Oral history interviews with
Robert McCormick Adams, 1984

Finding aid prepared by Smithsonian Institution Archives
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Collection Overview

Repository: Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title: Oral history interviews with Robert McCormick Adams
Identifier: Record Unit 9602
Date: 1984
Extent: 3 audiotapes (Reference copies).
Creator: Adams, Robert McC. (Robert McCormick), 1926-2018, interviewee
Language: English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation
Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9602, Oral history interviews with Robert McCormick Adams

Access Restriction
The recordings and transcripts of the Robert McCormick Adams Interviews cannot be used without his permission during his lifetime.

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
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.

**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.

**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, 75 pages of transcript, and occupies 0.25 cubic feet of shelf space. There are three generations of each recording, 5 original reel-to-reel audiotapes and one digital .wav file, 3 CDs with digital .wav files of all the interviews, 5 audiotape reference cassettes and six reference .mp3 files. Box 1 contains transcripts of the interviews and cassette and digital copies of the original recordings, which are in security storage.

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.

**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
Types of Materials:
Audiotapes
Interviews
Oral history
Transcripts

Names:
Adams, Robert McC. (Robert McCormick), 1926-2018
Henson, Pamela M., interviewer
University of Chicago
University of Chicago. Oriental Institute