

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**ROBERT ADAMS**

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH  
IN AMBLER (REACH Ambler)

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Wissahickon Valley Watershed Association  
Ambler, Pennsylvania

on

22 November 2013

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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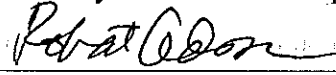
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## ABSTRACT

**Robert Adams** grew up in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, always interested in the outdoors. As a student at the Ambler campus of Temple University with a major in urban studies and environmental science, he became familiar with the “White Mountains” of Ambler, the piles of asbestos-containing waste material. His first official interaction with the area was as land manager for the Wissahickon Valley Watershed Area (WVWA), where his responsibilities centered on the Green Ribbon Trail and included removing invasive species, restoring wetland, and cleaning up woods and stream. As Director of Stewardship, he now also manages six preserves.

By the time Adams began working for WVWA—twenty years after his college years in Ambler—the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had completed the capping of the White Mountains. The BoRit site had been mostly ignored until a developer wanted to build a seventeen-story high-rise near the McDonald’s. Ambler’s residents objected strongly to such a large building in their small town; the Borough Council wanted the revenue; The WVWA, hoping to buy a reservoir located in the middle of the site, was concerned about proper remediation. The loud and angry debate that ensued forced the Council to undertake its own feasibility study; this study found the project’s expense prohibitive, and the project was dropped. Meanwhile, however, residents realized that the site was full of hazardous asbestos-containing waste, and, led by Sharon McCormick, they formed a protest group called Citizens for a Better Ambler. The EPA also took note of the hazard and formed a community advisory group (CAG), the BoRit CAG, of which Adams was elected co-chair. Many of the members of Citizens for a Better Ambler became the nucleus of the BoRit CAG. As a result of the CAG BoRit has been added to the EPA’s Superfund National Priorities List, and a remediation study is ongoing. After the remediation study there will be a feasibility study and then the actual remediation; all of this, Adams forecasts, will mean a further ten or twenty years before the site is finished.

Adams contrasts Ambler today with the Ambler of his college years. Then the plant had closed, people were unemployed, and businesses were shut down. Ambler was not a happy place. Perhaps at least in part because of the activism inspired by that long-ago seventeen-story high-rise project that never happened, Ambler now is becoming revitalized; the organization Main Street is helping foster business, restaurants, and tourism. Adams believes the Borough is well managed and that Ambler is now a very nice place to live. He hopes that the BoRit site, which is now fenced off, can eventually be more accessible to the residents. He says that other communities might take Ambler’s experience as a call to pay attention to their environments.

## **INTERVIEWER**

**Lee Sullivan Berry** earned a master's degree in medieval studies from the University of Notre Dame, and a bachelor of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Pennsylvania. As a staff member in the Center for Oral History, Berry conducts background research and oral-history interviews, edits transcripts of completed interviews, and coordinates with interviewers and interviewees to finalize transcripts. She was the lead interviewer for the REACH Ambler project and has presented her work at meetings of the American Society for Environmental History and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

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<p>Land manager with Wissahickon Valley Watershed Area (WVWA). Worked mostly in Ambler area but also in larger Wissahickon Valley watershed. Green Ribbon Trail his main responsibility. Also managed six preserves; work entailed ecological restoration, deer population control, invasive species removal, wetland restoration, in-stream work. Funding. Employees and volunteers.</p>	
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<p>BoRit mostly ignored until seventeen-story high-rise mooted. Remediation too costly for high-rise, but Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) called in. Portion of the site bought by WVWA. Wissahickon Waterfowl Preserve established. BoRit Community Advisory Group formed by EPA and community, especially Sharon McCormick. Adams elected co-chair of CAG. CAG meetings, workings; community participation.</p>	
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