



## Oral Histories Online: the Human Perspective of Historic Boston

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### **Abstract:**

*The content of this paper is divided into three parts. The first discusses the essential partnerships that were developed between the Boston Public Library (BPL) and its Center for Neighborhood History (CNH) with universities, historical societies, and other local organizations. Particular emphasis is placed on each organization's contribution to the project and the foreseeable impact their work will have on future audiovisual archival projects. A second part examines the technologies used for the purpose of collecting and disseminating family and local history. Finally, we examine the impact non-textual archival techniques can have on the general public. Examples of oral histories and visual stories collected by the CNH demonstrate how audiovisual narratives can empower communities, transcend generations, and provide researchers with valuable sources of historical information.*

### **Introduction**

Early civilizations used the oral tradition to transmit their history from one generation to the next by systematically passing down folklore, stories and personal memories. With the invention of writing systems, written chronicles were recorded to preserve knowledge, first by hand and most recently using machine

generated text. While recording methods have changed over time, the essential human impulse to preserve an enduring historical record has remained constant.

Advances in the printing process and later in computer technology (including word processing and e-mail), have made writing the most dominant form for recording and disseminating information. The written word greatly facilitates information flow, but it cannot fully convey the physical characteristics, personal background or human involvement of the writer. By using audiovisual technology to record and preserve oral histories — the personal memories and histories of those who experienced historical eras or events — written texts may be supplemented, creating a richer record of human history.

Recent advances in digital media recording and information processing technology have made possible the creation, storage and widespread dissemination of oral histories. This paper will explore how collaboration and technology allow libraries to elevate the human story to a greater level of historical significance.

## **The Center for Neighborhood History**

The term “neighborhood” can have different meanings in different cultures. Generally, a neighborhood is a geographically-defined area, usually located within a larger area, which constitutes a group of people who have some degree of familiarity with each other, or who identify with each other as members of a community. Neighborhoods in the United States often have historic roots of distinct ethnic character since immigrants tended to settle in clusters defined by language, country of origin or cultural similarities. Over time these distinctions softened with the influx of new groups and continued immigration. Today Boston’s 21 neighborhoods are populated by multi-ethnic, multi-lingual groups of people living within geographically defined boundaries. While each neighborhood has retained a distinct personality, the individual communities no longer share the common language, ethnicity and culture which once united them. In this context, a sense of shared neighborhood history can create a feeling of community for individuals of diverse backgrounds.

Driven by the idea that personalized history can help connect people with their neighbors and their communities, the Center for Neighborhood History is an online archive comprised of three major components: digitized photographs, oral histories, and maps. The CNH web site provides residents, school children, college students, visitors, businesses, and long time-residents with the opportunity to learn about the history of the various Boston neighborhoods through integrated forms of digital media. Users are able to identify neighborhood parcels on a map, see images of each parcel via digitized photographs, and gain an in-depth knowledge about the area through oral history videos of local residents.

The Center for Neighborhood History allows static information captured in the pixels of a photograph or trapped within the boundaries of a neighborhood map parcel to come alive through the voices of the people that are living and creating history today.

## **Project Background**

The growth of the Center has been as complex as the growth of Boston's neighborhoods. The Center has been shaped by individuals and driven by timely events and complementary partnerships.

### **Digital Photographs and the Boston Public Library**

Founded in 1848, the Boston Public Library was the first large free municipal library in the United States. As a hybrid public-research library, it is unique: in addition to the circulating collection and services available through the Central Library and 27 branches throughout the City of Boston, the BPL boasts over 1.2 million rare books and manuscripts, and a wealth of maps, musical scores, prints and historic photographs.

In 1999, the Boston Public Library received a grant from the Carnegie Foundation to organize and describe neighborhood history materials in seven branch libraries. Under this grant, the BPL began to select, index, and digitize neighborhood photographs. The range and significance of the photographs was extensive and included images of parades, politicians, churches, monuments, famous buildings and residential houses, dating from the late 1800s onwards.

Despite the richness of the corpus, the photographs still lacked an interactive dimension in their online presentation. Although images capture historic events and are often capable of conjuring up personal feelings and memories, the Library raised the questions, "How can we bring these photographs to life? How can we let our audience interact with these pictures?"

The BPL addressed these questions by partnering with another local institution, the Boston Red Sox major league baseball team. Generations of Bostonians have been loyal supporters of the City's beloved baseball champions; historic Red Sox photos are in high demand by Library users. Responding to this demand, the Library digitized a large collection of Red Sox materials and displayed them, not only online but also at Fenway Park, the City's baseball stadium and home to the team. Retired Red Sox players were on hand to tell stories to stadium visitors. The event was a popular success; the BPL witnessed the power of personal narrative and began to take note of its potential.

### **Oral Histories and Harvard University**

During the same period, across the river in Cambridge Massachusetts, Harvard University was looking to strengthen its relationship with a neighboring Boston community, Allston/Brighton. Harvard was in the planning phase of a university-wide expansion into that neighborhood, and the University understood that--to succeed--it had to preserve the neighborhood's unique history, strengthen relationships with community members, and learn about the area hosting their new campus.

After consulting with local community organizations, Harvard decided to fund an oral history project proposed by a seasoned local oral historian, Dr. William Marchione. John-David Perry, then a student at Harvard, would be engaged as a research fellow to work with Dr. Marchione and the Allston/Brighton Historical Society. Perry was charged with recording and disseminating the individual and collective stories of the Allston/Brighton community. Thus, the Allston/Brighton Oral History Center was created and emerged as a solution to Harvard's dilemma.

The Boston Public Library and Harvard University

By 2003, the Library and Harvard realized that they shared a common mission: to connect individuals with information and to use that information to develop relationships between people and neighborhoods. BPL held the historic collections; Harvard was committed to funding the Oral History Center. The two institutions joined forces and formed the Center for Neighborhood History to bring these resources together for mutual benefit.

Within the Center for Neighborhood History framework, personal narratives brought the BPL'S photographs to life, and the stories of Allston/Brighton residents coupled with the digitized photographs enabled Harvard University to better understand the Allston Brighton community and its residents.

### *Map Junction and the Center for Neighborhood History*

Local entrepreneur Bill Warner became involved in the Center through his interest in maps. Warner, developer of the first digital nonlinear editing system, the Avid/1 Media Composer ® was a pioneer in video editing technology and had developed a number of other high-tech ventures, including Wildfire, a voice-recognition telephony system. In 2002 he came up with the idea of creating an open source project that would allow users to combine, arrange, compare, download, publish, store and share maps. Warner started the project and called it Map Junction; eventually he contacted the Library to inquire about access to images of historic maps for the project.

Immediately recognizing an opportunity to expand the scope of the Neighborhood History project with digitized maps, the Library and Harvard invited Warner to participate in the Center. Thus the third significant partnership evolved,

with Warner contributing his technology expertise, funding and programming staff to create an archive of digitized historic maps of Boston neighborhoods.

Currently the Center for Neighborhood History web site, through a link to Map Junction, allows users to view maps of Boston neighborhoods at intervals of about 5-10 years, beginning with maps dating from the 1880's. Historians and genealogists can trace not only the evolution of the City, by observing the appearance of new buildings and houses in subsequent maps, but also the ownership of each real estate parcel, as the names of building owners appear in these historic maps.

## **Technological Advancements**

Technology can significantly affect the impact that personal stories will have on collective memory by dramatically improving the methods for recording and distributing oral history data. The challenge inherent in making oral histories accessible is directly related to the process used to record and disseminate their content. Until recently, most oral histories were either transcribed, stored on audio cassette, or both. Although these techniques are adequate for preservation, neither method allows for effective information retrieval. With an accurate transcription a reader can identify and extract what he or she feels subjectively to be the most applicable bits of information. Unfortunately, this requires access to the document and the ability to read the written text. Readers are forced to infer the importance of the story from the meaning of the written word and not from the emotion and character of the narration.

A tape recording preserves the nuances of the oration, and provides the listener with an opportunity to create his or her own transcription. However, these formats are not easy to disseminate widely and are largely utilized by a very small, localized audience. Audiovisual recordings of oral histories preserve the words, nuances, and characteristics of the subject, but were historically difficult to record and distribute on a large scale, until recently, due to the expense of recording equipment and the lack of a viable distribution medium. Advances in video recording technology and the worldwide growth of the internet have made possible easier, cheaper recording and distribution methods.

The internet makes oral histories universally accessible and provides users with the ability to choose the medium through which they retrieve the information. Oral histories recorded in audio, video and text may be distributed online and so provide a method for audiences to learn about far-removed cultures and peoples. This advancement assures that the stories of our forebears will no longer be left languishing on the back shelves of universities or library storage rooms. Instead, these stories will be at the fingertips of internet users worldwide.

## **Methodology**

At the beginning of the project, historic photographs from each of the Boston neighborhoods were selected by curators, historians, project members and librarians at the Boston Public Library. Photographs were scanned at a minimum of 300 d.p.i. using a desktop scanner; a preservation copy was stored in .tif format. Jpeg derivatives were created for online distribution. Their associated metadata was stored in a Microsoft Access database which linked to the derivative images on a local server. The database is searchable by neighborhood, format, subject and keyword.

With the launch of the Allston/Brighton Oral History Center, John Perry interviewed Allston/Brighton residents, recording the sessions using a handheld Sony video camera. The camera was a consumer product, not a professional-quality device. Videos were stored in Microsoft media player digital format for preservation purposes. Then the files were converted to Flash for online access, using freely available open-source software called Riva FLV Encoder. The decision was made to convert the files to Flash for a few reasons. First, it was cheap. The encoding software is free. In addition, the Library did not have to purchase streaming license for one or more of the traditionally used media players like RealPlayer or Microsoft Media Player. Finally, Flash is platform independent and will play in any web browser, improving users' access to the files.

Early in the project BPL had problems with the Access database, which was prone to crashing. The database was converted from Access to SQL server to create a more robust site. The database search is now faster, performance is greater and generally more reliable and dependable.

The Center is planning a site redesign for mid- to end-2007. Currently, users can search oral history videos, text and image files through one interface. Maps are accessed separately. The redesign will fully integrate digitized maps into the search, allowing users to browse the maps to find images and videos associated with specific geographic locations.

## **Impact of Oral Histories**

The success of the Center for Neighborhood History has validated the Center's basic founding principle: people want to participate in the historical documentation process, and benefit from doing so. During the Center's creation, there was a tremendous outpouring of public support. People of different ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds signed up to share their stories. For many of these individuals, this was the first opportunity to participate in the historical documentation process. Whether they spoke of raising a family during the great depression, listening to a 1940 radio broadcast, or describing neighborhood changes over a span of ninety years, project participants evoked their community's character by sharing their memories. Boston has a much-

documented history, but this project was the first to allow city residents to document it in their own words, expressions, gestures and accents.

As interviews progressed, a sense of empowerment began to emerge throughout the neighborhoods. Interviewees were eager to personalize and illuminate the historical events that defined their lives; they emerged with a sense of ownership about their neighborhood history.

Besides creating a sense of empowerment, the oral history program validated the importance of each individual's narrative. Many people were shocked that their experiences would be of interest to others. Often interviewees began by saying, "I don't know what I can tell you, nothing much exciting has happened to me." However, after a few minutes of reminiscing about their childhood, fighting in World War II, or raising a family during the Great Depression, they soon realized that their lives were anything but ordinary. Interviewees began to view their memories as valuable pieces of information that could educate future generations. Most importantly, they saw how their collective voices could help document a place and a moment in history.

## **Conclusion**

On June 15<sup>th</sup> 2006 Harvard University, the Boston Public Library, and the City of Boston gathered at the Harvard Business School to celebrate the launch of the Center. In one evening, neighbors, community organizations and project members from the University and the Library united to hear the personal stories of families and friends from the Allston/Brighton neighborhood. Harvard administrators listened attentively as Boston residents described the former Fiorentino family farm, now the site of the Harvard Business School. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino shared recollections of growing up in Boston while former Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers shared his memories of the City from his student years.

The highlight of the event was the screening of a documentary video produced by John D. Perry called *A Neighborhood Built on Character: the Story of Allston Brighton*. The video tells the story of the Allston/Brighton neighborhood, using excerpts from many of the oral history video interviews and historical photographs digitized during the creation of the Center for Neighborhood History. The response of the audience to the video was revealing: there were gasps and giggles as audience members saw themselves on the screen; there were murmurs of appreciation as digitized images of Boston history appeared, and moments of silence as narratives told of difficult times. The curtain closed on a very diverse audience united, at least temporarily, by a feeling of community and pride in their mutual association.

Low-cost, easily accessible technologies have allowed libraries to create and preserve oral histories for their local history collections, and to distribute them for

worldwide access via the Internet. Oral histories personalize information, and in doing so connect people with history and with one another. The Center for Neighborhood History is capable of disseminating information throughout cultures and transcending generations. The community empowerment and sense of personal validation that emerged through the Center for Neighborhood History project are testimony to the power of the personal narrative in creating community and documenting history.