

Conducting and Oral History

The Flood of 1955

Introduction

Oral histories are a method to record oral accounts of historical and current events. Interviewees provide oral testimony that is recorded and kept as a verbal document by the interviewer with the intent of preservation and to provide access to users, historians, and often the public either through recording or transcript.

Oral histories are unique and valuable as they typically aim to gather lengthy and in-depth accounts. Interviewers encourage interviewees to dig deep into their memory and share as much detail as possible. Historical events are often looked back upon from many different angles, a researcher might want to know general details about an event or want to understand the emotional impact of an event. Oral histories can be of value to learn details about the event as it occurred or its aftermath. For this reason, even the smallest detail is of value!

The Mattatuck Museum has completed to oral history projects previously and is working to make the interviews and collected images accessible to the public. Both the African American and Waterbury Neighborhoods projects provide a unique look at Waterbury throughout the years from the individuals who lived and worked here. There is added value in understanding the everyday lives of individuals rather than learning history from the top down. Oral histories allow for both individuals and researchers to reflect on their own position in historical events and how every individual actively shapes history.

Want to read short quotes pulled from the oral history projects completed by the Mattatuck Museum in 2007? The purpose of this project was to capture the diverse lives and experiences of Waterbury residents. Reach out to rachel@mattmuseum.org

The Flood of 1955 happened 65 years ago this August 2020. Some of us might remember our grandparents or parents recounting the tragic event throughout the years. Their experiences are a valuable piece of historical testimony that will help preserve the memory of the event and its aftermath for years to come. Before planning your oral history, watch the video Mattatuck Moments: Buried in Water for necessary context and to hear verbal testimony of the Flood!

[Mattatuck Moments: Buried in Water](#)

Tips for Conducting an Oral History

Your oral history can be formal or casual. If you'd like to have a casual conversation use your notebook to take notes and remember the details of what you have talked about. If you'd like a more formal conversation, use the steps below as a guide. For further guidance and to learn more about [oral history best practices guide](#) published by the Oral History Association.

- **Identify your interviewee**
 - Ensure that your interviewee is willing to participate and is aware that you will be recording your interview session. If you plan to share the recording, either informally or for a presentation, be sure to obtain consent.
- **Schedule a time to talk**
 - Consider how you will record your interview and what tools you will need. If you live with a family member, sitting down at the kitchen table and setting up your phone to record would be a good option.
 - Given the current safety standards, using Zoom to record a session with a family member or friend you don't live with is also an option!
- **Prepare your questions**
 - What are you trying to learn about? Is it a single event or do you want to know more about this person's life in general?
 - Having a set goal and list of questions to use, if need be, will help you guide the conversation.
 - When preparing questions, try to avoid yes or no questions. Open ended questions will allow the person to take the conversation in whatever direction they wish.
 - Asking one clear question at a time will ensure that you get a clear answer.
 - Let your interviewee finish their answer before asking a follow up question.
- **Gather supplies**
 - The supplies provided in this pack
 - If you're talking over the phone, you can use a smartphone to record your phone conversation
 - If you're talking through a video chat, providers like Zoom allow you to record a meeting. Find the instructions [here](#).
- **Conduct your interview**
 - Both you and your interviewee should introduce yourselves at the beginning of the recording.
 - Include the date and time of your interview, so that if future researchers ever access your recording, they will have the necessary context to understand what they are listening to.
- **Send thanks and follow up!**

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- Thank your interviewee for their time, and if you use their recording, share that with them. They might be happy to know their story is being shared.