

# *The Heritage Education Journal*

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past or present people and cultures*

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**Table of Contents**  
*The Heritage Education Journal*  
Volume 1, Number 1  
September 2022

**Editor's Corner**

Introducing *The Heritage Education Journal* (THEJ)

**Articles**

Heritage Education and Oral History

*Barbara Sommer*

Laboratories as Heritage Sites: Linking Ethics, Research and Education

*Rachel Watkins*

A Cultural History of Archaeological Education

*Carol J. Ellick*

When Heritage Meets Education: Reflections on Past and Contemporary Policy in Flanders

*Joris Van Doorselaere*

Teaching and Learning About Cultural Heritage Within Archaeology in Australia

*Georgia L. Stannard, Keir Strickland, and Melissa Marshall*

Conceptualizing Heritage Education in Contemporary Japan

*Mayumi Okada and Amanda Gomes*

Why Does Archaeology Matter? Archaeology Across Different Countries and Teaching Approaches

*Laura Arias-Ferrer, Alejandro Egea-Vivancos, A. Gwynn Henderson, Linda S. Levstik, Christian Mathis, Helena Pinto, and M. Jay Stottman*

**Forum**

A Conversation on Heritage, Archaeology, and Education in the United States

*Eleanor M. King, A. Gwynn Henderson, and Jeanne M. Moe, with comments by Sara Chavarría, Walter Fleming, Ayana Omilade Flewellen, Alexandra Jones, Robert Kelly, Allison K. McLeod, Sarah L. Miller, Teresa Moyer, Elizabeth Reetz, and Jack Rossen*

## Heritage Education and Oral History

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### Abstract

Heritage education and oral history may be seen in some ways as growing up together. Both began to take on a public profile in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and both focus on understanding community and the roles of individuals in a community. Both disciplines use first-person information to help document and interpret history and culture in a community; both work across disciplines to help define place and the past; and each is guided by a set of ethics and standards in their contacts with and work in the community. Oral history, with its focus on documenting first-person information is a teaching tool that can help add insight when working with material culture and the built environment. In this article, we'll review information that guides the work of oral historians and look at opportunities for using oral history in heritage education.



**Figure1:** Many educators incorporate heritage education and oral history into History Day activities. In this photo, a student interviews an Evergreen Protective Association volunteer at the Greater Rosemount, Maryland, History Day, September 25, 2010. The Evergreen Protective Association, founded in 1951, is a community organization supporting connections between neighbors and maintenance of standards for the National Register of Historic Places-listed Evergreen neighborhood in the Greater Rosemount area of western Baltimore, Maryland. Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Evergreen\\_Protective\\_Association\\_volunteer\\_recording\\_an\\_oral\\_history\\_at\\_Greater\\_Rosemont\\_History\\_Day\\_\(5073880352\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Evergreen_Protective_Association_volunteer_recording_an_oral_history_at_Greater_Rosemont_History_Day_(5073880352).jpg)

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## **Heritage Education in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Heritage education, described in “Heritage Education in the Social Studies” (Hunter 1988) as “an approach to teaching and learning about history and culture that uses information available from the material culture and the human and built environments as primary instructional resources,” with its emphasis on studying the built environment as a way of helping students understand history, grew out of the historic preservation movement of the 1960s. It was spurred on by passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which helped put a spotlight on learning about, identifying, and protecting the unique historical resources throughout the country. Similar movements developed in other countries as formal interest in the field of historic preservation and its application in the classroom grew globally. The goal was to help people learn about, understand, and care for the places they call home.

A variety of organizations and programs have developed from this base. Among them, The National Council for Preservation Education (NCPE) was founded in 1978 to foster awareness of shared architectural, historical, cultural, and environmental heritage through education. Initiatives include serving as a clearinghouse for preservation education programs and providing a syllabus bank containing examples of syllabi from various programs (<https://www.ncpe.us/>). European Heritage Days takes students out of the classroom to explore culture and heritage in their communities (<https://www.europeanheritagedays.com/>). The UNESCO World Heritage Education Programme, begun in 1994, also offers students an opportunity to become involved in protection of common culture and natural heritage (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/wheducation/>).

Branches of the United States government that focus on the humanities, historic preservation, folklife, and the sense of place and culture also have developed heritage education programs with lesson plans designed for use in classrooms. Among them are the U.S. National Park Service “Teaching with Historic Places” project that offers lesson plans, history lessons, and research guides designed to help students learn about the diverse and unique histories of place (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/teachingwithhistoricplaces/index.htm>). The Library of Congress American Folklife Center provides information on “Heritage Projects and Place-Based Education” (<https://www.loc.gov/folklife/edresources/ed-heritage.html>) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) through its EDSITEment! project offers the “Teacher’s Guide: Investigating Local History” including lesson plans, teacher’s guides, and media resources (<https://edsitement.neh.gov/teachers-guides/investigating-local-history>). Each of these programs offers examples of guidelines and suggestions for using education to help understand place and to learn about the importance of preservation as part of this process.

## **Oral History in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Oral history, defined by Sommer and Quinlan in *The Oral History Manual* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2018:1), as “primary source material created in an interview setting with a witness to or a participant in an event or way of life for the purpose of preserving the information and making it available to others.” can bring a hands-on, first-person option to the study of place and

preservation. As with heritage education, during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the practice of oral history has grown in complexity and depth.

The formal practice of oral history began in the 1940s and, by the 1960s, its use had begun to spread throughout museums and academic institutions. In 1966, this led to the founding of the Oral History Association (OHA - <https://www.oralhistory.org/>), the national association for those interested in oral history. Its statement of “OHA Principles and Best Practices” (<https://www.oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/>) serves as a guide for national and international audiences, providing information about ethics, interviewing best practices, and archiving, among other topics. The *Oral History Review*, the journal of the Oral History Association, keeps members up-to-date on advances in theory and practice.

The history of oral history is well documented in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, Donald A. Ritchie, ed. (2011) and the *Handbook of Oral History*, Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds. (2006). Essays in the publications trace the evolution of oral history from its somewhat rarified beginnings to its more democratized use across many disciplines and in many communities today. The ongoing work of oral historians along with careful and intensive study in both academic and community settings has led to advances in understanding and use of memory, ethical and legal standards, project planning and development, recording equipment, details of interviewing techniques, understanding and documenting interview context, stewardship involving curating and archiving oral histories, and analyzing and use of interview information. It also has led to advances in understanding issues related to diversity and the histories of people with many different backgrounds and ways of life.

The practice of oral history in communities received strong support in 2013 with the publication of the *Community Oral History Toolkit*, a five-volume set with a focus on the practice of oral history outside of formal academic settings. Its publication has helped oral historians continue to recognize the importance of community-based work. Another 21<sup>st</sup> century publication, the third edition of Sommer and Quinlan’s *The Oral History Manual*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (2018) offers a one-volume guide to the practice of oral history. In the third edition, the authors introduce a recommended series of steps for recording an interview and emphasize the importance of stewardship – ongoing care for oral histories. Donald A. Ritchie’s *Doing Oral History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (2015) is a long-time staple on the list of oral history publications.

## **Oral History in Education**

As the use of oral history has expanded, it also has developed focus areas for specialized study. One of the most active is the use of oral history in education, a focus that can benefit heritage education classrooms. Projects involving the study of history and culture through study of buildings and the built environment – “if these walls could talk,” streetscapes, parks and neighborhoods and urban development, material culture, human geography; all are examples that can benefit from use of oral history and the scholarship that has come out of the education focus area.

Oral history publications on education, though they differ in applications and use, have common threads that represent oral history practice and standards. For purposes of application to heritage education, the common threads are:

- **Planning**  
Planning helps coordinate oral history steps. Ranging from deciding on project focus to determining how much class time to give to the project, who to interview and what questions to ask, what type of equipment to use, to long-term plans for the interviews and classroom evaluation needs, this step pulls a project together. It may be incorporated into the classroom curriculum, offering students an opportunity to think more deeply about place and to help identify questions that will expand their understanding of it. This step helps put informed decisions in place for the most effective use of oral history in the classroom.
- The interview with its spoken history is the centerpiece of the practice of oral history. When made part of the curriculum, it offers students an opportunity to hear history first-hand. Its use in heritage education can help students learn about place, their communities, from residents willing to pass down this knowledge. Information in the interviews can be used as primary sources to help students better understand the built environment and can lead to projects, perhaps coordinating with local historians or historical organizations, to produce photo exhibits, walking tours, or other heritage education place-based activities.
- Evaluation and stewardship are the last steps. Evaluation helps review the results and stewardship helps answer questions about what to do with the recorded interviews. Stewardship can involve coordinating with the school library, the public library, or a local historical organization in preserving the interviews and the unique, first-person information they contain.

When looking for information about use of oral history in the classroom, it is helpful to keep these points in mind.

There are a number of oral history education publications that provide in-depth information and explanations of these points. Leading the way in defining and discussing opportunities for use of oral history in the classroom, authors and editors Barry A. Lanman and Laura M. Wendling, in their publication, *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education* (2006) have collected essays from oral history educators discussing philosophies, strategies, application of oral history guidelines and standards, and research. As they write in the Introduction to the book, “Students of the twenty-first century are now taught in accordance with state and national standards, interactive instruction, student-driven research, and authentic assessments. The outside world is the classroom through actual investigation as well as virtual exploration via the computer, interactive software, the Internet. ... Enter the dawn of the new age of instruction” (xviii). With this statement, Lanman and Wendling, emphasize bringing the outside world into the classroom and introducing updated uses of oral history that fit well with the goals and purposes of heritage education.

Within this context, additional recent publications offer examples of approaches by oral historians when working with a sense of place. In 2015, Nancy Mackay launched her series, *Practicing Oral History* (<https://www.routledge.com/Practicing-Oral-History/book-series/POHLCP>). It focuses on looking critically and carefully at the practice of oral history and how its primary source information can be effectively used to help us understand the past. Christine K. Lemly's *Practicing Critical Oral History: Connecting School and Community* (2018) is an excellent source for heritage education. It offers educators guidance and classroom examples in using oral history to help put the stories of people from marginalized communities into the center of the curriculum. The author provides sample activities and lesson plan outlines, primarily for grades 6 through 12, to help students examine and more fully understand the stories and perspectives from often under-represented communities. For those who teach in a post-secondary setting, Fawn Amber-Montoya's and Beverly Allen's book, *Practicing Oral History to Connect University to Community* (2018), uses case studies of oral history projects to describe and discuss how to "bring together town and gown." This author's volume, *Practicing Oral History in Historical Organizations* (2015) offers insights into use of oral history by museums and other historical organizations to document and communicate information about place.

Several additional sources also support this work. The Oral History Association pamphlet, *Oral History Projects in Your Classroom* (2001) by Linda P. Wood is an 80-page guide that includes sample handouts, curriculum suggestions, and discussion questions. The Oral History Association (OHA) also maintains information on its website dedicated to Oral History and Education (<https://www.oralhistory.org/education/>) with links to resources and sample lesson plans. The adaptation of OHA *Principles and Best Practices* for specific use by educators, the *Principles and Best Practices for Oral History Education (4-12)* (2013) ([https://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/2013-1411\\_Oral\\_History\\_ClassroomGuide\\_Update\\_V2.pdf](https://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/2013-1411_Oral_History_ClassroomGuide_Update_V2.pdf)), is linked to the page and organized by three main topics—before the interview, the interview, and after the interview—following the basic outline of what oral historians call the oral history life cycle. It reminds the user that oral history is more than an interview and defines standards for educators. The page titled "How can I use oral history as an educator?" (<https://www.oralhistory.org/how-can-i-use-oral-history-myself-as-an-educator/>) provides examples for use and a short bibliography.

Two additional oral history publications can be of use to teachers in heritage education. One focuses on oral history's legal and ethical guidelines and the other looks at how the use of oral history in the classroom can meet state and national teaching standards. In the first, John Neuenschwander, in his classic *A Guide to Oral History and the Law*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (2014), covers use of legal release agreements (donor forms) and additional topics important to oral historians including an explanation of copyright, privacy issues, and use of the Internet. The book also includes a sample "Permission to Use" form for middle and high school oral history projects that defines the roles and expectations of interviewers and interviewees, also called narrators.

Glenn Whitman's book, *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students & Meeting Standards through Oral History* (2004), offers insight into creating and conducting oral history projects that meet state and national standards. In addition to providing examples of classroom oral history projects, he discusses assessment guidelines and analyzes how the various steps in developing and completing a classroom project can meet social studies curriculum standards.



Although standards have been updated in the years since this book was published, Whitman provides a model for thinking through how classroom oral history projects can meet curriculum standards.

Discussions of advances in oral history also include information about recording formats. Expansion of use of personal computers in the 1980s, the Internet in the 1990s, and smartphones in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century all played a part in ushering oral history into the Digital Age. The website, *Oral History in the Digital Age*, is a good source for information about many questions related to recording and preservation formats. Its essay, “Connecting the Classroom and the Archive: Oral History, Pedagogy, & Goin’ North” by Janneken Smucker, Doug Boyd, Charles Hardy III (<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2017/02/connecting-the-classroom-and-the-archive-oral-history-pedagogy-goin-north/>), describes a collaboration between a college classroom and an archive in preserving and providing access to oral histories. In his essay titled “Case Study: Oral History in the Classroom,” in *Oral History in the Digital Age* (<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/oral-history-in-the-classroom/>), Glenn Whitman describes his use of oral history in the classroom during his first years as a high school teacher.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century publications discussed in this essay provide information about and insight into the evolving and growing practice of oral history and oral history in education. The information can continue to benefit the use of oral history in heritage education, expanding and supporting its practice. A number of the publications, as noted, include sample lists of activities, discussion questions, and lesson plans.

## **Oral History and Heritage Education**

Options for use of oral history in heritage education, through careful planning, offer students an opportunity to hear history first-hand. Here are several examples.

*Oral Histories in the Classroom: A Curriculum and Project Guide for Secondary School Students*

(<https://www.historylink.org/Content/education/downloads/Oral%20History%20Curriculum.pdf>) (2008), prepared by Patricia Filer with the assistance of the students of Cleveland High School [Seattle, Washington] and their English and Drama teacher Faith Beatty. This is a 105-page detailed step-by-step guide that walks the reader through the “realistic assessment” involved in making oral history part of a curriculum. The publication is based on development of a classroom project funded through a City of Seattle Department of Neighborhoods Small and Simple grant. Its four sections cover the project description, the basics of oral history in the classroom including information about meeting state standards, a student curriculum and project guide, and a teachers’ guide with sample forms.

The project outcomes, as described in the curriculum guide, illustrate the broad uses of oral history in the classroom. This project produced information that could be used by students in English, Drama, History, Computer, Journalism, or Art classes and could be shared with the school and the community. It highlighted an understanding of diversity and resulted in “unexpected but genuine friendships. . . . This successful collaboration between the Friends of Georgetown History (FOGH) and Cleveland High School students resulted not only obtaining oral history interviews for the FOGH Research Project, but served as a venue for promoting

positive intergenerational and intercultural relationships in the community. Student exhibit panels featuring excerpts from the stories obtained during oral history interviews have been displayed at community events such as the Georgetown Art and Garden Tour, the Seattle Architectural Tour of Georgetown, the Dedication of OxBow Park, and at History House in Fremont. Selected students presented excerpts from the oral history interviews in the form of a Readers Theater at a community event sponsored by FOGH called Celebrating Georgetown (see page 11) and also at the Ethnic Heritage Conference (pp. 9-10).”  
(*Oral Histories in the Classroom: A Curriculum and Project Guide for Secondary School Students*, 7.)

The Montana Historical Society has developed a set of “Footlockers,” each focusing on a topic in state history and designed to meet state education standards (<https://mhs.mt.gov/education/Footlocker/>). Topics include “Architecture: It’s All Around You” with its identification of architectural styles and preservation needs and several kits focusing on diversity in the state. The Footlocker titled “Oral History in the Classroom Mini Footlocker” includes a 57-page manual (<https://mhs.mt.gov/education/Footlocker/OralHistoryUserGuide.pdf>) that guides the user through developing a classroom oral history project. It begins with basic information and then moves to a section on suggested lesson plans, followed by a rubric, and, in the final section, examples of resources and reference materials. The current publication expands on and updates information in an earlier Montana Historical Society pamphlet on the same topic.

A 2018 entry in the *New Georgia Encyclopedia* summarized heritage education programs and projects in that state and the organizational partnerships that have helped develop and support them. As the entry states, each contributes to a strong statewide preservation education effort. (<https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/heritage-education/>)

Heritage educators can benefit from developing projects in cooperation with local museums and historical organizations. The Tenement Museum of New York City offers lesson plans on “Teaching with Oral History” that use interviews as tools to help better understand people, places, and events. Designed for various grade levels from elementary through high school, they can serve as an introduction to using oral history in heritage education while modeling a museum-school partnership ([https://www.tenement.org/lesson\\_plans/teaching-with-oral-history-2/](https://www.tenement.org/lesson_plans/teaching-with-oral-history-2/), [https://www.tenement.org/lesson\\_plans/teaching-with-oral-history/](https://www.tenement.org/lesson_plans/teaching-with-oral-history/), [https://www.tenement.org/lesson\\_plans/teaching-with-oral-history-middle-school/](https://www.tenement.org/lesson_plans/teaching-with-oral-history-middle-school/)[https://www.tenement.org/lesson\\_plans/teaching-with-oral-history-4/](https://www.tenement.org/lesson_plans/teaching-with-oral-history-4/))

On a national scale, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage has developed resources on a variety of subjects ranging from celebrations to storytelling to community (<https://folklife.si.edu/masters-of-tradition>). The United States Library of Congress, in its “Exploring Community through Local History: Oral History Stories, Landmarks and Traditions,” offers a lesson plan to help students explore the broad and diverse history of community through oral history and the study of landmarks such as buildings and parks that can help “relate stories, landmarks and traditions of their community to history, place and environment.”  
(<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/exploring-community-through-local-history-oral-stories-landmarks-and-traditions/>). The National Endowment for the Humanities “Teachers

Guide: Oral History as an Educational Experience,” which, though it focuses primarily on interviews with veterans, provides basic educational guidelines for use of oral history in the classroom (<https://edsitement.neh.gov/teachers-guides/oral-history-educational-experience>).

Internationally, in 2020, European Heritage Days used oral history to explore themes related to heritage and education. It featured projects from Spain, Ireland, Norway, and several that span a number of countries, documenting information about “cultural life, heritage, and society” over the past half century (<https://www.europeanheritagedays.com/EHD-Programme/Press-Corner/News/Oral-history-heritage-education-through-conversation>).

## Conclusion

Oral history is used by many disciplines including history, anthropology, sociology, human geography, folklore, education, and heritage education. The publications and projects described here and listed in the source materials at the end of this article, cover guidelines for use of oral history in the classroom that can fit well within the goals and guidelines of 21<sup>st</sup> century educational standards. Also, as the examples illustrate, they can help support exciting heritage education oral history projects that help bring spoken history into the classroom.

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