



## ORAL HISTORY GUIDE FOR ACRP PARTICIPANTS

Greetings ACRP participants!

This guide is here to help you prepare for the oral history recordings. We hope these recordings will provide you with the opportunity to reflect upon the ACRP pilgrimage and the ACRP events throughout the past year. Additionally, we hope these recordings will provide you with the opportunity to retell memories from your own lives and how they relate to the ACRP (example: What important people/events from your life have shaped your values and ethics?; or, Can you describe your personal history with Alexandria). And lastly, we hope these recordings will provide you with the opportunity to consider the future, such as what changes do you want to see in Alexandria, and most importantly, how can we best honor the lives of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. Ultimately, we hope these recordings will leave behind an archive of memories and stories for future Alexandrians who can learn more about the transformative work that each of you and the ACRP have done!

**When it comes to the logistics of the recording, there are a couple of things that you should consider.** First, your recording will be 40 minutes long (an hour total with set-up and paperwork) and it will be an audio recording (not a video recording). **You can decide to either conduct your recording in pairs, or by yourself.** If you decide to be in a pair, you can either select your partner, or we can randomly select a partner for you. **For those in pairs, you will be in conversation with one another, asking and answering each other's questions, which you will decide upon before the recording by filling out the question list that is located at the end of this packet.** The manager of the Oral History Center, Francesco De Salvatore, will be present for these interviews in order to operate the audio equipment and may also ask a couple of questions throughout your conversation. **Please note that if you select to do the recording by yourself, Francesco De Salvatore will be interviewing you with questions that you have created beforehand by filling out the question list that is located at the end of this packet.** All the recordings can either take place at Lloyd House (220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314), or at a location that is more convenient for you.

As you read through this guide, please consider that for these recordings **you will both be an interviewer and a storyteller**, so all of these tips will be helpful for you, as you prepare for the recording. Additionally, we recommend that you listen to examples of recordings that exhibit great interviewing and vivid storytelling strategies. Please listen to both examples below:

- **Oral History about Miss Devine (an example of vivid storytelling)**
  - o <https://storycorps.org/stories/james-ransom-and-cherie-johnson/>
- **Oral History with Priya Morganstern, Ken Morganstern, and Bhavani Jaroff (an example of great interviewing)**
  - o <https://storycorps.org/stories/ken-morganstern-priya-morganstern-and-bhavani-jaroff/>

To sign-up for a recording, please email Francesco De Salvatore at [francesco.desalvator@alexandriava.gov](mailto:francesco.desalvator@alexandriava.gov), or call at 703.946.2687.

And please feel free to reach out with any questions/concerns about anything in this guide.

We look forward to hearing from you soon!



## WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

An oral history is a recorded, spoken, or signed interview that centers the narrator's perspectives, experiences, agency, and authority from the project design and recorded conversation to preservation and uses of the interview. Oral history is more than just an interview; it is an entire process that places people's experiences within a larger social and historical context, captures recollections about the past filtered through the lens of a changing personal and social context, and it centers the creation of a dynamic, collaborative relationship between the interviewer and narrator.

The purpose of oral history is to create:

- ***A Process of Creating Shared Authority***<sup>1</sup>
  - Shared authority means to both decenter knowledge and weave various forms of knowledge into a larger narrative where different voices, experiences, beliefs, and practices, converge.
- ***A Process of Developing Radical Empathy***
  - Radical empathy encourages each of us to see the world from another's perspective, however, it also asks us to create change. This term is borrowed from Terri E. Givens, who explains that radical empathy “encourages each of us to not only understand the feelings of others, but also to be motivated to create the change that will allow all of us to benefit from economic prosperity and develop the social relationships that are beneficial to our emotional wellbeing.”<sup>2</sup> Radical empathy emphasizes the potential of creating an awareness about how, as the black abolitionist Frances Ellen Watkins once said, “we are all bound up together.”<sup>3</sup> Oral history that is rooted in radical empathy means that it is a process of re-forging connections within our communities, and working together to create a community that includes and benefits everyone.
- ***A Relational Process***
  - Oral history is a relational process that can connect, or continue to connect individuals and communities. In various cultures, storytelling has served as a crucial glue for the social and political fabric of a community. Consequently, the “goal” of oral history is more about the process of developing relations above anything else.
- ***A Process of Dreaming and Reflecting***
  - Oral histories not only reveal what happened, but also what could have happened. An oral history interview provides a narrator the opportunity to reinterpret and recast actions and experiences. As oral historian, Alessandro Portelli once said, “oral history tells us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.”<sup>4</sup> Oral history interviews can provide narrators the opportunity to hope, imagine, consider, emote, and even regret.

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Terri Givens, *Radical Empathy: Finding a Path to Bridging Racial Divides* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021), p.20.

<sup>3</sup> Frances Ellen Watkins, “We Are All Bound Together,” *Eleventh National Women's Rights Convention* (1866).

<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different?,” *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Parks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 67.



## ORAL HISTORY BEST PRACTICES

- ***Create a list of questions/topics.***
  - You and your partner should create a list of questions before the recording. However, please remember that this list is a living document! Check-in with your partner at any time before the recording if you would like to add questions/change anything.
- ***Ask open-ended questions.***
  - An excellent open-ended question is when someone is provided the space to share what is most important and true to them. For example, open ended questions usually begin with: “Tell me about...” or “What was it like when...” In an interview you want to avoid “leading questions,” which usually point your partner in a certain direction. For example, leading questions can be answered with “yes” or “no,” and/or can sometimes include descriptions/answers that your partner has not given yet.
- ***Ask follow-up questions***
  - Be prepared to ask follow-ups or diverge from your question list if you’re curious about something. If you’d like to hear more, try “And then what happened?” or “How did that make you feel?” or “What were you thinking in that moment?”
- ***Paint a story through words.***
  - You’re encouraged to over-describe a story/memory. Include specific details like the names of people, streets, schools, addresses, business, etc. Additionally, attempt to describe your story/memory through the 5 senses. What did things look like? What color were they? Were there any smells that come to mind? If related, do you remember the feeling of certain textures, or how did things taste? Remember you are the only one that has experienced your memory/story through your perspective, so do all that you can to paint us a story that is vivid and rich with detail!
- ***Provide Context.***
  - Keep in mind that future listeners may not be familiar with the specific people and places you mention. Set up context where needed with questions like “Who was Uncle Steve?” and “Why was he such an influence on you?”
- ***Ease into the interview.***
  - Even though you and your partner have been preparing for this interview beforehand, it is still important to warm-up the conversation before discussing more in-depth memories or stories. When you start the interview try to talk about more general things

at first and then ease into more of the in-depth memories and stories. In other words, support your partner in stretching their storytelling muscles!

- ***Welcome the silence.***
  - Don't feel a need to fill every single minute of the recording. There will be times when you or your partner may need to pause and process what was just said/asked. Welcome the silence and be patient with the conversation! Let silence stretch as long as it needs, but if you or your partner are struggling to put something into words, it's also okay to gently prompt them at a certain point.
  
- ***Avoid interrupting the narrator.***
  - Try your best to stay out of your partner's way. This is one of the most important aspects of being an interviewer. Provide your partner as much space as possible to answer the questions.
  
- ***Observe body language.***
  - In addition to what your partner is saying, pay attention to their body language throughout the interview. Your partner's body language can sometimes tell you a lot about how they are feeling in the moment. For example, if they seem tense and/or uncomfortable this should compel you to figure out a different strategy in the interview and/or move onto another question/topic.
  
- ***Active listening.***
  - There are various ways in which one can actively listen. Typically nods or small noises like "yeah" or "mhm" can indicate to your partner that you are really engaging with their story. Active listening can help to build trust within a conversation, thereby allowing the speaker to communicate more easily, openly and honestly.
  
- ***Don't be afraid to deviate.***
  - It's a good idea to make a list of questions ahead of time, but it's also important to be willing to abandon the plan if the need arises. Be flexible—let the interview flow and develop organically.
  
- ***Be a human first and an interviewer second.***
  - Remember: you are working with real, living people! Do not be afraid to empathize, sympathize, console, or generally be emotionally vulnerable and present. If your partner becomes emotional, let them feel what they need to feel and ask them what they need in that moment.



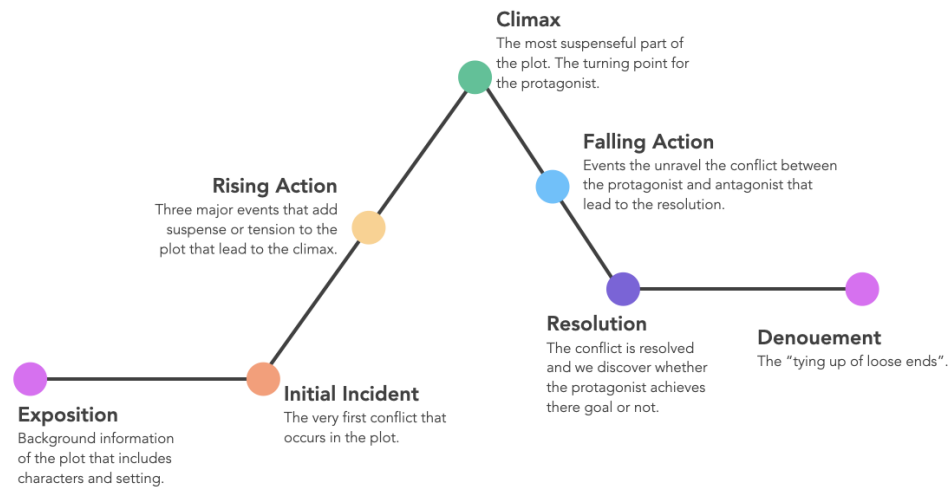
## OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS VS LEADING/CLOSED QUESTIONS

Leading/Closed Questions	Open-Ended Questions
“Were you born in Old Town?”	<b>“Can you describe</b> the neighborhood you grew up in?”
“Did you like your friends?”	<b>“Tell me</b> about your friends?”
“That must have scary, right?”	<b>“What did it feel like</b> in that moment?”
“It sounds like you’ve described everything from your childhood.”	<b>“Is there anything else that you would like to share about</b> your childhood?”
“I imagine that must have happened on the waterfront?”	<b>“Where did</b> this occur?”
“It must have had a large impact on you?”	<b>“How did</b> this event affect you?”
Can you describe your neighborhood? And tell me about your friends? And where did you go to school?	<b>Ask one question at a time.</b>
“It sounds like that was Mr. Hewitt?”	<b>“Who</b> was the teacher that taught you that lesson?”
“You seem sad right now.”	<b>“How are you feeling right now,</b> as you retell this memory?”
“You’re forgetting to mention dates and people’s names.”	<b>“When</b> did this memory occur?”



## STORYTELLING BEST PRACTICES

- *When applicable, use elements of a literary story arc to organize the retelling of your memory/story.*



- *When applicable, retell your story/memory through the five senses.*
  - **Sight**
    - Examples: Describe the colors; What did your home look like?; What did your neighborhood look like?; What did the person you are describing look like?
  - **Sounds**
    - Examples: What sounds were in your home growing up?; What was the background noise on the street?; Can you describe what the music sounded like during the show?
  - **Taste**
    - Examples: What did your mother's soup taste like?; What did your favorite flavor of ice cream taste like?
  - **Touch**
    - Examples: What did your favorite couch at your childhood home feel like?; What did your mother's hands feel like?
  - **Smell**
    - Examples: What did it smell like in Alexandria when there was more industry; What was the smell of the cafeteria at your school?;

- ***Include names and dates.***
  - Example: The neighborhood snowball fights occurred in December of 1983. And Glen Howard and Mark Hewitt were there giving me a hard time!
  
- ***Include relevant contextual information.***
  - Examples: What political events surrounded your memory/story?; What cultural events surrounded your memory/story?; Were there any other personal issues/events surrounding the memory/story?
  - As you reflect on it many years later, it might be helpful to also answer the questions above for the present day and how they might be affecting how you are currently recalling the memory/story.
  
- ***Reflect on how you felt during that moment and how you currently feel, as you retell the story/memory.***
  - As you reflect on how you felt during the memory/story, attempt to further describe those emotions.
    - Example: I felt annoyed during that moment. It felt like I was endlessly hearing nails on a chalk board.
  - Take time to also express how you feel in the current moment as you retell the memory/story. Perhaps it is different from when the memory/story occurred. If so, why is this the case? And what are these new emotions that you are feeling?
  
- ***Take your time retelling your memory/story***
  - This is your time, so do not feel pressured to retell your memory/story quickly. The more time you take, the more likely you are going to be able to paint a full picture of your memories.
  
- ***Use your voice and your words.***
  - Above all else, you are the best storyteller of your memories. Trust your voice and your words!



# ACRP GREAT QUESTIONS

## ACRP Specific Events

- Can you describe the ACRP events that you attended?
- Can you describe your favorite memories from the ACRP events that you attended?
- Can you describe what was challenging for you while attending the ACRP events?
- Can you describe what was surprising for you while attending the ACRP events?
- If applicable, can you describe how you were involved in organizing the ACRP events?
- Can you describe how the ACRP events that you attended made you feel?
- What did you learn from the ACRP events that you attended?
- Can you explain why you chose to attend the ACRP events?
- If applicable, can you explain how the ACRP events have shaped your relationship with other residents of Alexandria?

## ACRP Pilgrimage Questions

- Can you explain why you chose to attend the pilgrimage?
- Can you describe your favorite memories from the ACRP pilgrimage?
- Can you describe challenging moments from the ACRP pilgrimage?
- What did you learn from the ACRP pilgrimage?
- What was something that surprised you from the ACRP pilgrimage?
- Can you explain why you think it was important for Alexandrians to attend this pilgrimage?
- If applicable, can you describe how you were involved in organizing the pilgrimage?
- If applicable, can you explain how the ACRP pilgrimage have shaped your relationship with other residents of Alexandria?

## General Questions

- Can you describe your personal history in Alexandria?
- Can you describe the important individuals and moments in your life that have shaped your understanding of racism and oppression?
- Can you describe the important individuals and moments in your life that have shaped your values and politics?
- How has the ACRP affected how you understand the past, present, and future of Alexandria?
- In your opinion, what is missing and/or incorrect in the mainstream, historical narrative about Alexandria?
- In your opinion, how can you, the residents of Alexandria, and the city government best honor the lives of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas?
- What changes do you want to see in the city of Alexandria when it comes to dealing with institutional racism?
- In your opinion, what should be the ACRP's next steps?





## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/LIST OF TOPICS

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