

The Historical Society of Washington, D.C. presents
Oral History at Home



History isn't just names and dates, it's storytelling. And historians aren't just teachers with many years of training and experience. You can be a historian, too, and help document the stories your family has to tell.

Oral history is a recorded conversation between an interviewer and a storyteller (also called a narrator or interviewee). The interviewer gathers, preserves, and may interpret those memories and stories of past and current events. The storyteller shares their history to record what happened to them and their community. Giving an oral history, or verbally passing along what came before, is an ancient tradition that continues to thrive today with modern tools. With voice recording technology built into every smartphone, tablet, and laptop, it's easy to record a conversation. And with video chat, you don't even have to be in the same place as your interviewee!

By becoming an oral historian you are helping document what life was like here in the recent past or perhaps even the current moment. But perhaps most importantly, conducting an oral history can truly deepen your relationship when you're interviewing someone you know. The process of conducting an oral history will always provide a deeper understanding of the interviewee's lived experience. Their words will help bring history alive.

At the DC History Center, oral histories are an important part of our collection, and are most often created by professional oral historians with years of training who follow strict rules when creating oral histories. Alongside records, journals, letters, photographs, and objects, oral histories are used by researchers, historians, and curious members of the public to better understand the past.

But the basics are simple and can be used by anyone curious to learn more about a particular topic or person. Here is how you can go about creating an oral history with someone whose story you've decided is worth preserving for the future.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Identify your interviewee. This might be anyone in your home; or someone who you can call or email.
2. Prepare for your interview by writing down some guiding questions and reviewing some oral history basics (see the [ORAL HISTORY GUIDE](#)).
3. Conduct your interview (see the [INTERVIEW NOTES WORKSHEET](#)). You can do as many as you'd like!

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Oral History Guide

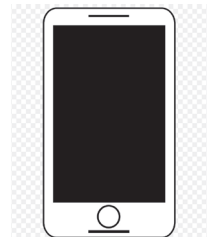
Before the Interview

Prepare your questions. Think about what you want to know about this person. What have they experienced that is interesting? What is important to them about their life and times? What have they lived through or seen before you were born that you'd like to know more about? Write down your list of questions. Try hard to write open-ended questions, rather than ones that the interviewee would answer with "yes" or "no." Make sure to look over your list of questions right before the interview so that the conversation can flow smoothly.

Prepare your interviewee. Give your interviewee an idea of what kinds of questions you'll be asking and what topics you want to cover. This will give them a chance to prepare and be ready to answer your questions. Ask them if they might have photographs or diaries or other items that may help them recall details.

Decide how to record the interview. You can use your cell phone, or a small recorder, or a video camera. Some video call platforms such as Zoom and Skype allow you to record your call. Or you can simply take notes as they talk, either by hand or on a computer. Using a recorder is easiest and is less likely to make your story teller uncomfortable. Test your equipment before the official interview and make sure you have a power source at the ready so that a technology problem doesn't interrupt a successful interview.

Look up important dates ahead of time so you don't waste time trying to remember.



During the Interview

Start with the basics. Before jumping in with questions, start your recorder, and then state your full name, the date, and have the interviewee say and spell their full name, their birth date, and how old they are at the time of the interview. Once the formalities are done, then begin with a question that will put the interviewee at ease and spark the conversation.

Take notes. As your interviewee is talking, write down things that you want to know more about, or important details. Even if you are recording, notes will help you find information quickly later. If you plan to transcribe the interview (that is, write down what was said), notes will help make that process more efficient.

During the Interview (*continued*)

Pay attention. It takes practice to ask questions, listen carefully to the answer, write notes, and think about what question to ask next – all at the same time! The most important thing is to pay attention to your interviewee. Don't just go from one question to the next. The magic of oral history interviewing happens when your story teller tells you something that makes you want to know more. Ask follow-up questions to allow them to say more and also to keep the conversation going. And it's okay to go "off script" from your initial list of questions.

Clarify. Remember that you might know the person who you are interviewing well, but someone reading, or listening to, this interview in the future doesn't. You might know who "Uncle Jimmy" is or where "grandpa's store" was, but a future historian won't. Ask for clarifying details and add them to your notes. Also ask them to spell names and other words that are unfamiliar.



Bring along old photographs to prompt memories, or suggest your interviewee have them available.



After the Interview

Go back and listen, adding to your notes as you go. Think of something you wish you asked? It's common to do additional interviews to follow up or get more details. Often your interviewee will have remembered more or thought of something else they want to share.

By serving as an oral historian, you'll have recorded a first-person account of local history. In doing so you'll gain a deeper understanding of the topic and the person you chose to interview. But perhaps even more importantly, you'll have given someone the invaluable chance to share and preserve their story.

Interview Notes Worksheet

Name of Interviewer: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Birth date of Interviewee and age at interview: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Place of Interview: _____

[if a virtual interview, indicate where both the narrator and interviewer are located]

Questions to Ask

Ask open-ended questions (*Why did you like growing up in this neighborhood? Rather than Did you like growing up in this neighborhood?*).

Ask follow-up and clarifying questions (*That's interesting, can you tell me more about that? Was that before or after DC had Home Rule?*).

