



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Robert McCormick Adams  
Oral History Interviews, 1984

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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>	Robert McCormick Adams Oral History Interviews
<b>Identifier:</b>	Record Unit 9602
<b>Date:</b>	1984
<b>Extent:</b>	3 audiotapes (Reference copies).
<b>Creator::</b>	Adams, Robert McC. (Robert McCormick), 1926-2018, interviewee
<b>Language:</b>	English

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9602, Robert McCormick Adams Oral History Interviews

### Use Restriction

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

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## Historical Note

Robert McCormick Adams (1926-2018), archaeologist and anthropologist, served as the ninth Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution from 1984 to 1994. Adams received the bachelors of philosophy from University of Chicago in 1947, the masters in 1952 and the Ph.D. in 1956. Adams' research focused on field studies in the history of irrigation and urban settlement, primarily in the Middle East, but also Mesoamerica. He served on the faculty of the University of Chicago and Oriental Institute from 1955 to 1984, serving as director of the Oriental Institute from 1962 to 1968, and as Provost of the University from 1982 to 1984.

At the Smithsonian, Adams initiated new programs to ensure cultural diversity, establishing a Cultural Education Committee in 1986. He oversaw acquisition of the National Museum of the American Indian and development of the National Postal Museum from the National Philatelic Collection. Adams oversaw construction of the Quadrangle, a complex housing the National Museum of African Art, the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, and the International Center. He also sought to reinvigorate research at the Institution, as well as incorporate new technologies into education, research, and museum programs. The National Science Resources Center was created to improve the teaching of pre-college science and mathematics.

Adams faced several challenges head-on, raising awareness of the deteriorating infrastructure of the Smithsonian and initiating a renovation program for its historic structures. When the "culture wars" erupted at the Smithsonian in the 1990s, with criticisms of exhibits including *The West as America*, an exhibit at the Smithsonian American Art Museum; *Science in American Life*, at the National Museum of American

History, and a script developed at the National Air and Space Museum for an exhibit on the *Enola Gay*, Adams oversaw a thoughtful national discussion of the issues.

Upon his retirement from the Smithsonian in 1994, Adams was appointed an adjunct professor at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) where he continued anthropological research and publication. Over the course of his career Adams explored the importance of social interaction and cultural ecology in the evolution of civilizations and how cultural ecology helps explain the rise of civilizations and how cultures affect each other.

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## Introduction

The Oral History Program is part of the Smithsonian Institution Archives. The purpose of the program is to conduct interviews with current and retired members of the Smithsonian staff who have made significant contributions, administrative and scholarly, to the Institution. The project's goal is to supplement the published record and manuscript collections in the Archives, focusing on the history of the Institution and contributions to the increase and diffusion of knowledge made by its scholars.

The Robert McCormick Adams interviews were accessioned into the Oral History Collection because of his role as Secretary of the Smithsonian from 1984 to 1994.

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## Descriptive Entry

The Robert McCormick Adams Interviews were conducted during three sessions in 1994 and 2012 by Smithsonian Institution Archives Historian Pamela M. Henson. The first two interviews discuss his education and research prior to his being named Secretary of the Smithsonian in 1984. The third interview discusses his tenure as Secretary of the Smithsonian and his research at UCSD. The collection consists of approximately 4.25 hours of audio recordings and 75 pages of transcript.

Additional documentation pertaining to Adams can be found in the Records of the Office of the Secretary, and the Robert McCormick Adams Papers in the Smithsonian Archives.

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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:

- Anthropologists
- Anthropology
- Archaeologists
- Archaeology
- Human settlements -- Middle East
- Interviews
- Irrigation -- Middle East
- Oral history

Types of Materials:

- Audiotapes

Transcripts

Names:

Adams, Robert McC. (Robert McCormick), 1926-2018  
Henson, Pamela M., interviewer  
Smithsonian Institution. Office of the Secretary  
University of Chicago  
University of Chicago. Oriental Institute

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## Container Listing

### Interviews

- Interviews                    **Interview 1: May 26, 1994**
- Interviews                    Discusses Adams' childhood and education; his college and graduate education at the University of Chicago; factory work during his college years; his first fieldwork in Iraq in 1950 with Robert J. and Linda Braidwood; his decision to pursue an academic career; and the influence of anthropologists V. Gordon Childe and Gordon R. Willey, among others, on his research; c. 1920s-1950s.
- Interviews                    Transcript, pp. 1-22, 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 audiotape cassettes; 3 digital .mp3 files
- Interviews                    **Interview 2: May 31, 1994**
- Interviews                    Focuses on Adams' role as an administrator at the University of Chicago, as director of the Oriental Institute and Dean of the Social Sciences faculty; c. 1920s-1970s.
- Interviews                    Transcript 1-27, 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 audiotape cassette; 2 digital .mp3 files
- Interviews                    **Interview 3: November 14, 2012**
- Interviews                    Discusses Adams' role as Secretary of the Smithsonian from 1984 to 1994, and closes with his current research program; c. 1984-2012.
- Interviews                    No transcript available, of audio recording, 1.75 hours.
- Interviews                    Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 1.75 hours

Note:

- Original Masters: 1 digital .wav file
- Preservation Masters: 1 digital .wav files
- Reference Copies: 1 digital .mp3 file