



Using a Historic Place to Build Community

How-To Guide: Part 4 - The Interviewees

1. **Develop a list of potential interviewees in line with your project's goals.** For example, I interviewed people of all ages, races, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and occupation who were an important part of our historic house museum's recent history. This included Family (both White and Black site descendants), Friends (personal family friends, donors, and board members), and Professionals (staff, architects, preservationists, engineers, media and tourism professionals, etc.); this became the book's organizing structure.
2. **Communicate well in advance** by email, text, or telephone and explain the purpose of the interview, the persons whom the interviewee may know or who have already been interviewed and who could serve as a reference, and the kinds of questions you may be asking. To the extent possible, establish a personal relationship.
3. **Write a brief summary of the project, including its purpose and scope, and sample questions** and send this in advance or give to the interviewee, so descriptions will be in writing and less subject to misunderstandings. Provide your contact information in case questions or concerns arise. Chances are the interviewee will discuss the upcoming interview with family or friends, so the written summary can help give clear answers from the outset.
4. **Be prepared for any potential negativity,** which usually comes into play from some direction. In the project summary, tactfully address the negativity and provide positive answers.
5. **Have questions typed up in advance and give them to the interviewees** if at all possible, so he or she can be thinking of answers and not be caught off guard.



6. **Have your organization produce a release form for the interviewee to sign**, granting permission to use their photo and transcript. If interviewed by phone or video, get verbal permission. Check with the legal counsel of your organization and try to make the release form simple and straightforward for a lay person. Too much “legalese” can be off-putting. [Duke’s basic release form provides an excellent starting point.](#)
7. **Before the interview is videoed, be sure the person knows what to wear.** While such may be often overlooked, the video is a visual medium, so dress is important.
8. **At the start of the interview, the interviewer should again explain (albeit succinctly) the goals of the interview, how it might be used, how the interview will be conducted, and that the transcript will be given to the interviewee to review, edit and approve.** No surprises. No “gotcha” moments. Please keep in mind the higher goals of the interview — education, community enhancement, bridge-building, etc. and that to achieve those higher goals, the truth is being asked for.
9. **Air time is to be shared. That is, the goal is to hear the thoughts or stories from the interviewee, not the interviewer.** Simplify questions. Make them concise but clear. Open-ended, not yes/no. Very quickly, the interviewee will pick up on the outlook of the interviewer. If he or she detects a closed or biased mind, the interviewee may well shut down or say only what he or she thinks the interviewer wants to hear.
10. **Candor is critical if a useful history is to be documented.** If you think the interviewee might be fishing for pleasing answers, be sure to explain the purposes of the project and how they can contribute to it.
11. **You, the interviewer, should set the tone for the interview.** It is often helpful to be able to see the place, people, or event that serves as the subject of the interview, so you can both look at the same thing. If it is not possible to be on site, then show pictures and ask the interviewee to describe what he or she sees and why that scene is important and who the persons are. Be sure the video camera, if one is used, documents the images.
12. **Relax. Be comfortable.** We all read each other’s body language, and the interviewee is watching yours.



13. **During the interview, respect silences.** Avoid jumping in to fill them in. Let the interviewee pause and reflect if he or she wishes.
14. **If the interviewee chooses not to answer a question, move on to the next.** Maybe re-phrase that question later, while remembering that the purpose is not to create "gotcha" moments but to build trust, respect, and community and to the extent possible, to get at the truth.
15. **Honor the flow of the conversation because that builds rapport between you and the interviewee.** If the person goes off, say, on religion or politics, yet your topic is a place, don't jerk the person back to the topic at hand, but find ways to respectfully shepherd the person back to the topic.
16. **Be cognizant of time.** It flies.
17. **Find ways to stick to your questions** – remember that an interview can last only so long.
18. **Be sure to ask the interviewee if there are questions they'd like for you to ask and to leave time for them.**
19. **The interviewee may become emotional, especially if memories are painful, so respect those emotions, and listen and empathize, but remain professional.** If the person wishes to cut that emotional segment, assure him or her that that it is possible, and once transcribed, they can look the transcription over and cut it if they choose. No one should feel embarrassed or shamed by their interview and participation in the project. Although this may sound as if you may miss something in the short term, in the long term you may find tactful and respectful ways to bring it forth in another venue.
20. **Be careful about background noises, especially ones we tune out,** like a television or radio in the adjacent room, the whine of a refrigerator, or a car or an airplane passing by. If you think the noise has "stepped on" the audio, tactfully ask the interviewee to repeat.



21. Ask the person to repeat your question in their answer since your question may well be deleted in the final version, especially if videoed. For example, “Could you describe your grandparents’ house?” Not, “It was a ...” but “My grandparents’ house was ...” The viewer or listener will not know what “It” refers to.

22. Ask someone to take photographs during the interview so you'll have photo-documentation of the process for the archives, promotion of the project, education and outreach. Send photos to the interviewee as a thank you.

23. Be sure to get a photograph of you and the interviewee and to send that to the interviewee with your thank you note.

24. When the interview is completed, have it transcribed by a person or by a software program such as [Otter.ai](#) – be sure to review the transcription so that the text is clear. In your follow-up thank you to interviewees, include a copy for them to review, edit, approve, and return to you.

25. Be sure to give the interviewee a copy of the audio or video interview for their own history records.

26. By treating everyone with respect and by finding ways to make it fun for the interviewees, you achieve important goals: to create trust and interest in the project, to document a historic place from multiple points of view, to add to the archives, to produce evidence for diverse programs and audiences, and to build community.

READY TO EDIT THE TRANSCRIPT OF YOUR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW?

The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill offers a detailed handout that will walk you through the process. <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/oral-history/>