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Eleanor B. Adams and her family, ca. 1925: her father, Charles W. Adams, M.D.; mother, Faustina; brother, Charlie; and sister, Virginia. Courtesy of Sally M. Fesler.

Eleanor Burnham Adams: Woman of Letters, 1910–1996

JOHN L. KESSELL

Her younger brother Charlie, a student at Harvard University in the late 1940s, recalls an occasion in Cambridge when Eleanor was home from New Mexico. He asked her to look over a term paper he was writing. “Dead,” she pronounced. “No life. Write it over. I only have time to read it once more. Bring it to me in the morning.” He spent the rest of the day and all night rewriting. The revision she judged only a little better, but her sisterly chiding earned him a decent grade.¹

Editor of the *New Mexico Historical Review* from 1964 to 1975 and historian of colonial Spanish America, Eleanor B. Adams ranked among the few women scholars of her day to achieve international acceptance in the historical profession. To introduce the appended list of her publications and to honor her memory, I offer this brief biographical sketch of a distinguished woman of letters.

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 14 May 1910 to Faustina Burnham and Charles Waldron Adams, M.D., Eleanor was the first of three children, two girls and a boy. As they grew up, the family maintained close contact with the Burnhams of Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick, and the Adamses of Provincetown at the tip of Cape Cod. A good many of their ancestors had been Loyalists during the American Revolution. As she would point out with undisguised irony, they were among the *other* Adamses.

Living at home at 27 Garfield Street, Eleanor attended Cambridge Latin School and Radcliffe College, studying Romance languages and literature and graduating cum laude in 1931. She then booked passage to Spain with a group of students from Smith College. During her year

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abroad, she studied at the University of Madrid and Centro de Estudios Históricos. Young and idealistic in republican Spain, she never forgave the reactionary forces that subsequently overthrew that noble experiment.²

At home again in Cambridge by the fall of 1932 during the worst of the depression, Adams went to work temporarily as an enumerator for the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Graduate school was financially out of the question, so she found something that suited her equally well. In the autumn of 1934, venturing "past the shrunken heads on the fifth floor . . . to the end of a crooked office corridor" in Harvard's Peabody Museum, she secured a secretarial position with the esteemed Post-Columbian Section, Division of Historical Research, Carnegie Institution of Washington. She could walk to work. She resumed her study of ballet and modern dance, appeared in performances, and rowed a shell on the Charles River.³

At No. 10 Frisbie Place on the Harvard campus, which she and some of her fellow workers jokingly termed Frisky Place, twenty-four-year-old Eleanor entered the heady interdisciplinary world of historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and linguists all concentrating their studies on Spanish colonial Yucatan. Historian France Vinton Scholes, who had already begun publishing in the *New Mexico Historical Review* his fundamental documentary histories of seventeenth-century New Mexico, became her mentor. Their collaboration lasted a lifetime.

Adams was a quick study. Scholes taught her Spanish history, paleography, the origin and nature of historical documents, and how to find them in the archives. So astute was she at paleography that he came to trust her reading of difficult passages over his own. Soon, he admitted proudly that her position was "rather more that of an investigator than a secretary."⁴

It was in the former capacity that the Carnegie Institution sent Adams to Mexico in 1938. Arriving by ship at Vera Cruz, she traveled by Pullman to Mexico City and checked into the Hotel Geneve, her home for the next seven months, from July 1938 until February 1939. During that time, the young American woman from Massachusetts worked assiduously in the Archivo General de la Nación, transcribing or ordering microfilm of documents on lists supplied by Scholes. During March and April, she visited the Mayan ruins of Chichén Itzá, in Yucatan, happily observing the Carnegie Institution's archaeological expedition in the field. By mid-May, she was back at Frisbie Place.⁵

Eleanor Adams never married. She came closest in 1939. Her beau, a dentist, was a member of a prominent Mexican family. And although his mother opposed his engagement to a North American woman, Alfredo and Eleanor planned to be married. She wrote in May to Scholes, who was then in Mexico City, that she hoped by special arrangement to remain in Cambridge even though the Post-Columbian Section was scheduled to remove to Carnegie headquarters in Washington, D.C., when Scholes returned.

As I have already told you, I hope it will be possible for me to go on with as much of my work as possible after I am married, not only because I shall need the extra money but because, as you know, I find my work very interesting (on the whole!) and it would be a wrench to give it up entirely.⁶

Scholes foresaw difficulties. "Your work and mine," he explained, "will be so closely interrelated that we should be in the same place—for day-to-day discussions, allocation of work, etc." He did not want to rush her. Whenever she and Alfredo decided on their plans, Scholes and archaeologist Alfred Vincent Kidder, chairman of the Division of Historical Research, would "give the question the fullest and most earnest consideration deserved by your abilities, your interest in the work, and your services to the historical program and your whole-hearted and able collaboration in that program."

He closed by passing on favorable comments about their two-volume, co-edited *Don Diego Quijada, Alcalde Mayor de Yucatán*, recently published in Spanish in Mexico City by José Porrúa Turanzas and Sons. Silvio Zavala, dean of Mexican historians, liked it, while his colleague Vito Alessio Robles said he could see the English under the Americans' translation of the introduction. "But if that is the worst he can say," allowed Scholes, "then I'm very happy."

The Porrúas had presented him with certain other volumes he had inquired about. The gift, he told Adams, "should have been to you!" So cordial were relations with the publishers that Scholes was negotiating for a documentary series of one or two small volumes each year. "Don't die of heart failure," he teased Adams, "you'll not have to carry the proof reading!!!"⁷

For whatever reasons, Alfredo and Eleanor parted company. In 1940, she moved to Washington, rented an apartment, and threw herself

single-mindedly into her career as scholar. Her friend Margaret A. L. Harrison also remembers Eleanor tea dancing at the Mayflower Hotel. She was not a good social dancer; she disliked having to follow.

* * *

France Scholes, meantime, had received an invitation from University of New Mexico President James F. Zimmerman to return to UNM, where he had taught and headed the Department of History during the 1920s. He accepted, at first part time, beginning in the summer of 1941. Although he had long since fulfilled course requirements for the Ph.D. at Harvard, he had never bothered to submit a dissertation. This he did finally in 1943, combining previously published studies as "Church and State in New Mexico in the Seventeenth Century."⁸

At Scholes's behest, the Carnegie Institution provided that Eleanor Adams join him on detached duty at UNM. She made the move to Albuquerque in 1941, arriving several months before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Soon after, she joined a group of women who had volunteered to knit scarves for the armed services. Staying at first in apartments, then with her friend Eupha Morris, whose lawyer-husband Harry was overseas during the war, Eleanor lived successively in the homes of two absent UNM faculty members.⁹

Adams had never been to New Mexico before. Almost every weekend when gasoline was available, Scholes would take wife Lillith, daughter Marianne, and Eleanor on excursions by car around the state. Even as he served as dean of the Graduate School, then as academic vice-president at UNM, Scholes and Adams kept producing works on colonial Yucatan, New Spain, and New Mexico, publishing some together and others separately.

In 1949, when a new director of the Carnegie Institution terminated the Division of Historical Research, Scholes arranged a position for Adams as curator of the rapidly growing microfilm collection of Hispanic manuscripts at the University of California's prestigious Bancroft Library in Berkeley, of which their long-time friend and colleague, George P. Hammond, was director. While in California in 1950 and 1951, she explored the Monterey Peninsula, taking the weekend train to Pacific Grove, which brought back memories of her family's summer place at Brant Rock in Marshfield south of Boston.

At Berkeley, Adams inventoried and organized the Spanish and Mexican microfilm while continuing her own research, though she despised the bureaucracy of the UC main library that made requisitioning even pencils an ordeal. Later in 1951, after training Vivian C. Fisher as a successor, she returned to UNM with the title of Research Associate in History. It was then that Eleanor purchased the comfortable, flat-roofed Southwestern bungalow at 413 Bryn Mawr, S.E., that remained her home for the rest of her life. She especially enjoyed boiling lobster and entertaining friends and colleagues on her patio, which was overhung with trumpet vine.

She and Scholes at once resumed work on the documentary volumes for the Porrúas, their friends and publishers in Mexico City. Seven appeared between 1955 and 1961, prime sources for the institutional and social history of sixteenth-century New Spain. In response to praise for their partnership, Scholes often remarked graciously that "the lady had done most of the work."

Professor Scholes's occasional forgetfulness had resulted in an awkward coincidence that turned out famously. In the cache of Franciscan documents for the history of New Mexico he had discovered in Mexico City in 1928, he had noted particularly the long and telling report compiled in 1776 by fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez. No document revealed more about the eighteenth-century colony.¹⁰ Not remembering he had suggested to Adams that she transcribe and translate it, Scholes proposed the same task to Franciscan historian Fray Angélico Chávez. Each labored long hours and months without knowledge of the other's efforts.

Soon after Adams returned from the Bancroft, however, they discovered their momentous duplication. Fray Angélico volunteered gallantly to turn everything over to her. She refused, they became fast friends, and together they created a doubly valuable work, *The Missions of New Mexico, 1776: A Description by Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez with Other Contemporary Documents*, published first in 1956 and again in 1976. Their dedication read simply "France Vinton Scholes. His Book."¹¹

In the summer of 1957, Adams planned another of her frequent research trips to Mexico City, this time inviting her teenage niece Sally Maddux to accompany her. They rented rooms in the home of a Mexican general and his family. Sally had the time of her life, recalling forty years later that her aunt:



Eleanor B. Adams, France V. Scholes, and Fray Angélico Chávez, 1956, at the publication of *The Missions of New Mexico, 1776*. Courtesy of the late Roland F. Dickey.

traveled with style and flair, interested in everything, taking advantage of opportunities to see and learn and show her favorite places, making the effort to meet and know people and maintain relationships over the years. She had many interesting friends.¹²

Eleanor Adams's eleven-year editorship of the *New Mexico Historical Review* began with the July issue in 1964, when she took over from ailing long-time editor and New Mexico historian Frank Driver Reeve; it ended with the July 1975 issue, after which she retired from UNM. Working with her close friend Roland F. Dickey, master book designer and director of UNM Press, she gave the *Review* a quiet and elegant "new look" in January 1965. In addition to her keen intuition, exacting standards, and broad array of scholarly talents, she

brought to the craft of editing a clarity and discernment soon reflected in the journal's pages.¹³

I first met Adams in 1965 when I stopped by the *NMHR* office with an article for her consideration.¹⁴ During the next three years as I pursued a Ph.D. in history at UNM, I often came to her with questions. Then, between 1970 and 1972, I enjoyed the privilege of working closely with her as assistant editor of the *Review*. At the same time, she directed my search for primary sources relating to Pecos Pueblo for a study I was preparing on contract with the National Park Service.¹⁵ We collaborated on several other projects, and over the years, I began to think of myself almost as a surrogate son.

Numerous authors, colleagues, and students sought her counsel and friendship. With patience and good humor, she taught us to scrutinize historical documentation, to appreciate the editor's role, and to write and think more clearly. She coaxed France Scholes, who had formally retired in 1962, to submit the last of his dozens of seminal contributions to the colonial history of New Mexico, the two-part "Royal Treasury Records Relating to the Province of New Mexico, 1596–1683."¹⁶

Midway through her tenure as editor of the *Review*, Eleanor Adams found herself in a fight and refused to back down. Her nontraditional career path made her vulnerable professionally. Adams had been hired under special conditions, had no advanced degree, and carried no classroom teaching load. With Scholes no longer on campus, several faculty members of the Department of History tried to have her removed. Others in the department rallied staunchly to her defense, pointing out that her reputation as a scholar and her list of publications far exceeded those of her detractors. She not only was retained but promoted to Research Professor-at-Large.¹⁷

Honors continued to come her way. None meant more than the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters conferred by Tulane University in 1984. The citation from Tulane's president, Eamon M. Kelly, to "Eleanor Burnham Adams, Researcher, Author, Scholar," read in part:

Your meticulous research and lucid writing have shed light on the complexities of Colonial Mexican and Southwest American History, and your numerous published works have played a central role in the development of an entire academic specialty. . . . Indeed, we owe you a debt of gratitude for the rich legacy you have provided American scholarship. . . . We seek, too, to

recognize and commend the humane values that inform your work; you demonstrate that the true scholar is committed equally to increasing our storehouse of knowledge and to transmitting that knowledge so that others may develop their own insights from it.¹⁸

* * *

Adams was increasingly affected over the years by osteoarthritis, requiring her use of first one "stick," as she called it, then two, and finally hip replacements. Nevertheless, for several years after retiring, she gamely continued to travel to Mexico and to visit family in Massachusetts and Maine. At home, she read *The New Yorker* and mystery novels, delighted in figure skating, golf, and tennis on television, and spoiled her regal Maine coon cats.

By the early 1990s, as her condition worsened, she became subject to falls. I remember a telephone call one Christmas Eve several hours before dawn. Eleanor had fallen but managed to pull the phone down beside her. When I arrived, I found her kneeling by her bed, unable to get up. Solemnly but softly, I intoned, "Bless you, my child. Do rise; your sins have been forgiven." Once she was propped back up in bed, she chuckled.

Eventually unable to remain at home, Adams entered a nursing home in 1994 and, after an especially bad fall, a rehabilitation hospital. In the summer of 1995, she left Albuquerque for good, when relatives came and escorted her by train back to Massachusetts. On the morning of 15 January 1996, Eleanor Burnham Adams died peacefully in the town of Norwell. She is buried in the family plot at the lush, rolling Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, the first garden cemetery in North America.¹⁹

In her research and writing about colonial New Mexico, Eleanor Adams concentrated on the eighteenth century, just as France Scholes had on the seventeenth. "I am convinced," she wrote in 1963,

that post-Reconquest history is fully as interesting and significant as that of the pre-Revolt period. I feel that my work should result in an important contribution to historical scholarship, and that the better understanding of New Mexico's past should have some bearing on the understanding of her present.²⁰

None of us has said it better.



Eleanor B. Adams in 1984, when Tulane University conferred upon her the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters.

NOTES

1. Charles W. Adams to John L. Kessell, Hanover, Mass., 16 August 1999, Eleanor B. Adams Papers (EBAP), Center for Southwest Research, Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

2. A University of New Mexico "Biographical Record," completed by Adams on 31 July 1962, listed "Univ. of Liverpool Summer School, 1931," presumably en route to Spain. EBAP.

3. Sally M. Fesler, "Thoughts on the Life of Eleanor Adams [1910–1996]," prepared for a memorial at the Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Mass., 14 May 1996, EBAP. Eleanor B. Adams, "The Historical Society of New Mexico Honors France Vinton Scholes," *The Americas* 27 (January 1971), 228-32 (quotation, 228). See also Richard E. Greenleaf, "Eleanor Burnham Adams: Historian and Editor," *New Mexico Historical Review* 60 (January 1985), 4-9.

4. France V. Scholes to Eleanor B. Adams, Mexico City, 24 May 1939, and Adams to Scholes, Cambridge, Mass., 2 August 1939, EBAP.

5. Monthly Financial Statements, Division of Historical Research, Carnegie Institution of Washington, covering 1 May 1938–10 May 1939, EBAP. In brief periodical reports, Scholes chronicled the historical component of Carnegie's Yucatan project in the *Annual Report of Carnegie Institution of Washington: Yearbook*, vols. 30-48 (1930–1949). Historian Lewis Hanke would write in 1973: "The most sustained and important cooperative research project carried on by a United States institution in Latin America during the twentieth century was probably the Yucatan program of the Carnegie Institution of Washington." Quoted by Greenleaf, "Eleanor Burnham Adams," 6-7.

6. Adams to Scholes, Cambridge, 17 May 1939, EBAP.

7. Scholes to Adams, 24 May 1939.

8. Adams, "The Historical Society of New Mexico," 230.

9. Adams appeared between 1942 and 1946 in *Hudspeth's Albuquerque City Directory* (El Paso, Tex.: Hudspeth's Directory Co., 1942–1945/46), but was not listed in Albuquerque city and telephone directories from October 1948 until 1952. During part of this time, she returned to Cambridge to be with her ailing mother, who died in 1949. Subsequently, she took the job at Berkeley.

10. France V. Scholes, "Manuscripts for the History of New Mexico in the National Library in Mexico City," *New Mexico Historical Review* 3 (July 1928), 301-23.

11. Eleanor B. Adams and Fray Angélico Chávez, eds., *The Missions of New Mexico, 1776: A Description by Fray Francisco Atanasio Dominguez with Other Contemporary Documents* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1956, 1976).

12. Fesler, "Thoughts on the Life."

13. Although her name did not appear formally on the masthead until she assumed the editorship in 1964, at least as early as mid-1962, she listed herself as associate editor. "Biographical Record," 31 July 1962.

14. John L. Kessell, "The Puzzling Presidio: San Felipe de Guevavi, Alias Terrenate," *New Mexico Historical Review* 41 (January 1967); 21-46.

15. John L. Kessell, *Kiva, Cross, and Crown: The Pecos Indians and New Mexico, 1540-1840* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1979).

16. France V. Scholes, "Royal Treasury Records Relating to the Province of New Mexico, 1596-1683," *New Mexico Historical Review* 50 (January and April 1975), 5-23, 139-64.

17. Her academic titles at UNM were: Research Associate in History (1951-66), Research Associate Professor (1967-74), and Research Professor-at-Large (1974-75).

18. Quoted by Greenleaf, "Eleanor Burnham Adams," 5-6. Among her other honors were: corresponding membership in the Academy of American Franciscan History (1951), alumna membership in the Radcliffe chapter of Phi Beta Kappa (1956), Award of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History (1973), the Governor's Award of Honor for Historic Preservation (1984), and the Historical Society of New Mexico Board of Directors' Award for a lifetime of distinguished achievement (1990).

19. "Preserving the Records of Mount Auburn Cemetery," *Annotation: The Newsletter of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission* 27:2 (June 1999), 1, 19.

20. Eleanor B. Adams to Harold Enarson, Albuquerque, 11 April 1963, EBAP.

The Published Works of Eleanor Burnham Adams

AS SOLE AUTHOR:

- "Two Colonial New Mexico Libraries, 1704, 1776." *New Mexico Historical Review* 19 (April 1944), 135-67.
- "Note on the Life of Francisco de Cárdenas Valencia." *The Americas* 2 (July 1945), 21-29.
- "The Chapel and Cofradía of Our Lady of Light in Santa Fe." *New Mexico Historical Review* 22 (October 1947), 327-41.
- "A Bio-Bibliography of Franciscan Authors in Colonial Central America." *The Americas* 8 (April 1952), 431-73; 9 (July 1952), 37-86. Reprinted as *A Bio-Bibliography of Franciscan Authors in Colonial Central America*. Bibliographical Series, 2. Washington, D.C.: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1953.
- "An English Library at Trinidad, 1633." *The Americas* 12 (July 1955), 25-41.
- "Viva el Rey!" *New Mexico Historical Review* 35 (October 1960), 284-92.
- "Fray Silvestre and the Obstinate Hopi." *New Mexico Historical Review* 38 (April 1963), 97-138.
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- "The Historical Society of New Mexico Honors France Vinton Scholes for Outstanding Achievement in Spanish Colonial History, 1970." *New Mexico Historical Review* 45 (July 1970), 245-50. Reprinted in *The Americas* 27 (January 1971), 228-32.
- "Jurisdictional Conflict in the Borderlands." In *The Roman Catholic Church in Colonial Latin America*, edited by Richard E. Greenleaf. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1971. [Excerpts from her introduction to *Bishop Tamarón's Visitation of New Mexico, 1760*.]
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- "History of the Southwest: Personalities and Discoveries." In Donald C. Dickinson, W. David Laird, and Margaret F. Maxwell. *Voices from the Southwest: A Gathering in Honor of Lawrence Clark Powell*. Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland Press, 1976.
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AS CO-AUTHOR:

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AS SOLE EDITOR:

- “Bishop Tamarón’s Visitation of New Mexico, 1760.” *New Mexico Historical Review* 28 (April, July, October 1953), 81-114, 192-221, 291-315; 29 (January 1954), 41-47. Reprinted as *Bishop Tamarón’s Visitation of New Mexico, 1760*. Publications in History, vol. 15. Albuquerque: Historical Society of New Mexico, 1954.
- “Letter to the Missionaries of New Mexico, Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante,” and “Writings of Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante.” *New Mexico Historical Review* 40 (October 1965), 319-35.
- “A Sidelight on the Santa Fe Trade, 1844.” *New Mexico Historical Review* 46 (July 1971), 261-63.

AS CO-EDITOR:

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 2. *La Iglesia en Yucatán, 1560–1610*. Mérida: Carnegie Institution, Diario de Yucatán, 1938.
 3. *Discurso sobre la Constitución de las Provincias de Yucatán y Campeche, 1766*. Mérida: Carnegie Institution, Diario de Yucatán, 1938.
- . *Don Diego Quijada, Alcalde Mayor de Yucatán, 1561–1565*. 2 vols. *Biblioteca Histórica Mexicana de Obras Inéditas*, 14, 15. Mexico City: Antigua Librería Robredo de José Porrúa e Hijos, 1938.
- With Ralph L. Roys and France V. Scholes. "Report and Census of the Indians of Cozumel." *Contributions to American Anthropology and History*, Carnegie Institution of Washington, 4 (1940), 1-45.
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- . "Inventories of Church Furnishings in Some of the New Mexico Missions, 1672." In *Dargan Historical Essays*. Edited by William M. Dabney and Josiah C. Russell. Publications in History, 4. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1952.
- . *Documentos para la historia del México Colonial*. Mexico City: José Porrúa e Hijos, 1955–61:
1. *Relación de las encomiendas de indios hechas en Nueva España a los conquistadores y pobladores de ella. Año de 1564*. 1955.
 2. *Advertimientos generales tocantes al gobierno de Nueva España que los Virreyes dejaron a sus sucesores, 1590–1604*. 1956.
 3. *Ordenanzas del Hospital de San Lázaro de México. Año de 1582*. 1956.
 4. *Información sobre los tributos que los indios pagaban a Moctezuma. Año de 1554*. 1958.
 5. *Sobre el modo de tributar los indios de Nueva España a Su Majestad, 1561–1564*. 1958.
 6. *Moderación de doctrinas de la Real Corona administradas por las Ordenes Mendicantes, 1623*. 1959.
 7. *Cartas del Licenciado Jerónimo Valderrama y otros documentos sobre su visita al gobierno de Nueva España, 1563–1565*. 1961.

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In addition: sundry book reviews, notes, encyclopedia entries, translations, and annotations.

