

Allen Varley Astin Papers
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Prepared by Manuscript Division staff

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Collection Summary

Title: Allen Varley Astin Papers

Inclusive Dates: 1939-1973

Bulk Dates: 1950-1970

ID No.: MSS62002

Creator: Astin, Allen Varley, 1904-1984

Extent: 25,000 items

Extent: 66 containers

Extent: 26 linear feet

Language: Collection material in English

Location: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

LC Catalog record: <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm87062002>

Summary: Physicist and director, National Bureau of Standards. Correspondence, memoranda, minutes, agenda, reports, studies, congressional testimony, writings, speeches, conference papers, university teaching and training course records, research data, printed matter, and photographs documenting Astin's career at the National Bureau of Standards, 1928-1969.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the LC Catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically.

People

Astin, Allen Varley, 1904-1984.

Astin, John.

Organizations

United States. National Bureau of Standards.

United States. Office of Scientific Research and Development.

Subjects

Bombardment.

Electric apparatus and appliances.

Electric insulators and insulation.

Electrification.

Metric system.

Ordnance.

Proximity fuzes.

Science and state--United States.

Science--International cooperation.

Telemeter.

Weights and measures.

World War, 1939-1945--Aerial operations.

World War, 1939-1945--England--London.

Places

Great Britain--Armed Forces.

Occupations

Physicists.

Public officials.

Acquisition Information

The papers of Allen Varley Astin, physicist and director of the National Bureau of Standards, were given to the Library of Congress in 1986 by his widow, Margaret Mackenzie Astin.

Processing History

The papers of Allen Varley Astin were processed by Nan Thompson Ernst and Susie H. Moody in 1995.

Additional Guides

A description of the Allen Varley Astin Papers appeared in *Library of Congress Acquisitions: Manuscript Division*, 1986, p. 55.

Transfers

Audiotapes and motion picture films have been transferred to the Library's Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division where they are identified as part of these papers.

Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of Allen Varley Astin is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

Access and Restrictions

The papers of Allen Varley Astin are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container number, Allen Varley Astin Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

Date	Event
1904, June 12	Born, Salt Lake City, Utah
1925	B.S. in physics, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah
1926	M.S. in physics, New York University, New York, N.Y. Chemical analyst, American Smelting and Refining Co., Salt Lake City, Utah
1927	Married Margaret Linnie Mackenzie
1928	Ph.D. in physics, New York University, New York, N.Y.
1928-1930	National Research Council Fellow, National Bureau of Standards Research Fellow, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md.
1930-1932	Research associate, Utilities Research Commission, National Bureau of Standards
1932	Associate scientist, Electricity Division, National Bureau of Standards
1936	Physicist, Electricity Division, National Bureau of Standards

1940	Senior physicist, National Bureau of Standards
1943	Chief, Optical Fuse Section, Ordnance Development Division, National Bureau of Standards
1944	Assistant Chief, Ordnance Development Division, National Bureau of Standards
1944-1945	United States representative on proximity fuses in London, England, Office of Scientific Research and Development, Defense Department
1948	Chief, Ordnance Development Division, National Bureau of Standards
1950	Associate Director, National Bureau of Standards
1951	Acting Director, National Bureau of Standards
1952-1969	Director, National Bureau of Standards
1984, Jan. 28	Died, Bethesda, Md.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Allen Varley Astin (1904-1984) span the years 1921-1984 with the bulk of the material concentrated in the period 1950-1970. The collection is organized into three series. The [National Bureau of Standards](#) series documents Astin's forty-year career at the bureau, most especially his role as director, 1952-1969. The [Professional Activities](#) series documents his association with scientific, academic, governmental, and public administration organizations. A small file concerning his term as acting assistant secretary for science and technology at the Commerce Department is combined with a few family and personal papers into a [Miscellany](#) series.

The [National Bureau of Standards](#) series relates to all phases of Astin's career, including his earliest scientific research in measurement techniques for dielectric (electric insulating) materials, telemetering, and electronic instrumentation. Since the National Bureau of Standards was founded in 1901 to coincide with the electrification of American industry, Astin's initial research was among the work most emphasized at the bureau. During World War II, ordnance research dominated its program, and Astin was one of the scientists assembled at the bureau in 1940 to develop proximity fuses for bombs and rockets. In 1944 and 1945, he represented the bureau in London working in liaison with the Office of Scientific Research and Development and the British armed forces. Astin's proximity fuse file chiefly documents technical and tactical matters, yet reference is also made to the strategic decision not to use proximity fuses in Europe and to their limited use in the Burma and China.

Astin's papers also document his active leadership in the formulation of public policy relating to science. The [National Bureau of Standards](#) series provides a record of his influence, including his role in the controversy over negative findings on the battery additive marketed as "AD-X2." Dismissed by Secretary of Commerce Sinclair Weeks, Astin was exonerated by a scientific council appointed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower and overseen by the National Academy of Sciences. A subsequent report to the Secretary of Commerce made recommendations, which Astin helped to develop, for a reorganization of the National Bureau of Standards which eliminated ordnance research from its program and emphasized its primary role in establishing measurement standards and reliable properties of materials. Documentation for the AD-X2 controversy is located principally in the administrative file of the series.

Eisenhower approved the committee recommendations, reinstated Astin, and transferred the ordnance program to the Defense Department. Two new laboratories were then established by Defense: the Harry Diamond Laboratory in Washington, D.C., and the Corona Laboratory in California. Astin's association with these laboratories is documented in the [Professional Activities](#) series. Reorganization and relocation of the bureau to Gaithersburg, Maryland, is documented in the administrative file of the [National Bureau of Standards](#) series. In addition, the publications file in the same series includes Astin's 1968 interview for the Columbia University oral history of the Eisenhower administration and a draft manuscript for the bicentennial history of the bureau, "Measures of Assurance," both of which treat the AD-X2 controversy and bureau reorganization. Some of Astin's 1953 speeches in the National Bureau of Standards series also refer to the controversy.

Public speaking and publication files in the [National Bureau of Standards](#) series document Astin's articulation of the bureau's mission to governmental, scientific, and civic groups throughout the country and at European and Asian conferences. His extensive involvement in scientific associations, documented in the [Professional Activities](#) series, reflects the rise of late-twentieth-century research by committee and Astin's influence on the agenda of research programs in

private and public laboratories. Other files in the Professional Activities series concern his efforts in scientific panels and governmental committees to define an autonomous role for scientists in public service.

Papers documenting Astin's role in international matters include the International Committee on Weights and Measures file in the [National Bureau of Standards](#) series and files for his work with State Department cooperative science programs in France and Japan in the [Professional Activities](#) series. Astin initiated studies at the bureau which were used in support of the Metric Conversion Act of 1975. The United States Metric Board file in the Professional Activities series documents his later work on national conversion.

Several letters and a few school and theatrical papers in the [Miscellany](#) series pertain to Astin's son, the actor John Astin, who is known for his portrayal of "Gomez" on the 1960s television show, "The Addams Family."

Organization of the Papers

The collection is arranged in three series:

- [National Bureau of Standards, 1921-1983](#)
- [Professional Activities, 1928-1984](#)
- [Miscellany, 1934-1984](#)

Description of Series

Container

Series

BOX 1-27

National Bureau of Standards, 1921-1983

Correspondence, memoranda, minutes, agendas, reports, studies, congressional testimony, printed matter, photographs, writings, speeches and conference papers, research data, university teaching and in-house training course records, and other material from Astin's career with the bureau.

Organized alphabetically by subject or type of material and chronologically thereunder.

BOX 28-61

Professional Activities, 1928-1984

Correspondence, memoranda, minutes, agendas, business records, notes, reports, studies, printed matter, photographs, and other records from Astin's committee work with various organizations.

Arranged alphabetically by title of the organization, institution, agency, or commission and thereunder by subject or document type.

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Miscellany, 1934-1984

Commerce Department file and family and personal papers, including correspondence, memoranda, photographs, press releases, appointment calendars, reports, financial records, minutes, and programs.

Arranged alphabetically by subject or type of material.

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