

Oral History FAQs

What is oral history?

Everyone has a story to share. Oral history is a technique for collecting, preserving, and interpreting the knowledge and memories of everyday people and their experiences in relation to past events. Unlike other forms of interviewing, oral history is more conversational and has a thinking-out-loud quality that centers the interviewee's feelings and worldview.

Why does Jones Memorial Library (JML) want my oral history interview?

JML is vehemently committed to collecting and making accessible diverse histories and lifting up untold, non-traditional narratives. Oral histories can provide more textured representations of individual perspectives and collective memories in relation to archival materials, and can also be used to fill documentary gaps within our collections. Additionally, the process of conducting oral histories is inherently collaborative, and provides opportunities for both interviewers and interviewees to share interpretive authority within JML's historical record for generations to come.

What can I expect when participating in an oral history interview?

Oral history interviews consist of a recorded dialogue between an interviewer and an interviewee. Generally, interviews can last from 20-60 minutes, and can be conducted in-person or remotely (via Zoom or phone). Interviews can follow a chronological timeline, starting with your early life and career, and ending with the present day and some of your "big picture" reflections or can be focused on one event or period of time you experienced. Overall an oral history interview centers the interviewee's perspective and the conversation is led by your reflections.

Your interview will be recorded in audio and/or video format, and you may be asked to wear a microphone. You will also be asked to complete an Oral History Agreement, which is your consent for recording and adding the interview to the Jones Memorial Library collections. Your interviewer will go over this form with you and will be happy to answer any questions that you may have beforehand.

What happens to my interview?

Once the interview is completed, it will be processed and transcribed by JML staff. They may have follow-up questions, or ask you to clarify spellings for the transcription. Once complete, copies of the transcribed interview and recording will be shared for your review. At any point during the interview and post-interview process the interviewee can decide to stop the interview, cut parts out, or have the interview and all related material deleted.

Your interview will be made available to researchers or may be publicly disseminated through social media posts, exhibits, or presentations at research conferences. With your consent, your interview may also be uploaded to the JML Memory Lab Web Portal.

If you have any questions about JML's Memory Lab, or would like to suggest an individual or group to interview, please email JML Oral History and Reference Assistant, Bella Kilper, at bkilper@jmlibrary.org