copies).
Creator::	Garber, Paul Edward, 1899-1992. interviewee
Language:	Language of Materials: English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9592, Oral history interviews with Paul Edward Garber

Historical Note

Paul Edward Garber (1899-1992), was the first Curator of the National Air Museum, now the National Air and Space Museum. Garber was born on August 31, 1899, in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and moved permanently to Washington, D.C., with his family in 1910. He developed an interest in flight early in life with kites, and it continued with airplanes when he saw Orville Wright fly at Fort Meyer, Virginia, in 1909 while on a trip to Washington with his father. His interest in flight continued to grow as he visited airplane exhibits at the Smithsonian and flew kites on his own. Once while flying a kite outside his family home on Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., he met Alexander Graham Bell, who helped him fix it. During World War I, Garber joined the D.C. National Guard, and then transferred to the United States Army as a Sergeant where he learned to fly airplanes at Bolling Field. After the war, he joined the Air Mail Service as a ground crewman, headquartered at College Park, Maryland.

Garber joined the staff of the Smithsonian Institution in 1920 as a Preparator in the Division of Mechanical Technology where he repaired objects and built models for exhibition. This began his long career at the Smithsonian during which he followed his passion for flight and built a world-class collection of airplanes. Among the airplanes Garber acquired for the collection are the Curtiss NC-4, the first aircraft to fly across the Atlantic; Lincoln Ellsworth's Northrop Gamma *Polar Star*, which made the first flight across the Antarctic; Wiley Post's *Winnie Mae*, which established a number of speed records; and Charles A. Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis*. During World War II, Garber took military leave from the Smithsonian from 1941 to 1946 and worked for the United States Navy. While a Commander in the Navy, he built recognition models of enemy planes to teach pilots, gunners and observers how to identify the enemy planes.

When the National Air Museum was officially founded on August 12, 1946, Garber was appointed its first Curator. During the early years of the museum, Garber spent much time commuting between Washington, D.C., and Park Ridge, Illinois, where the museum had a storage facility for military aircraft in a Douglas

Company building used for airplane assembly during World War II. The Korean conflict made it essential that the storage facility be put back into operation, so Garber had the task of finding a new storage facility. He conducted aerial surveys of the D.C. area by airplane and found suitable land in the Silver Hill area of Maryland. The twenty-one acres of land was acquired by the Smithsonian, and storage and restoration facilities were built. In 1980 the facility was renamed the Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration, and Storage Facility.

In 1967, Garber, in association with The Smithsonian Associates, founded the annual Smithsonian Kite Festival which was first held on March 25, 1967. The festival included kite flying on the National Mall, kite-making workshops, a lecture series, and a special display of kites made by Garber and his wife. In 1969, at the age of 70, Garber retired after serving the Smithsonian for forty-nine years. He continued to work at the museum for another twenty years as Historian Emeritus, and he was the museum's first Ramsey Fellow. He died on September 23, 1992, at the age of 93.

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.

Paul E. Garber was interviewed for the Oral History Collection because of his seminal role in the development of the National Air and Space Museum during his sixty-nine years at the Smithsonian.

Descriptive Entry

Garber was interviewed in 1974 by Smithsonian Institution Archives Historian Miriam S. Freilicher. The interviews discuss his background, living in Washington, D.C., as a child, and early interest in flying; his early career at the Smithsonian as a Preparator; the acquisition of many of the famous aircraft in the National Air and Space Museum collection; his career in the United States Navy during World War II; and the early years of the National Air Museum. The collection consists of 8.0 hours of audiotape recording and 187 pages of transcript, and occupies 0.5 linear meters of shelf space. There are two generations of tape for each session: original tapes and reference tapes. In total, this collection is comprised of 8 original 5" reel-to-reel tapes and 8 reference copy audiotape cassettes. Box 1 contains transcripts of the interviews and cassette copies of the original reel to reel recordings, which are in security storage.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Aeronautical museums
Aerospace museums
Curtiss NC-4 (P2N-1)

Museum curators -- United States -- Interviews

Polar Star (Airplane)

Spirit of St. Louis (Airplane)

Winnie Mae (Airplane)

Types of Materials:

Audiotapes

Interviews

Oral history

Transcripts

Names:

Curtiss, Glenn Hammond, 1878-1930

Ellsworth, Lincoln, 1880-1951

Freilicher, Miriam S. interviewer

Garber, Paul Edward, 1899-1992

Lindbergh, Charles A. (Charles Augustus), 1902-1974

National Air Museum (U.S.)

National Air and Space Museum (U.S.)

National Air and Space Museum (U.S.). Department of Aeronautics

National Air and Space Museum (U.S.). Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration, and Storage Facility

National Air and Space Museum (U.S.). Ramsey Fellowship in Naval Aviation History

National Air and Space Museum (U.S.). Silver Hill Facility

National Air and Space Museum Building (Washington, D.C.)

Post, Wiley, 1898-1935.

United States National Museum

United States National Museum. Department of Mechanical Technology

United States. Navy

Container Listing

Box 1

Transcripts of Interviews

- | | |
|------------|----------------------------|
| Box 1 of 1 | Interview 1: 23 April 1974 |
| Box 1 of 1 | Interview 2: 7 May 1974 |
| Box 1 of 1 | Interview 3: 14 May 1974 |
| Box 1 of 1 | Interview 4: 26 June 1974 |

Audio Recordings of Interviews

- | | |
|------------|----------------------------|
| Box 1 of 1 | Interview 1: 23 April 1974 |
| Box 1 of 1 | Interview 2: 7 May 1974 |
| Box 1 of 1 | Interview 3: 14 May 1974 |
| Box 1 of 1 | Interview 4: 26 June 1974 |