

Hudson Community Voices Oral Histories Project

The City of Hudson is representative of many post-industrial cities across the country. Once a city in deep economic decline, it has undergone a commercial and architectural revival over the last 15 years. This revival has served parts of our communities and not others, creating friction and mistrust among and between different communities within our small city.

Hudson's "revival" has attracted a great deal of media coverage. Hudson has appeared in the New York Times Travel section more than a dozen times over the last five years as a weekend getaway spot with luxury appeal ("Hudson, NY: An Elegant Transformation" ran 7/27/16 and "Cultivating Hudson: Enter the Tastemakers," on 1/16/14), only one article mentioned that 25% percent of Hudson residents are below the poverty line, and none mentioned Hudson's unlikely designation as a food desert despite the city's abundance of high-profile restaurants and the density of small farms just across city lines.

The photographs that accompanied the articles featured a very limited, and exclusively white, portrait of city residents. One article called the Hudson Valley "the new Brooklyn." These articles, oriented toward a tourist audience, erased a wide swath of Hudson's diverse population (25% African American, 8% Latinx, 7% Asian, with sizable Bangladeshi and Haitian communities), adversely impact community identity and skew community memory.

We wish to address a two-fold problem, factionalism in our community and the oversimplified narrative about our city as authored by outsiders, by pulling together four collections of primary aural sources that comprise a history of Hudson through residents' lived experience. Our project design also includes an interrelated series of workshops and listening events as opportunities for community conversations, interpretation, problem-solving and visioning for our community's future as we build toward a more complex, collaborative and cohesive sense of who we are. In this way, we will invite the Hudson community to negotiate our complex story in our own words.

This work will happen in several phases detailed below, focusing on talking/listening across difference using residents' authorship in the process of interview preservation, processing and dissemination. We will not strive for consensus about past and present but attempt to use a medium (oral history) well suited to hold multiple perspectives together. We will build on oral history's opportunities to assign authority to those whose voices are not usually amplified and to support emergent narratives, community dialogue and inspire broader leadership in shaping Hudson's future.

During the summer of 2018, the Hudson Area Library conducted a series of community conversations, utilizing the Turning Outward process developed by The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. The recurring theme that emerged out of these conversations was a need to move beyond silos and create more opportunities to connect with the diversity of our community.

Examples of successful collaboration between original residents and more recent arrivals, include a mobile grocery store with a sliding scale fee structure (The Rolling Grocer 19) and a community-based radio station (WGXC 90.7 FM), and an educational center that runs daytime, afterschool and summer programs including a community garden for youth (Kite's Nest). These organizations, which positively impact our small city, are helmed by new residents and longtime community members. They serve as positive examples of how our various communities can work together for the benefit of all.

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This proposal builds upon the strengths and limitations of Hudson, a small city in both geographical area (2 square miles) and population (6,239). Hudson is located along the Hudson River in Columbia County, a mainly rural county in the northeastern region of the Mid-Hudson Valley in upstate New York. While dealing with some of the problems common to other post-industrial towns, our small population means we operate like a small town and can address some large problems in more intimate forums.

Our project will employ Oral History best practices and values (emphasizing reciprocity, co-ownership and the use of oral history as a form of problem-solving), archival best practices, reciprocal ethnography and collaborative analysis. Our project takes inspiration from a range of oral history projects, archives design and public history work including the New York Public Library's crowdsourced transcription program ("Together We Listen"), the Philadelphia Public History Truck's work in communities, and Brooklyn Historical Society's award-winning, community-based oral history/public events program, "Crossing Borders Bridging Generations."

PROJECT WORK PLAN

HAL and Oral History Summer School, in collaboration with allied community organizations, propose to bring four narrative collections (described below) into relationship by:

- Designing and building a highly accessible, interactive online archive that includes audio, images, video clips and transcripts, as well as invitations for community interpretation, and annotation. In this way, our project offers multiple opportunities to engage in the creation of community memory.
- Developing social/educational opportunities for scholarship and interpretation of existing collections. Workshops will focus on archives related skill-building events to socially tag, summarize, and annotate narratives. We will also develop an Archives Working Group to further develop skills and engage community in the processing of collections.
- Planning dynamic public programming with innovative outreach that 1] promotes complex discourse around themes of central interest to Hudson residents 2] activates narratives by bringing them into public space through listening events, public art, an audio walking club and a radio show called "From the Archive."

The four collections we will network are Oral History Summer School, the Black Legacy Association of Columbia County (BLACC), the Hudson Area Library Oral History Project, and the Kite's Nest Listening Project.

The OHSS collection is the most extensive and diverse of the collections, collected between 2012 and 2019 with an ongoing collection plan. The collection consists of 367 life histories of Hudson community members, along with a song collection (56 files) and an ambient sound collection (105 files). It includes youth interviews, interviews with adults with developmental disabilities and interviews with adults suffering from memory loss. These interviews were supervised by allied professionals (geriatric social worker, youth educators and disability rights advocate) as part of an OHSS initiative called Let Us All Our Voices Raise.

The BLACC collection features 29 interviews collected between 1987 and 1989 on VHS and audio cassette by staff and volunteers of the now-defunct Retired Senior Volunteer Program as part of a research program that sought to reveal contributions made by the local black community from slavery to present time; ownership of this collection was transferred to the library in 2018. The library's Oral History Project collection consists of 19 oral histories recorded between 2013 and

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2016. This collection is community-based by design, involving an open invitation to residents to serve as interviewers, providing free training and access to recording equipment. The Kite's Nest Listening Project is a collection of 11 interviews conducted during a year-long (2013-2014) listening practice centered around Hudson educators' and parents' experiences of learning and education. All but the BLACC collection are digital collections with recordings in wav format.

The interactive, online archive will be comprised of these four networked collections, accessible through a common landing page and some functions that allow for cross-referencing and searching across collections. Someone interested in "Shiloh Baptist Church," for example, will be able to type in this search term and find interviews in four different collections that mention Shiloh Baptist Church. This relies on a range of preparatory processing work (word lists, keywords, tagging) that will be done in collaboration with volunteers and community members. This integrated archive is not an "endpoint" but a part of an oral history project that involves alternate phases of collection and reflection and builds toward a sense of complex community identity.

While our team's credentials can be found as attachments, we relish the diversity of skill sets along with the shared values and interests coming together on this project. The project team will be led by Snider and Library Director, Emily Chameides. Key project staff include HAL Program Director Brenda Shufelt, digital media and technology consultant Brian Buckley, and archivist Marie O'Toole. Project advisors include Quintin Cross, the founder of SBK Social Justice Center, who will serve as a community liaison for the BLACC collection, Alex Kelly (Together We Listen, NYPL Community Oral History Project), and Sady Sullivan (Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, Brooklyn Historical Society) who will support in the areas of collection curation and public events. Community partners for this project include Kite's Nest, the City of Hudson Senior Center, SBK Social Justice Center, WGXC 90.7 FM, and the Hudson City School District.

Our public programs and public art workshops will build upon existing well-attended public programming by both HAL and OHSS and will increase excitement about our small city's history, increase knowledge of oral history and raise awareness of these existing collections. In our experience, building toward collective memory through individual experiences promotes problem-solving and visioning.

Public programs will include:

- **Hack the Archive Tagging Workshop (Tags, Keywords):** This workshop, led by Shufelt and Sara Kendall will engage Kite's Nest high school-aged participants in identifying significant themes and words in a selection of narratives from the archive. Processing tasks like tagging offer a chance to understand how the record is created and preserved and a rich opportunity to discuss things like ethics and bias when choosing keywords and creating content for finding aids. This workshop will focus on all four collections.
- **BLACC Collection Summary-Writing Workshop:** Offered in collaboration with SBK Social Justice Center and led by Snider and O'Toole, this workshop will launch in February in honor of Black History Month. The workshop will focus on writing summaries for interviews in the collection that do not yet have descriptive text. Participants will be encouraged to participate in drop-in summary writing sessions following the workshop, held in the library's History Room during open hours throughout the month.
- **Annotation Workshop:** This workshop will introduce participants to the sounds and stories in these collections while inviting participants to respond to the narratives using existing digital

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tools, such as Soundcloud's annotation tool. Snider will also present annotation tools in development by labs, like MIT's Annotation Studio.

- **“From the Archive” radio series:** Snider will produce ten one-hour episodes for broadcast on WGXC, highlighting audio from all four collections with opportunities for listeners to call in and respond. Each episode will feature diverse voices and juxtapose narratives from the 1980s with those of the 21st century.
- **Senior Center Reminiscence Group/Walking Club:** Led by Snider in partnership with City of Hudson Senior Center director, Sher Stevens, the Reminiscence Group and Audio Walking Club will give seniors the chance to experience a curated “mix tape” of area voices, followed by discussions of what they heard and their own experiences. These listening groups will be offered in both seated and mobile formats in order to address the diverse mobility abilities of Senior Center regulars and visitors.
- **Oral History and Public Art Workshop with Kite's Nest:** This workshop will bring stories into public space with digital and analog tools. Youth participants will take over a range of spaces and think about how to create sound installations, text-based art and images that relate to the four networked oral history collections
- **Watercolor with Your Grand Person:** This popular monthly intergenerational art workshop, a collaboration between the library and the City of Hudson Senior Center, will utilize sounds and songs from the OHSS collection as inspiration for their painting.
- **Nonfiction Book Club:** The library's Nonfiction Book Club will go off-book for one meeting per year to discuss other nonfiction resources including recordings from the oral history collections and thematically related articles.
- **Thematic Listening Events:** Snider and Shufelt will co-curate a series of four listening events centered on themes explored in the four collections and of importance to our community. These events will incorporate listening, reflection, conversation, and visioning. Potential topics include food access, history of the Black community, education, youth experiences and opportunities, and affordable housing.

Other open workshops will be developed in response to collection needs and community response to these public programs and the collections themselves.

We will document the conversations that come out of Listening Events using a free app developed by WGXC, to help citizens record community conversations and public meetings with smartphones. Any resident with the app can initiate these recordings, which are available via livestream on the WGXC website and through the station's audio archive. We will also link to these community conversations (audio) and drawings on our common oral history landing page, to become part of our networked archive.

Time Frame:

Our work will be divided into four phases, from September 2019 through August 2021

Phase One (Sept. - Dec., 2019): Web Archive Development, Digital Design, Digitization

During this phase, we will focus on developing the framework and tools for organizing, networking and accessing the collections. We will also digitize the BLACC collection (currently comprised of analog video and audio files, hard copies of transcripts and news articles). Key team members for this phase include Buckley, Snider, Chameides, and O'Toole. Buckley will design digital archival spaces for the four collections and a landing page to network the four collections with a common access point and digital tools that allow for browsing between the collections and searching

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across collections. Snider will co-design OHSS's digital archival space, manage the processing and uploading of OHSS's collection, and consult on the common landing page and on oral history-related issues for the other three collections. Chameides will oversee the design of digital spaces related to BLACC and HAL collections and will work with Snider and Buckley on developing the landing page and other ways to interweave the four collections. O'Toole will oversee technical aspects of the BLACC collection digitization (conducted by HAVE, Inc., a local multimedia services provider), and assessment, uploading, and management of the BLACC and HAL collections.

Phase Two (Jan. - Aug., 2020): Skills-based workshops with crowdsourced processing

During this phase, community members will participate in the building of the networked archive with dynamic, crowd-sourced activities that introduce skills such as annotation, tagging, transcription and curation. We will offer a combination of workshops that are open to the public and workshops developed for constituents of specific community partner organizations. The workshop series will be curated by Shufelt and Snider, coordinated by Shufelt, and workshops will be led by Shufelt, Snider, O'Toole, and Kendall. Starting in the summer, we will also formalize the Archives Working Group; Snider and Chameides will oversee the working group.

Phase Three (July - Dec., 2020): Listening Events and Community Dialogue

Overlapping with Phase Two, these events will use oral histories to explore the history of Hudson, as a launching pad for discussion of Hudson's complexity, today, and solutions-based visions for the future. These sessions will cater to a range of ages and abilities, longtime residents and newcomers, inviting people to respond verbally, through art, or even with single words or resonant themes. The listening events and community dialogue will be curated by Snider, Shufelt, and Chameides, coordinated by Shufelt, and facilitated by Snider, Shufelt, Chameides, and O'Toole.

Phase Four (Jan. 2020 - Aug. 2021): Public Art/Curation

"From the Archive" Radio Show: This will start early in the grant cycle (January-August, 2020), as a way of generating excitement and building awareness of the collections and workshops. OHSS will produce **six hour-long episodes for "From the Archive"** to air on our community radio station, WGXC 90.7. This series will serve as a pilot project for a possible ongoing radio show.

Our Team

Suzanne Snider, Oral Historian and founder/director of Oral History Summer School, will co-lead and develop public programs and workshops, produce and develop the "From the Archive" radio show, train staff and volunteers on oral history best practices and permissions/release forms (Staff, Archives Working Group) and consult on the development of digital archives. Library Director, Emily Chameides, will co-lead the processing workshops, select public programming and oversee the processing and uploading of the BLACC collection and Hudson Area Library Oral History Project collection. Program Director, Brenda Shufelt will coordinate public programs and workshops with the project team and collaborative partners, including organizing registration (when necessary), publicity, setup, hosting, evaluation, and follow-up communications with participants. Archivist Marie O'Toole will focus on the BLACC Collection (digitization, assessment, workshops). Brian Buckley will develop the web-based archives and web tools, including the landing page to network the four collections.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

We anticipate a number of specific outcomes and deliverables from this two-year process of archives literacy and immersion into community memory. The most significant deliverable will be an interactive digital archive made up of four networked collections, a newly digitized Black History collection, an emergent group of citizen archivists and historians, a series of community conversations, which we will record and archive. Additionally, we will produce six hour-long radio shows, six workshops, a Senior Reminiscence group and an audio-based walking club.

We expect outcomes including broader collaboration across social groups with a movement toward shared narratives about our community. These forums--workshops, listening events and community conversations—will offer opportunities to build rapport and empathy and historically contextualize some of our small city's present-day programs.

Success will be defined by sizable, meaningful participation in community events, mastery of skills associated with oral history and archives, the launch of our digital archive, use of the narrative collections during organized events and during library hours, increased understanding of Hudson's long and more recent history, including key events, significant community leaders and relevant institutional/industrial histories, digitization of our Black History collection and completion of associated processing tasks, fluid movement in conversations between discussions of the past, present and future of Hudson.

We will measure our success through self-assessments at workshops and events as well as anecdotal feedback, asking participants to reflect on their mastery of tasks, increased awareness of community history, level of fulfillment and interest in engaging with the archives in the future. Our digital archive will track visits to the collections. We will be tracking participation in terms of audience size and workshop size, as well.

Our project design includes the development of an Archives Working Group, comprised of trained staff, volunteers and community members. This grant allows us to build awareness around our collections and the creation of an Archives Working Group and expands our capacity to address collection needs; the AWG will continue to meet beyond the grant period.

OHSS supports a minimum of four community scholarships, annually, to train as interviewers and stewards of the growing collection (This year, OHSS offered scholarships to three area-educators). This contributes to residents' interest in oral history best practices, area oral history collections and in archival practices.

Our project design builds upon ongoing, existing clubs and events (Watercolor with Your Grand Person, Nonfiction Book Club, for example), structures already in place and those that will continue beyond the grant cycle. We can continue to develop ways to incorporate community memory and access to the collections into this framework.

