

Guide to Clara Grabau Adams Papers (MS-023)

This finding aid is written in English

International Women's Air and Space Museum
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This finding Aid is available upon request by emailing collections@iwasm.org

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SUMMARY INFORMATION

Repository	IWASM Special Collections
Creator	International Women's Air and Space Museum
Title	Clara Grabau Adams Papers
Identifier	MS-023: 1991.19 ; 1991.58
Dates	1919 - 1970
Language of Materials:	English, German

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Clara Adams was born on December 3, 1884, in Cincinnati, Ohio. Her parents were Walter and Ida Grabau and her paternal grandmother was Augusta von Hindenburg, a distant relative of German President, Paul von Hindenburg. Her mother, Ida, lived next door to Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin in Baden-Baden, Germany.

Clara received training at the Conservatory of Music in Leipzig, Germany, where her father was a professor of music. While studying there, Clara became an accomplished piano player. She also learned to speak several languages and had some artistic talent as well.

Clara married George Lincoln Adams of Boston, Massachusetts, a man forty years her senior. They built a home in Tannersville, Pennsylvania where her husband owned and operated a chain of tanneries in that state. Partly because of the age difference, their marriage was a short one. George passed away in 1929 making Clara a wealthy widow.

Clara Adams's main claim to fame is that she holds many firsts for women in aviation, not as a pilot, but as a paying passenger. Her first flight came in March 1914, Lake Eustis, Florida where she went up in a Thomas Flying Boat piloted by Walter E. Johnson. This flight sparked an interest in aviation that lasted the rest of her life. She was dubbed "First Flightster."

Clara was introduced to Lighter-Than-Air transportation through a letter of introduction by General Paul von Hindenburg to Dr. Hugo Eckener. She was given a ride on the ZR III during one of her test flights. The Zeppelin Company built the ZR-III for the United States Navy as war reparations for WWI. When the ZR-III was delivered to the Navy, the ship was christened the *USS Los Angeles*.

One of Clara's most memorable journeys took place in 1928 when the *Graf Zeppelin* made its first trip from Europe to the United States and back. Clara was the first woman to buy a ticket to fly across the Atlantic, paying the price of \$3,000.00. She was the only woman on the trip with the flight lasting seventy-one hours.

In 1931 she again became the first woman to purchase a ticket to fly on what was then the largest aircraft ever built, the Dornier DO-X flying boat. The DO-X had left Germany for a multi-continent trip. Clara joined the DO-X's journey in Rio de Janeiro where the DO-X was to continue on to New York.

Clara was among the passengers that made the maiden flight of the *Hindenburg* in 1936, a sixty-one-hour flight from Germany to Lakehurst, New Jersey. In the same year she made the maiden voyage on board of the *Hindenburg*, Clara made another historic flight, the inaugural flight of Pan American's *China Clipper*; flying from California across the Pacific. All together in 1936 Clara flew 27,000 miles.

During her many years of flying, Clara Adams flew in free balloons, gliders, Zeppelins, and various passenger aircraft. Along the way she met many famous flyers such as Amelia Earhart, Hugo Eckener, Edwin Musik, and the Stinson sisters to name a few. Her hobby was being a "historic first flighter," as she is sometimes called. She was never associated with any commercial concern or publications and was always a private passenger.

According to her passport, Clara Adams listed her occupation as “lecturer and writer,” no doubt a vocation that grew from her many flying firsts. On her travels, she always kept the collector in mind. She purchased and signed many first day covers, programs, schedules, menus, and other airline memorabilia.

Her flying came to an abrupt halt with the outbreak of WWII, and, although she may have continued flying, she made no more inaugural flights. It would not be until 1966 that she again made news. She flew with five of the original passengers and officers to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the first passenger flight across the Pacific.

Clara Adams died 10 February 1971 with her passing relatively unnoticed. However, she did plan her last plane ride. She had her body cremated and her ashes scattered over the ocean from an airplane.

Although not a pilot, Clara helped to contribute to the advancement of commercial aviation. Today, flying is taken for granted, but at a time when commercial aviation was in its infancy, she and other brave souls like her who believed in the future of mass passenger service braved the dangers and flew over great distances in aircraft whose airworthiness was questionable.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The Clara Grabau Adams Papers span the years 1919 to 1970 and document her life as a famous passenger who was granted access to the first flights of various aircraft. It includes booklets, advertising flyers, and lecture notes for her speaking engagements. It also includes photographs of Clara with various people associated with those flights as well as snapshots with friends and acquaintances. Also included are promotional booklets of Zeppelins as well as Adams’s manuscripts describing her flight on *Graf Zeppelin*. There are newspaper clippings, newsletter articles, research papers, and internet download articles about Adams. There are documents and correspondence related to the Women’s International Association of Aeronautics.

STATEMENT OF ARRANGEMENT

The collection is arranged in six series named Speaking Engagements, Photographs, Hindenburg (incorrectly labeled as the documents in this series are about the Graf Zeppelin, a different, older airship), Articles, WIAA, and Correspondence. Three oversized documents are included. They are Adams’s description of the Graf Zeppelin, 2 pages of the *New York Times* “Photo Section,” Sunday, July 23, 1939, Pan American Air Ways, Issue 5, Volume 7 September/October 1936.

PROCESSING INFORMATION

Processed by Lynn Vandevort, 2026.

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PREFERRED CITATION

Description of item, Date, Box #, Folder #, MS-023: 1991.19; 1991.58, Clara Grabau Adams Papers, Special Collections and Archives, International Women's Air and Space Museum, Cleveland, OH.

ACCRUALS

The current collection will accrue records in accordance with the International Women's Air & Space Museum policies.

EXISTENCE AND LOCATION OF COPIES

This collection includes a CD-R disk with a PowerPoint slide show that includes material that is uncredited. Some material in this collection is photocopied.

RELATED MATERIALS

Lady Drummond Hay Trophy Scrapbook
Floyd Bennett Field Scrapbook

Other Repositories

University of Texas at Dallas, Eugene McDermott Library Special Collection, History of Aviation Archives, Clara Adams Collection H003-67.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

One record storage box, one 3-ring binder with six series dividers, three oversized documents.

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Publication Statement

Special Collections & Archives
International Women's Air & Space Museum
Burke Lakefront Airport
1501 N. Marginal Rd
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www.iwasm.omeka.net

COLLECTIONS INVENTORY

Series 1: Speaking Engagements

Presbyterian Senior Services Piano Performance Announcement
Clara Adams First Flight Travelogs of the Air tri-fold brochure
Seating List Luncheon Opening of the New York Air Lines Terminal 1941
Wings For America Campaign, The Forum Council of Bergen County, 1941

Series 2: Photographs

Multiple photographs, postcards, and snapshots

Series 3: Hindenburg (incorrectly labeled as the documents in this series are about the Graf Zeppelin, a different, older airship)

Transcript of Adams's manuscript description of the Graf Zeppelin flight

Manuscript of the flight on the Graf Zeppelin

German promotional booklet titled Luftschiff

Photo of aerial view 2 airships tethered on the ground at an airfield. On the back is written: "May 1935 Lakehurst, N. J., to meet Lady Grace Hay Drummond Hay, Lady Wilkins & Sir Hubert Wilkins, Clara Adams."

Photographs of an airship, one titled Graf Zeppelin

German promotional booklet titled Luftschiffbau Zeppelin Hamburg – Amerika Linie

The *New York Times* "Rotogravure Section", Sunday, July 28, 1939

Photo of Nine adults standing on the ground outside a United Air Lines plane. On the back is written "Clara Adams arriving at Newark Airport after First of the China Clipper."

A manuscript copy of *The Village Blacksmith*.

August 1954 *Pacific Coast Nurseryman*

Series 4: Articles

Newspaper clippings; some original, some photocopies, some downloaded articles from various websites.

Series 5: WIAA

Photocopy of a Postcard to Bill Kotab (?)

A fragment from a WIAA Twenty-ninth Anniversary Luncheon 1958 program

Original correspondence addressed to "Dearest Clarrehon (?)" from Edith H.

Western Union Telegraph to Adams from Mrs. Clark Stearns, Pres. WNAA

Letter to Adams from Beth on WIAA letterhead

WIAA program of Christmas Party 1939

WIAA postcard(?) announcing a Book and Short Story Contest

Series 6: Correspondence

A Tribute to Clara Adams by Kitty Cheatham 1940

Typed transcript of an interview with Adams 1941

A wine menu from The Roosevelt, New York with the word "Autographs" hand written across the cover 1941

A photocopy of Macfadden Publications letterhead with signatures on it 1932 (?)

Two typed letters on Hotel Van Cleve letterhead address to Adams from Grace M Hay Drummond Hay

A fragment of a letter on A. Vere Haw & Company letterhead to Adams from Richard K. Tobin (?) 1966

Letter to Adams from Irene on Amelia Earhart Memorial Civic Club letterhead 1941

Typed letter to Adams from Hallett Cole

Letter to unknown from Viola Grossmutter (?) on Hotel Wellington Letterhead 1970

Letter to Adams from Ferd (?) Winzen (?)

Letter to Adams from Jessie B & Jessie R

Handwritten fragment of an itinerary

Letter to Adams dated 1935 written in German

Wedding announcement on fragments from a scrapbook

Three letters addressed from "Lena & Dad" on Luftschiff Hamburg-Amerika Linie letterhead

Christmas card to Adams from Jesse Chamberlain 1939

Typed letter to Adams from Violet Von Herder Woodruff 1935

Letter with photograph to Adams from Viola Gentry

Photocopy of a typed letter to Adams from G. Richter on W. A. Sheaffer Pen Co. 1933

Photocopy of an article from the Miami Herald March 5, 1950, signed "Best wishes to "Tom" very sincerely Clara Adams."

Card to Adams from Herb Fisher of the Port of New York Authority