

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Harriet Elam-Thomas

PERSON

Elam-Thomas, Harriet Lee, 1941-

Alternative Names: The Honorable Harriet Elam-Thomas;

Life Dates: September 15, 1941-

Place of Birth: Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Residence: Orlando, FL

Work: Orlando, FL

Occupations: Foreign Ambassador

Biographical Note

Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas was born on September 15, 1941 in Boston, Massachusetts to Robert and Blanche Elam. She attended William P. Boardman Elementary School and graduated from Roxbury Memorial High School for Girls in Boston, Massachusetts. Elam-Thomas went on to receive her B.S. degree in international business in 1963 from Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts, and her M.A. degree in public diplomacy in 1981 from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.

From 1963 to 1965, Elam-Thomas worked as a secretary at the U.S. Department of Army in Washington, D.C.; and later in 1965, she worked at the American embassy in Paris, France, where she served for three years. Elam-Thomas returned to the U.S. in 1968 and secured a position in the White House as special assistant for appointments under President Richard Nixon. In 1971, she resigned from her position in the Nixon administration and was hired at the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs as a Foreign Service officer in Washington, D.C. In 1975, she was sent to Dakar, Senegal. From 1977 to 1979, Elam-Thomas served as a Foreign Service officer in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. In 1981, she was selected to serve in Athens, Greece as a cultural affairs officer. Within one year, she was sent to Athens where she worked from 1983 to 1987. Elam-Thomas transitioned to the position of desk officer in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus. In 1990, she was assigned to Turkey as the U.S. branch public affairs officer, then Elam-Thomas returned to the U.S. in 1994 and was accepted into the U.S. State Department's Senior Seminar, a year-long intensive program on foreign

policy and diplomacy. In 1995, she was named public affairs officer in Brussels, Belgium where she served for two years. She then became a counselor at the United States Information Agency (USIA) and oversaw the merger with the U.S. Department of State. In 1999, Elam-Thomas was selected by President Bill Clinton to become U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Senegal, and served from 2000 to 2003. She later became the first ambassador-in-residence at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida. In 2005, Elam-Thomas retired from U.S. Foreign Service at the rank of career minister.

Elam-Thomas has received multiple awards and honors for her work. She received the Superior and Meritorious Honor Award for Informational and Cultural Diplomacy and the Greek and Turkish Governments' Award for improved U.S. cultural relations. She also holds honorary doctorate degrees in public service from Simmons College and the University of Central Florida, an honorary doctorate of law from Richmond College and The American University in London, and an honorary doctorate in public administration from Suffolk University.

Elam-Thomas is married to Wilfred Thomas.

Harriet Elam-Thomas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on September 9, 2018.

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