Stories for Our Times:
A Toolkit for Community Storytelling

October 2024

Executive Summary

Stories for Our Times is a community storytelling initiative developed by History Cambridge to strengthen social cohesion and collective resilience in our city during a period of profound societal challenges. The initiative responds to a national landscape marked by widespread change, instability, and crisis fatigue that manifests locally through social isolation, fraying social fabric, and many of our residents struggling to cope. When faced with these challenges, timed-tested humanities practices like storytelling can offer grounding and shared meaning-making to help us chart a course forward.

Through this initiative, History Cambridge aims to use *constructive storytelling* as social infrastructure, working with residents to document and amplify Cambridge stories that demonstrate humanities themes like wisdom, hope, and collective support. By weaving individual narratives of interconnectedness into a shared story of Cambridge's past and present, the initiative will help residents process change, grieve loss, strengthen community bonds, and work together toward a vibrant vision for the city's future.

The program pairs "storyweavers" (creative interpreters with deep roots in their Cambridge communities) with "storykeepers" (individuals whose lived experiences and wisdom can light the way forward) for 4-6 month constructive storytelling projects that are shared with the city at large in a variety of formats. Over time, History Cambridge will build a collection of Stories for Our Times that can serve as a vital community resource, helping Cambridge residents navigate the challenges of our times—together instead of alone.

This toolkit provides a practical framework for implementing Stories for Our Times projects, including detailed guidance on project structure, roles, recruitment, documentation, budget, and evaluation. While designed primarily to guide History Cambridge's own work, this toolkit will be shared widely so other cultural organizations can adapt its approach to address the effects of these challenging times in their own communities through the power of constructive storytelling.

About History Cambridge

Our organization was founded in 1905 by a group of amateur historians as the Cambridge Historical Society (CHS). For its first 100 years, CHS operated as a conventional local historical society, similar to others founded throughout the United States during the 20th century. The histories the organization preserved mostly represented West Cambridge. CHS began to expand its mission in the early 2000s, with a goal of serving everyone in Cambridge.

In 2015, CHS implemented new plans to transform into an audience-centered, community organization. CHS began experimenting with new humanities programming methods, holding events at library branches, bars, and cafés throughout the city. It won a national award from the American Association for State and Local History for its 2016 Fall Symposium.

Starting in 2019, CHS embarked on a multi-year, creative strategic planning process to further transform the organization. Significant progress on the plan to date has included a name change to History Cambridge, a programming pivot that highlights one Cambridge neighborhood a year, new public programs such as the Forgotten Souls of Tory Row art installation and our History Kit outreach initiative, and growth in the organization's base of partners and friends.

History Cambridge's current mission is *to use history to catalyze the connections that make Cambridge more vibrant and cohesive*. We think of ourselves first and foremost as a community organization. We believe it is vital to collect and share the stories of everyone in Cambridge. We also believe that everyone is an expert in their own history, and we are committed to telling the stories of many different people who call (or called) Cambridge home.

About Stories for Our Times

In fall 2023, History Cambridge was approved for funding from the National Endowment of Humanities for Phase One, conceptual development and interpretive planning of a new multi-year community storytelling initiative. As we explained in our proposal to NEH, we had several top-level goals for the initiative. First, we wanted to engage in co-creative storytelling with Cambridge communities to fill in the historical record at the neighborhood level with content that is rich in humanities themes and authentically shaped by residents. Second, we wanted to help Cambridge residents appreciate all the neighborhoods in the city, not just the one they live in. Third, we wanted to build lasting relationships and networks throughout the city that would supplement the reach of our small permanent staff. And fourth, we wanted to experiment with new methods for local history.

During 2024 we engaged Rainey Tisdale and Diana Lempel as Phase One consultants. With Rainey's expertise in urban public history and interpretive planning, and Diana's expertise in facilitating local history research and story development as well as her knowledge of Cambridge, they were the right team to guide the planning phase. As part of our planning process, they conducted a literature review and a benchmarking scan of existing community storytelling projects. They also undertook a community needs analysis and stakeholder interviews with six local leaders from other Cambridge community organizations.

Through these activities, clarity emerged about why and how storytelling is important at the community level and best practices for developing a local history storytelling initiative. But also, our team planning conversations kept circling back to how much Cambridge residents—and the city at large—are struggling with the overwhelming loss and change they are currently experiencing. It was these conversations that helped us understand what Cambridge needs specifically from community storytelling here and now: it needs Stories for Our Times.

What follows is our resulting community storytelling toolkit, which provides our rationale for community storytelling as essential social infrastructure, as well as a concrete road map for implementing individual storytelling projects. We have created this toolkit to guide our own organization in community storytelling, and we also are sharing it widely with other cultural organizations so they can benefit from our research, planning, and framework. We see this toolkit as a work in progress: a living document that we will continue to improve as we practice constructive community storytelling and learn from the process. Now that we have wrapped up Phase One of this initiative, Phase Two will involve implementing a pilot project where we test our ideas and refine the toolkit.

Why We Need Stores for Our Times

A Landscape of Change and Crisis

We are living in a time of profound challenge. The current pace and scale of societal change—technological, social, economic—have left many feeling unmoored and overwhelmed. And the challenges are mounting with extraordinary intensity. We have not yet recovered from the ways the pandemic disrupted everyday life. Epidemics of social isolation, depression, and anxiety have emerged, creating widespread experiences of disconnection. In conducting the research for this project, two recent thought pieces helped us understand the specific dynamics at play in our challenging times. These essays—the first focused on widespread insecurity and the second on an "epoch of crisis," helped us understand what we are collectively experiencing.

In her essay "Why Does Everyone Feel So Insecure All the Time?," Astra Taylor articulates how our times have produced significant insecurity. We worry about keeping our jobs, affording housing and health care, having enough for retirement, and ensuring our children's future. As Taylor notes, "We are all, to varying degrees, overwhelmed and apprehensive, fearful of what the future might have in store. We are on guard, anxious, incomplete and exposed to risk." And because insecurity involves anxiety about an uncertain future, it traps us in an endless cycle of jockeying and scrambling because the future never stops feeling uncertain. Taylor argues that this pervasive insecurity erodes social bonds. It undermines social cohesion by creating distrust, division, competition, and a scarcity mentality. When people feel precarious, they're less likely to build community, or take risks to help others. Insecurity turns us against each other rather than uniting us in our shared struggles and common cause.[1]

Interwoven with this insecurity is what journalist Jeneen Interlandi, in her essay "We Tire Very Quickly of Being Told Everything Is On Fire," calls "an epoch of crisis." This piece is primarily about public health, but several of her key arguments apply more broadly to American society, and to this project. As Interlandi puts it, we face overlapping emergencies. And on top of the actual crises, mass communication—from public officials to news media to research analysts—has a tendency to call everything a crisis in order to get our attention in an oversaturated landscape. The relentless nature of all this crisis—its scale, frequency, and persistence—creates what we might call collective crisis fatigue. An epoch of crisis has serious implications. As Interlandi observes, "It may dull our sense of what's possible, but it also primes the populace with anxiety, and a perpetually anxious society is a vulnerable one. There is no telling whom we might surrender our judgment to or what portion of the social contract we might agree to scrap, if only to silence the alarm bells."[2] When we're overwhelmed by constant crisis, we can't see clearly enough to make thoughtful decisions, exacerbating the situation and potentially compromising important social bonds and our larger goals in the process.

Cambridge as a Microcosm of Broader Challenges

While the challenges outlined above are widespread and national (if not global) in nature, they play out at the local level—in places like Cambridge—where people live their everyday lives. At the local

[1] Astra Taylor, "Why Does Everyone Feel So Insecure All the Time?," *New York Times*, August 18, 2023.
[2] Jeneen Interlandi, "We Tire Very Quickly of Being Told Everything Is On Fire," *New York Times*, 21 November 2024.

level, these abstract forces take concrete shape, affecting how we relate to our neighbors, experience our public spaces, and imagine our collective future.

For example, the physical fabric of the city—the streets and skyline—is changing at a faster rate than longtime residents can metabolize. Meanwhile Cambridge's population grew 12.6% between the 2010 and 2020 censuses (close to double the national growth rate of 7.4%), making it harder to maintain the sense of being known and seen in public spaces.[3] And when people don't know and trust their neighbors while experiencing crisis fatigue and insecurity about their own place in the city, it can lead to a scarcity mindset where residents fight over limited resources—whether that's jobs, housing, or parking spaces. It becomes easy to blame neighbors for all of these struggles instead of calling out the complex social problems that are actually the root cause but feel overwhelming and impossible to fix.

The broader mental health challenges facing our society also play out locally. Public health experts have called attention to the nationwide epidemics of loneliness, anxiety, and isolation and how they are undermining everyday life at the community level. When we're struggling with our own wellbeing, it becomes harder to extend ourselves to our neighbors or invest energy in community events and initiatives, which only fuels more isolation. Certainly we are seeing this dynamic in Cambridge in a reduced participation in community life and a growing sense of disconnection from local institutions and traditions, so much so that the City of Cambridge is now investing in programs to bring Cantabrigians together, understanding how important it is to the health of the city.

Storytelling as Social Infrastructure

And so, in the face of so much change, loss, insecurity, and crisis, it's all hands on deck for every nonprofit organization in Cambridge and across the country that serves the public good. Social service agencies tend to be the first responders in such times, but organizations like History Cambridge have a role to play too.

History Cambridge uses the tools of history to help make Cambridge more vibrant and cohesive. We believe our work can have meaningful social impact by rooting Cantabrigians in place and connecting them to each other—something they truly need right now. To do this work effectively, we must meet local residents where they are: exhausted and overwhelmed. The question becomes: how can our organization use history to support Cantabrigians in moving out of this epoch of crisis toward a more vibrant and cohesive future?

We aim to deploy community storytelling to help people feel more rooted and connected at a time when the foundation is shifting under them. Our city needs stories for our times—local Cambridge stories that speak to longstanding humanities themes like:

- Meaningful collective rituals for mourning what has been lost
- Taking care of each other
- Physical, emotional, individual, and community survival strategies
- Hope in the face of fear and insecurity

[3] U.S. Census data.

- Cultivating abundance when surrounded by scarcity
- Doing hard things and living to tell about it
- Successfully managing change
- Coming together to solve shared problems

Moreover, we need more than individual one-off stories; we need to weave Cambridge's stories together. That's how we strengthen belonging and social cohesion so that Cambridge can build collective resilience in the face of these shocks to daily life and networks. In this sense, community storytelling is not a luxury or a peripheral cultural activity. In our current landscape of change and challenge, it represents a form of social infrastructure—a critical tool to reduce insecurity, model collective support, offer hope, and help us find the way forward together.

In determining exactly how to approach this work, we were greatly influenced by Jessica Senehi's article on constructive storytelling.[4] Senehi, a storytelling scholar, writes about the difference between *destructive* and *constructive* storytelling. She argues that constructive storytelling can be a significant way of building trust and common ground in groups or communities experiencing disagreements—a way of walking in each other's shoes. These stories can also help build shared group identity. And because stories aren't just information—they have emotional resonance and engage empathy—they have the ability to shift public opinion, or move people to support a community initiative. They can produce shared joy, comfort, or hope in a way that deepens community connection.

Stories are often tied to place. As Senehi notes, they can be used either to advance competing claims on places by different groups (destructive, and similar to the fighting over resources we currently see in Cambridge) or to root people more deeply in place and strengthen their desire to care for a place (constructive). She shares a quote from Constance Mears, speaking in relation to her local place of Fidalgo Island in Washington State: "Our stories are threads that anchor us into the land. They're like invisible roots that go deep in and when people have those, they take care of their place."[5]

Particularly influential to our thinking was Senehi's observation that "Stories, even personal stories, always imply how things should be. They have moral import." She writes that "Stories are about envisioning what should be in order to shape social thought and action to bring that about."[6] Local history is the process of telling stories about a community's past. Senehi's framing helps us see that when Cantabrigians tell stories about Cambridge's past, they are trying to express what they want the city's future to be like. They are trying to imagine and conjure a future for Cambridge that improves upon their present. For example, a story about how we got through a difficult moment in the past offers instructions on how to better prepare in the future. A story about what was lost at that difficult moment is a moral statement that in the future we shouldn't lose so much. And a story about caring for each other while dealing with that difficult moment is a moral statement that in the future people must be attended to. If History Cambridge can help Cantabrigians tell each other constructive

[4] Jessica Senehi, "Constructive Storytelling: A Peace Process," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 9: No. 2, Article 3, 2002, DOI: 10.46743/1082-7307/2002.1026.
[5] Constance Mears in Evelyn Adams, ed., *At Home on Fidalgo*, 2001, p. 11, cited in Senehi, p. 56.
[6] Senehi, p. 53.

stories about Cambridge's past, it could be an important step in working together to move out of the challenges of the present and into a better Cambridge of the future.

In addition to Senehi's work, there is quite a body of literature—from a range of disciplines—to help us understand other ways that storytelling can support the healing and stability everyone needs right now. For example, in "Storytelling as Adaptive Collective Sensemaking," researchers Lucas Bietti, Ottilie Tilston, and Adrian Bangerter write about storytelling's long-standing cultural function of conveying survival-related information—warnings and guidance about what will shorten your life and what will prolong it—from one generation to the next.[7] If this is the case, why not use community storytelling to transmit wisdom about how to survive our current times?

Bietti et al.'s research also describes storytelling's role in adaptive sensemaking during times of significant upheaval. Stories help groups interpret and bring order to their experiences of non-routine events, creating coherence and interpretive framing to understand why something happened, how it affected people, and what larger meaning can be gleaned. They note that "at no time are collective sensemaking processes more evident than in the wake of sudden catastrophic events."[8] This suggests that community storytelling could be intentionally designed to help Cambridge residents make sense of the challenges they are facing now.

Meanwhile, in "Safety in Storytelling: the Healing of Shelter Stories for our Times," the storytelling practitioner Suzanne Down writes about the ways she uses stories to support children who are dealing with significant personal challenges. She writes about the concept of "shelter stories:" stories that help children imagine safe and supportive spaces for themselves, and in so doing help children feel safer in their bodies. She gives an example of a shelter story about a human woman and three fairies developing a relationship of reciprocity to help each other make their homes feel safe, comfortable, and beautiful. This concept can just as easily apply to adults, who can use "shelter stories" to help them recover a sense of security, metabolize change, and grieve their losses.[9]

Storytelling and Social Cohesion

The potential for storytelling to strengthen social cohesion feels particularly vital as an antidote for our times, and it's something History Cambridge is passionate about; it's part of our mission statement.

"WE-Making: How Arts & Culture Unite People To Work Toward Community Well-Being," a report produced by Metris Arts Consulting that we find especially useful, defines social cohesion as "what we call it when individuals feel and act as part of a group that is oriented toward working together." In this definition, social cohesion has four dimensions: "group relationships or connections, sense of belonging to people and/or place, orientation toward the common good, and willingness to

[7] Bietti, Lucas M et al. "Storytelling as Adaptive Collective Sensemaking." *Topics in cognitive science* vol. 11,4 (2019): 710-732. doi:10.1111/tops.12358, p. 714-717.
[8] Bietti, Lucas M et al., p. 721-722.
[9] Suzanne Down, "Safety in Storytelling: the Healing of Shelter Stories for our Times,"Lilipoh blog, 1 November 2022.

participate or cooperate with each other," with trust serving as the "glue" across all four dimensions."[10]

Meanwhile 100 Resilient Cities, a Rockefeller Foundation initiative, sees social cohesion as central to resilience building in cities like Cambridge. In their social cohesion toolkit, they define urban resilience as "the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and systems within a city to survive, adapt, and grow no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience."[11] The toolkit makes the case that social cohesion strengthens this collective resilience by creating networks of support that communities can activate during challenging times. When residents trust each other and feel a shared sense of belonging, they are more likely to work together to address problems, share resources, and help community members who need it.[12] Social cohesion thus makes cities more adaptable and better equipped to handle a range of challenges, validating History Cambridge's decision to invest in it with initiatives like Stories for Our Times.

Our literature review yielded quite a bit of interesting and varied research on the specifics of how community storytelling supports social cohesion. For example, in "How Stories Change the Brain," neuroscientist Paul J. Zak offers evidence of how storytelling supports social cohesion and other prosocial outcomes. The research of his and other labs on the human brain's response to stories suggests that when a story hooks someone, it creates what neuroscientists call "transportation:" you feel transported into the story, and your brain simulates the emotions of the people in the story so that you feel them too. It is this transportation process that creates empathy. The brain releases oxytocin, which relaxes, decreases stress, and as Zak's research has shown, stimulates you to be "trustworthy, generous, charitable, and compassionate." In order to be effective in these ways, the story must have a narrative arc that captures and holds the listener's attention, and it must be compelling enough to produce "transportation." This research suggests that there is "a virtuous cycle in which we first engage with others emotionally, that leads to helping behaviors, that make us happier."[13]

Jessica Senehi also writes about storytelling as a means of creating or strengthening relationships and reminding everyone of shared humanity. She also writes about storytelling's role in knitting together groups who are at odds with each other: "The perspectives of each group are grounded in historical narratives with different meanings. Developing a shared historical narrative may be necessary for transforming the intergroup conflict and allowing for a shared vision of the future."[14] In this sense, working toward a shared historical narrative for Cambridge may be critical work that History Cambridge's community storytelling can contribute to in these times of low trust and fragmentation.

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[10] Rachel Engh, Ben Martin, Susannah Laramee Kidd, and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, "WE-making: How arts & culture unite people to work toward community well-being," Metris Arts Consulting, Easton, PA, 2021, p.2.
[11] Nicole Bohrer-Kaplan, Ameneé Siahpush, and Samatha Nemana, "Social Cohesion: A Practitioner's Guide to Measurement Challenges and Opportunities,"100 Resilient Cities, Rockefeller Foundation, 2019, p. 8.
[12] Bohrer-Kaplan et. al.
[13] Paul J. Zak, "How Stories Change the Brain," *Greater Good Magazine*, 7 December 2013.
[14] Senehi, p. 55.

Lastly, Emily Kombe describes how storytelling supports all four dimensions of social cohesion. Kombe works in international development and has been researching storytelling as a tool for community-led development. Based on this research and her on-the-ground experience, she articulates several ways that storytelling builds trust and catalyzes positive change. Storytelling creates an accessible entry point for participation, providing a shared language that doesn't require technical expertise. Rather than focusing on deficits, storytelling can illuminate community assets and strengths—like shared cultural traditions—which can shift the narrative from what a community lacks to what it possesses so that community members begin to see themselves as agents of positive change. Perhaps most powerfully, storytelling builds bridges and trust in fragmented communities by helping people recognize their common hopes and dreams. By inviting people to imagine and articulate the future they want for their community, storytelling creates both the social bonds and the sense of agency needed to come together for the common good.[15]

In light of this varied research, we envision constructive community storytelling that feels authentic and real and very Cambridge, that tells it like it is without being Pollyanna-ish or saccharine, and helps Cambridge residents:

- Employ adaptive sensemaking to process and understand the landscape of loss, insecurity, and crisis
- Co-create community "shelter stories" to regain a sense of shared security
- Remember that they can do hard things: that their city has a long history of collective resilience in the face of challenge
- Convey survival strategies from their different cultural traditions and experiences, and weave them together
- Use stories to more effectively metabolize change
- Deploy storytelling's capacity to trigger mirror neurons and engage human empathy
- Create social bridging by helping them understand how much their stories have in common
- Tell authentic stories about Cambridge that create a shared narrative of the city, imagine and articulate a brighter collective future, and then work toward it together

In subsequent sections of this toolkit, we will explain in concrete terms how we plan to go about this work.

[15] Emily Kombe, “Can Storytelling Fuel Community-led Development?,” Collaborative for Development Action, blog post, August 2023.

The Community Storytelling Landscape

During our benchmarking scan, we gathered examples of constructive storytelling, meaningful community storytelling initiatives, and other public humanities projects designed to draw on existing community wisdom and strengths in the face of significant challenges.

Community Storytelling Initiatives that Inspire Us

Community Plate

This Maine-based organization demonstrates the potential for combining food and storytelling to strengthen social cohesion. Their Story Sharing Potluck Suppers bring people together in local communities across the state to share their personal stories over a meal. The model is simple yet meaningful: residents are invited to bring a dish and its accompanying story, responding to prompts offered by Community Plate that encourage social connection. These prompts, centered around food memories and traditions, create natural bridges between personal experience and collective meaning-making. The evening unfolds in two acts: first, participants are encouraged to sit with people they don't know, and organic storytelling takes place during the meal as they share food memories based on the prompts. Then during dessert and coffee, pre-selected community storytellers perform prepared stories that weave the evening's themes into a larger shared experience. Each gathering is then commemorated through a small community cookbook containing both recipes and stories. The effectiveness of this approach is evident in Community Plate's 2024 Impact Report, which cites data from participant surveys during their first year of operation: 99% of respondents made new connections, 90% felt more deeply rooted in their community, and 89% reported both feeling truly heard and an increased desire to participate in other community events.[16] Community Plate's success offers a compelling model for how intentional storytelling, when paired with the timeless ritual of sharing food, can help address contemporary challenges of loneliness and disconnection.

StoryCorps Shorts

Storycorps is well-known for its process of collecting oral histories from everyday Americans. A curated selection of these oral histories have been made into video shorts, several of which demonstrate how personal stories can weave together place, care, wisdom, and human connection in ways that mirror our goals for Stories for Our Times. We are aware that one of the potential pitfalls of an initiative like ours is that the stories could end up feeling overly sappy, celebratory, and "can't we all just get along" to the point that they feel fake and shallow. Therefore we appreciate how these StoryCorps shorts model real talk about personal and community problems mixed with meaning-making and lessons learned. They feel authentic, human, intimate, and warm—a tone we want to learn from.

[16] "Setting the Table: The Impact Report of Community Plate, June 2024.

Oregon Humanities Community Storytelling Fellowships

Each year six fellows receive $5,000 each to develop three true stories about their Oregon community, which can be in any medium—journalism, audio, video, photography, etc. They are paired with mentors that support their work, and the resulting stories are published in *Oregon Humanities* magazine.

Museum Survival Kit

This pandemic project collected wisdom from museums and history organizations around the U.S. about traditional knowledge and survival strategies, including home skills, handicrafts, remedies, foraging, and DIY entertainment. While it doesn't involve storytelling per se, the rationale and crowdsourcing approach of the project ("to share how people in the past—and present—take care of themselves in hard times") is very much aligned with Stories from Our Times and expanded our thinking during conceptual development.

Existing Storytelling Projects in or near Cambridge

- Longtime Cambridge storyteller and street performer Hugh Morgan Hill (aka Brother Blue), who died in 2009, was an anchor of the local storytelling scene. Storyspace is a weekly Tuesday night storytelling event he founded in 1992 with his wife Ruth Edmonds Hill that met in person for many years and now occurs virtually online.
- True Story Theater, based in neighboring Arlington, presents "playback theatre," a form of improvisational performance where members of the audience are asked to share their experiences related to a pre-chosen theme, and then actors and musicians dramatize their story in real time. The rest of the audience is assigned an active role of not only listening but being fully present with and supporting the sharer and the performers, which TST says "greatly affect[s] the level of risk-taking, and hence the depth and beauty of the show." Past performance themes include belonging, standing up for others, building bridges across ideological differences, and gratitude in perilous times—themes that closely align with our Stories for Our Times framework.
- The Moth, the well-known storytelling podcast and performance series, holds monthly StorySlams just over the river in Boston.
- Story Collider is an international organization that engages people in telling stories about how science has affected their lives. The MIT Museum hosts Story Collider events locally in Cambridge.
- Cambridge Center for Adult Education offers a Storytelling Workshop & Showcase.
- Jukebox is a permanent public art installation of local oral histories served from a repurposed jukebox in the Cambridge Foundry.

Program Design

This toolkit outlines practical steps and considerations for implementing a Stories for Our Times project. It is not meant to be static or final. Instead, it will evolve and improve as we gain hands-on experience with constructive storytelling and incorporate the lessons we learn along the way. The current version will serve as a road map for our pilot project during 2025. Then we will use insights from the pilot project to revise the toolkit. We encourage other organizations interested in following our model to check back with us for updated versions of the toolkit in subsequent years.

Goals

Stories for Our Times aims to contribute to Cambridge's historical record while strengthening the bonds that hold our community together. Through thoughtful storytelling and collaborative partnerships, we seek to:

- Support History Cambridge's mission (*to use history to catalyze the connections that make Cambridge more vibrant and cohesive*) and the implementation of the goals in History Cambridge's strategic plan
- Deepen our commitment to historical practice that tells Cambridge's story through the lived experiences of everyday Cantabrigians
- Embrace neighborhood-level history with intention and care by:
    - Filling gaps in the historical record at the neighborhood level
    - Helping Cambridge residents appreciate each Cambridge neighborhood for its individual attributes while also helping them navigate and appreciate neighborhoods that aren't their own
    - Connecting residents across different neighborhoods (social bridging)
- Strengthen the history resources of Cambridge's communities, ensuring their experiences and wisdom are shared and preserved with the respect they deserve
- Experiment with new and creative methods of public history that resonate with contemporary audiences
- Build a sustainable initiative that works within History Cambridge's capacity while maximizing our impact, finding ways to supplement our small staff's reach
- Cultivate and support a network of engaged storykeepers who can be mobilized as ongoing partners in preserving Cambridge's history and strengthening community cohesion
- Develop lasting relationships with local storyweavers who can help us craft a generative historical narrative that honors a variety of Cambridge voices
- Create a replicable model that other local history organizations across the country can adapt to their own communities' needs and contexts

Through these interconnected goals, we aim to create not just a collection of stories, but a living, breathing archive of community wisdom that can help guide us toward a more connected and resilient future.

Guiding Principles

A deep commitment to ethical, community-centered storytelling that honors both individual voices and our collective journey is foundational to Stories for Our Times. The following principles guide every aspect of our work, from initial conversations to final sharing:

- *We practice constructive storytelling.* We embrace storytelling that builds bridges, strengthens community bonds, and illuminates paths forward. Our stories aim not just to document but to inspire, model, heal, and create positive change in our city.
- *Cambridge is the setting of our stories.* Stories for Our Times may also have regional, national, or global context but they are grounded in Cambridge. We hope they will be peppered with local details: specific street names, public places, events, traditions, and characters.
- *We honor community wisdom.* We recognize that everyday Cantabrigians carry valuable insights that can help our city navigate these challenging times.
- *We aim to augment the existing historical record*. Our priority is to support stories with rich humanities content that have not yet been widely heard by the city at large.
- *History Cambridge curates these stories with a light touch.* The Stories for our Times framework serves as a set of creative constraints to guide storykeepers and storyweavers in developing meaningful constructive stories. But at the same time we will maintain an open and flexible approach, trusting our storykeepers and storyweavers to bring their own vision and voice to each project.
- *The process is just as important as the outcome.* By adhering to these guiding principles, documenting and reflecting along the way, and continuously refining our approach, we hope to develop a process that is just as constructive and socially cohesive as the resulting stories.
- *Stories for Our Times are inherently stories of interdependence.* The only way we get through these times is together.

Through these principles, we strive to create not just a collection of stories, but a collaborative practice that strengthens the fabric of our community while preserving local voices for future generations.

Roles

Storytelling by its very nature is a social medium that takes at least two people: a teller and a listener. When it comes to community storytelling as social infrastructure, it takes even more. A number of different people—with a range of resources and skill sets—are essential to the success of this work. Below we outline their roles and how we conceive of their participation. Through these interconnected roles, Stories for Our Times creates a vibrant ecosystem of storytelling that strengthens our community's fabric and helps us imagine and work toward a more connected future.

History Cambridge: the Catalyst

As the organizing force behind Stories for Our Times, History Cambridge creates the supportive structure that allows these stories to emerge and thrive. Our role is part producer and part curator to:

- Build and maintain strong, trusting relationships with everyone involved
- Secure and manage funding
- Coordinate logistics and people to keep the project on track while remaining flexible to community needs

- Support research needs of storyweavers
- Ensure ethical practices in story collection and sharing
- Document and publicly share both the stories in their final format and the process
- Track measurements of success and continually refine and improve
- Share and refine best practices with other communities

Storyweavers: the Bridgebuilders

Storyweavers are the skilled interpreters who help transform the storykeepers' personal histories and experiences into Stories for Our Times. They serve as careful listeners and creative translators, helping shape narratives that can reach and resonate with the city as a whole. By investing in them as storyweavers, we are investing in the ongoing social capital they generate in their communities. They:

- Have established networks within Cambridge
- Bring creative talents that can help stories find their most powerful shape
- Often (but not always) are Cambridge's young people, which when paired with elder storykeepers, allows their project to strengthen intergenerational learning and connections
- Have a willingness to build a meaningful collaboration with storykeepers and curiosity about their lived experiences, and are committed to honoring each story's authenticity
- Ideally already know potential storykeepers they can approach for this project, allowing the storytelling process to emerge from existing relationships of trust
- Understand the broader vision of Stories for Our Times and are energized by the prospect of constructive storytelling that contributes to community connection and resilience

Storykeepers: the Source Material

Storykeepers are the heart of this project—individuals whose lived experiences and deep connections to Cambridge provide the throughlines of our community narrative. Their local stories show the way forward for others. They:

- Possess a wealth of knowledge, skills, and survival strategies, but they don't necessarily have the tools or the wherewithal to share them broadly across Cambridge. So they provide the source material, but it is someone else's job (the storyweaver's) to "package" the stories for the rest of the city
- Often (but not always) they are Cambridge's wise elders or "culture bearers," who practice and pass down cultural traditions
- Have lived in Cambridge long enough to accumulate deep knowledge of and lived experience in this place
- Want to see their community thrive and are respected as a force for good in their local networks
- Are curious and observant—about the city itself and the people they encounter
- Enjoy sharing stories, wisdom, and cultural traditions—this doesn't feel like hard work to them

Community Stakeholders: the Network

These individuals help the project take root and grow through their deep community connections, spreading the word about our work and helping create a network of community storytelling. They:

- Understand the transformative potential of constructive Stories for Our Times
- Are well-networked in Cambridge and therefore are in a position to help History Cambridge identify storykeepers and storyweavers
- Provide valuable context and connections across different community groups
- Help us surface stories that deserve attention
- Act as ambassadors for the project within their spheres of influence
- May also want to collaborate with History Cambridge to apply the Stories for Our Times framework in their own organizations

Listeners: the Community Circle

This is the role for the rest of Cambridge: to take in these stories and find personal meaning and strength in them; to not just passively consume them but actively receive them with reciprocity. To borrow a concept from storytelling circles, we hope that “salting” will occur, where these stories remind Cambridge residents of similar experiences from their own lives, and they are moved to share them in response. This is where true story weaving can occur. We will intentionally work to create the conditions for active listening where the listeners:

- Participate in dialogue and reflection that strengthens community bonds
- Help weave a broader community narrative by connecting these stories to their own lives
- Carry stories forward, helping them reach new audiences and inspire further sharing
- Share their own stories as part of the process

Storyweaver Recruitment

When we originally started planning this project, we assumed we would cast a wide net to recruit storyweavers through an open call. However, as our understanding of this work deepened, we recognized that building this initiative requires a more intentional, relationship-centered approach, especially in its early years. The kind of storytelling we hope to nurture is different from the common models of oral history collection or story performance people are familiar with. An open call would likely generate a lot of proposals based on those familiar expectations, a waste of time for everyone.

Our model requires a particular sensitivity to both individual experiences and collective needs, along with a deep rootedness in Cambridge neighborhoods and communities and an ability to shape individual stories in constructive ways. If instead we reach out to people in our network who understand what we are trying to achieve (for example the community stakeholders we interviewed during this planning phase) to seek recommendations of potential storyweavers they know in neighborhoods across the city, we are more likely to match with individuals well-positioned to carry out this work. We can then sit down in conversation to discuss the details of Stories for Our Times and collaboratively develop the possibilities for a promising project.

This approach allows us to ground Stories for Our Times within a network of trust: the trust we have developed with community stakeholders and partners, the trust they have developed with potential

storykeepers, and the trust those storykeepers have developed in their communities. Ten years ago, such a strategy would have been impossible; our network wasn't broad or deep or trusting enough. But after years of working in Cambridge neighborhoods building face-to-face relationships, we've developed the connections and credibility to work in this way.

To be clear, we certainly wouldn't turn away someone who approaches us with a great idea just because they are not part of our existing network. It's just that we anticipate that is not very likely until History Cambridge establishes a track record with Stories for Our Times, and Cambridge residents come to understand how our model works.

We envision the recruitment process will take 1-2 months. We will create a one-page description of the project and the role of the storyweaver that we will use in recruiting individuals through our network. This document will serve as a conversation starter, helping potential storyweavers understand how their existing community work might align with and be amplified through Stories for Our Times.

Getting to Commitment

Once we have identified two to three promising storyweavers, History Cambridge's executive director and program manager will meet with them to discuss the potential for a project. Topics that should be covered in this meeting include:

- History Cambridge's rationale and goals for Stories for Our Times
- The concept of constructive storytelling
- The storyweaver's background, personal history, and networks in Cambridge, as well as any particular vision and/or creative skills they would like to bring to this project
- Potential storykeepers the storyweaver might approach
- A generative discussion about the particular humanities themes and constructive storytelling possibilities, with the goal of co-developing an overall idea for the project that plays to the storyweaver's strengths and has high potential for social cohesion
- Discussion of compensation structure
- Any concerns or challenges that might affect the health of the project

After these meetings, the executive director and program manager will report on the conversations and decide which storyweavers and ideas show the most promise for implementation, in consultation with the History Cambridge program committee (made up of community members). There will be room at this point for any additional conversations that need to happen, including consulting with stakeholders to further shape project ideas, investigating community resources, reaching out to potential storykeepers, and following up with the potential storyweavers. History Cambridge will then choose which storyweaver to proceed with and notify everyone. Those who are not chosen will remain in consideration for future projects.

The goals of this selection process are to build trusting relationships along the way (even with those individuals who are not selected), create the conditions for collaborative and generative conversations that make the project idea as meaningful, constructive, and visible as possible, and to learn from each other as we go. Therefore we are intentionally choosing not to request written applications, which can come across as overly formal and jumping through hoops. Instead we want

the selection process to feel informal and relational, modeling the approach we hope the storykeeper will take in their work.

Documenting and Sharing the Project

History Cambridge intends to document and publicize each Stories for Our Times project from day one, and we will set this expectation with storyweavers and storykeepers. This is important to us for several reasons. First, as a local history organization, we believe in documenting and archiving. Second, by documenting and sharing the process, we are making visible the ways that community storytelling is social infrastructure and modeling how it is practiced. And third, we want to build awareness among Cambridge residents about the importance of telling each other Stories for Our Times, make them feel part of the process, and encourage them to become informal storykeepers and storyweavers in their everyday lives. We are budgeting time and resources for documenting and sharing so it doesn't get short shrift.

Compensation

It is important to History Cambridge that both storyweavers and storykeepers be fairly compensated for their contributions to Stories for Our Times. Fair compensation is essential to building ongoing reciprocal relationships with storyweavers and storykeepers that we hope will continue long after the stories are shared.

After our internal conversations as well as conversations with stakeholders, it became clear to us that what constitutes fair compensation varies from situation to situation. Based on benchmarking against other similar initiatives, we are aiming for $5,000-$7,000 per project as compensation for each storyweaver and $150-$1,000 for each storykeeper. We intend to secure $12,000 total per project for participant compensation so there is some flexibility depending on the project details, number of people, and each person's level of participation. If there are funds left over, they will roll over into the next project. We are basing our compensation amounts on data from both local wage and cultural fee calculators, a scan of Cambridge artist residencies, and going rates for speaking and advising honoraria from local history organizations—a signal to our peer institutions, potential funders, and community members that we value local knowledge holders in the same way and at the same level as academic and professional experts. In addition to compensation we are also budgeting $2,000 for storyweaver supplies so they don't have to pay out-of-pocket for materials necessary to their creative output.

Measuring Success

Success in community storytelling initiatives like Stories for Our Times requires a nuanced approach to evaluation that honors both measurable outcomes and the less tangible but vital aspects of relationship-building and meaning-making. We plan to track the initiative's impact through a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures, while remaining mindful that the process of building trust and connection is itself a significant outcome.

We will gather data through several methods:

- Evaluations from storyweavers and storykeepers

- Audience surveys, online or at end-of-project celebrations
- Tracking of audience engagement numbers and story distribution
- Debriefing sessions with storyweavers
- Structured reflection sessions with History Cambridge staff
- Documentation of audience responses and feedback
- Ongoing dialogue with our growing network of project stakeholders

While we value these formal metrics, we recognize that the true measure of success in this work extends beyond data. We believe that a successful Stories for Our Times project demonstrates several key qualities:

- Strong relationships have formed between storykeeper and storyweaver, and between both participants and History Cambridge—relationships that have potential to extend beyond the project itself
- All participants remained engaged throughout the process, indicating the project structure supported their needs and honored their contributions
- Stories were shared with Cambridge residents in formats that were accessible and engaging to them
- The stories exist in forms that allow for continued sharing and impact beyond the initial project period
- Both the process and final results created space for authentic and meaningful engagement—moving beyond mere information sharing to foster genuine connection
- Participants, including the broader Cambridge community, gained new insights or understanding through the process
- As one of our planning team members put it, “the project hit paydirt,” reaching that sweet spot where personal narrative connects to larger community meaning

It's important to note that as we experiment with new approaches to local history, not every project will achieve all of these measures of success. We view each project as an opportunity to learn and refine our approach. We want to avoid the tendency to prioritize efficiency and predetermined outcomes over authentic relationship-building and collaborative processes. Success ultimately lies in creating conditions where stories can emerge organically, where participants feel genuinely valued, and where the process itself models the kind of social cohesion we hope to strengthen in our city. By maintaining this balanced perspective on evaluation, we can better understand our impact while staying true to the spirit of constructive community storytelling.

Celebrating

Celebration plays a vital role in Stories for Our Times, serving both to honor the contributions of participants, and to strengthen the social bonds the initiative aims to build. We see these celebrations not merely as concluding events but rather opportunities to deepen community connections and extend the impact of the stories themselves.

Each Stories for Our Times project will culminate in a gathering designed to:

- Honor the storykeepers' wisdom and life experience
- Recognize the storyweaver’s creative work in crafting and sharing these narratives
- Create space for broader community engagement with the stories
- Model the kind of social cohesion the initiative seeks to build

The specific format of each celebration will be shaped by the nature of the project and the preferences of the participants. Some projects might call for intimate gatherings in neighborhood spaces, while others might benefit from larger community celebrations. What matters most is that the celebration feels authentic to the stories being shared and creates meaningful opportunities for connection. Some of our celebration ideas include:

- After the project's stories are presented, inviting attendees to share their own related Cambridge stories so that the celebration becomes a storyweaving experience for everyone
- A potluck celebration where residents share not just stories but also a meal
- Opportunities to commemorate each project with participants, such as bound copies of their stories, photographs documenting their collaboration, or other meaningful mementos that help preserve the experience and their role in strengthening Cambridge's social fabric.

Through these celebrations, we aim to demonstrate that Stories for Our Times is not just about preserving individual narratives, but about bringing people together. The celebrations thus become their own stories for our times—moments when Cambridge residents gather to honor wisdom, build connection, and imagine our future together.

Building a Stories for Our Times Archive

Over time, our intention is to build an entire collection of Stories for Our Times that serves as a vital resource for Cambridge residents. This collection will grow through two complementary approaches. First, through a series of dedicated projects with storykeepers and storyweavers following the process outlined in this toolkit—each grant funded, and each building and improving on the ones that came before.

Second, because we believe our Stories for Our Times framework is so important and relevant to the work of local history in our present context, we will also look for opportunities to identify and share Stories for Our Times through our other ongoing projects. We see potential to integrate Stories for Out Times into our Neighborhood History Centers (focusing on a different part of the city each year), our online History Hubs (digital collections of blog posts and resources organized by topic), the History Hive (a crowdsourced local history Q&A program), guided tours, summer block party booths, and History Hangs (informal local history gatherings in different parts of the city).

By weaving and sharing Stories for Our Times through these different channels, we aim to create a rich, multi-layered humanities collection that reminds Cambridge residents they are part of a long tradition of collective resilience and care. This growing archive will serve as both historical documentation and practical resource—helping current and future residents draw on community wisdom as they navigate their own times of change and challenge.

Timeline

Pre Project	Phase 1: Preparation ● History Cambridge secures project funding ● History Cambridge continually keeps an eye out for potential storyweavers and storykeepers through its network and ongoing activities around the city
Month 1-3	Phase 2: Project Development ● History Cambridge recruits and selects storyweaver and collaborates with them to develop their project concept ● History Cambridge announces the project through its communication channels ● History Cambridge works to build a strong relationship of trust with the storyweaver
Month 4-5	Phase 3: Listening ● Storyweaver secures commitment from 3-5 storykeepers, and collaborates with them to collect their stories and determine how they will be shared ● History Cambridge provides guidance on any historical research the storyweaver needs to conduct ● History Cambridge holds bi-weekly meetings with storyweaver to support and document the process and help troubleshoot any issues that surface ● History Cambridge shares regular updates on the project through its communication channels
Month 6-7	Phase 4: Story Weaving ● Storyweaver works to weave the storykeepers' stories into a creative format that can be shared with the city at large ● History Cambridge holds bi-weekly meetings with storyweaver to support and document the process, help troubleshoot any issues that surface, and collaborate on the creative format through successive iterations
Month 8	Phase 5: Celebration ● The project is completed and shared with the city ● History Cambridge hosts a celebration to honor the storykeepers, the storyweaver, and the stories themselves ● History Cambridge collects participant and audience data to measure the impact of the project ● History Cambridge holds a project debrief to understand what worked and didn't work, and lessons learned to improve the process going forward ● Project documentation is archived with History Cambridge ● The storykeepers and storyweaver join History Cambridge's Stories for Our Times network, with potential for further weaving and collaboration between individual projects

Draft Budget

Storyweaver compensation	$7,000
Storyweaver supplies	$2,000
Storykeeper compensation	$3,000
History Cambridge staff time	$4,000
Documenting and sharing project	$1,000
Translation services	$1,000
Clinical social worker support	$2,500
Food	$250
End of project celebration	$500
Contingency	$2,125
Total	$23,375

This toolkit will be updated as a result of ongoing testing. For the most recent version, contact us at info@historycambridge.org

STORIES FOR OUR TIMES:
Storyweaver Training Workbook
2024

This workbook is designed to give you tools for collecting meaningful stories in your community—and, hopefully, to help you refine your own tools to pass on to future Storyweavers. We are honored to share with you this first draft of our training workbook.

—Diana Limbach Lempel
info@historycambridge.org

PREPARING YOURSELF AND LEARNING TO LISTEN

Free writing and thinking aloud

During the research process, you will need tools for having conversations with yourself and thinking aloud. My preferred method is freewriting. This is the thing I do in my protected space and time. When I'm deep in a project I try to do it every day, so that I can really notice what I am thinking about. There are too many things in my mind to filter out the useful stuff, and to really have new thoughts, without making dedicated space. Here's how it works: I get a piece of paper, or you could have a dedicated notebook (space!), and a pen. It's important for me not to do this on the computer, where I feel like I'm "working." Then I put the date on the paper and just. start. writing. About what I'm thinking about my project, about what I did yesterday, about what I'm doing today. Sometimes I will write, what should I do next? And then I'll spend half a page wondering about that. Free writing is the time when I can ask myself questions. I can say wait a minute, I noticed I'm really pissed off about that. What's going on? Why am I so upset? Then I might stop and clock the tightness in my chest and say ah, I felt that feeling when I was in that meeting when I felt like I had the answer but couldn't put it into words. I don't stop—that's the key! Don't let yourself stop!—until I've finished at least both sides of an 8.5x11" sheet. My hand is tired afterwards and I am grateful for keyboards. You might like to have conversations with yourself out loud, instead of on paper—I once worked for a lawyer who would just sit in front of a microphone and think out loud about the case he was working on. You might like to have these conversations on a walk, a run, or while you're gardening. If this isn't something you already do, you can experiment to see what you can stick with and what really helps you get deep. More on this in the research methods section.

Creativity

Creativity and intuition are the result of taking different pieces of information and connecting them in startling ways. Sometimes they require “taking a leap” from an old way of thinking to a new one. Notice if you have spots in your day or week when you are able to let your mind wander. Notice what kind of seemingly unrelated ideas, media, images, stories, and activities you are drawn to during this process. Don’t stop doing them because they “don’t seem like work.” Instead find ways to let them slowly seep into the rest of your mind and mix and mingle with the work parts. Showers are notorious places for flashes of insight, as are those conversations with yourself. And dreams. If you find these insights feel just out of reach, or slip away as soon as you have them, maybe you want to focus on documenting them in your self-talk times. You never know when the next question, story, or interview narrator will come into your mind. But you have to be listening.

More on listening to yourself, and creativity, in Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way.*

Gratitude

By gratitude I don’t mean “feeling grateful for what you have.” I mean that you and I have a responsibility to acknowledge the gift of life. Everyone’s story is a gift you will be blessed to receive, and you are only the tender of these stories. You are keeping them alive, calling them to change as they continue their life over time and do the work in the world they need to do. I am grateful for you!

PRE-RESEARCH

Making maps of what matters in your community can help you notice what stories will be valuable to gather. Where are the places, people, and institutions that you know you need the support of in your life and work? Do they relate to each other? Do you need them to? Are they tightly collected or widely dispersed? Are they sufficient? Do you need something else? Do they need support in order to support you? How can you set up plans to activate this support network when you need to receive or process feedback, figure out how to give feedback, or metabolize difficult dynamics? How can they witness and celebrate you and the work you are doing?

Asset mapping

Assets are what people value. These are the resources that your community has to work with. Institutions and community groups, active neighbors and engaged youths, basketball courts with regular pickup games, dog parks with a regular meetup, knitting circles or dive bar hangouts. Religious institutions and their leaders, maybe. Public library branches. Awesome trees and excellent swingsets. Whatever your community values, or could value, are assets. And that is what projects are made of. What are things you notice that your community values? Do they know they value them? How do they show it?

Where to find information that’s already been collected

Cambridge has a wealth of data, stories, and information. Puritans revered the written word and kept meticulous records. Scholars have lived and written here for centuries. Archival collections are organized with directories called *finding aids*, which sometimes are interactive online, and sometimes are static documents that tell you what is available in the physical collection. If you need

help navigating a finding aid, the folks at any of these collections will be happy to help you. In general, archivists and librarians are a kind, generous and extremely knowledgeable bunch. And they all already work closely with us at History Cambridge and will know to expect you. Here's an overview of where you can find some of what's available:

The **Cambridge Public Library—Cambridge Room** keeps archival material from around the city. There are old maps, the key to the lock on the old powder magazine at Magazine Beach, collections from community members, photographers, you name it. If you want to research your family's history, you can go there. There are many digitized resources available as well, which you can find here: https://cambridgepl.libguides.com/cambridgehistory

The **Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC)** maintains files on every building in the city. If your house or a significant building in your neighborhood is older than the 1960s, there will also be a photo and documentation of it from the architectural survey that was done at that time. The key interest of these files is the architectural history of the city, but it also maintains newspaper clippings and things that might help you learn more about what people were doing at a certain time in that place, too. They will also have, like the library, directories of the city over time, old maps, and some assorted objects. Set up an appointment and they will help you learn how to look at things. You can check out their digital collections and inventories here: https://www.cambridgema.gov/historic/researchaids/archivalcollections

The **CHC** also hosted projects by oral historian Sarah Boyer for many years. She interviewed many residents of The Port (formerly Area 4), North Cambridge, Central Square, and East Cambridge, as well as gathering stories of the home front in Cambridge during WWII. It's possible that some of the people you are hoping to talk to were interviewed for that book. It's certain that many neighborhoods and communities of Cambridge were introduced to oral history by Sarah. The books are not indexed, so are difficult to use for research, but they are enormously wonderful and full of voices.

Kit Rawlins and Charlie Sullivan have been at the CHC for decades and know a lot about the city and how it's changed over the years.

You can access both CHC and Cambridge Room collections online at https://public.archivesspace.dlconsulting.com/repositories

The records of the **Oral History Center**, which operated in Cambridge in the 80s and 90s, are now housed in the archives at Northeastern University. https://archivesspace.library.northeastern.edu/repositories/2/resources/839

Harvard and MIT Libraries both have materials that are relevant to their own histories.

The Jukebox in the Foundry hosts many stories from Cambridge residents. It's an artwork by Elisa H. Hamilton. Many of the interviews were produced in collaboration with the **Cambridge Black History Project,** another wealth of resources which collaborates with the Cambridge Historical Commission and is closely connected also with us at History Cambridge. The full interviews are in the archival collections at the Cambridge Public Library Cambridge Room.

History Cambridge has many resources, including recent oral history projects and older archival collections. The history hubs are great places to start!

Other storytelling projects in and around Cambridge

- Miranda Santiago's guided tour of Cambridgeport for History Cambridge, weaving her own memories of growing up there in the 21st c with stories she collected from neighborhood elders
- Cambridge Center for Adult Education, Storytelling Workshop & Showcase taught by dramatist Andrea Apteker Storytelling Workshop & Showcase *In-Person* | CCAE
- See this feature on longtime Cambridge storyteller and street performer Hugh Morgan Hill, aka Brother Blue, who died in 2009 Brother Blue – Harvard Square
- Storyspace, a long-running Tuesday night storytelling event that met in person for many years and is now virtual. Story Space
- Arlington's True Story Theater has partnered with Cambridge organizations to bring stories such as Sarah Boyer's oral histories to life. True Story Theater

RESEARCH PROCESS

Research Phasing and Outreach

Outreach can be a really challenging part of a project, even if you are a longtime part of the community. People are busy and don't answer their phones. Some people only text or email, some people want you to drop by their home. Some of your research schedule will be determined by chance or necessity: like, this person will be in town for summer break, or, this community event only happens once a year, or, I have childcare today so I will spend the day at the library, or, that person hasn't called me back so I guess I'll go to the next person on my list. But it is still worth it to think about what order you want to do things in. Do you want to start with old newspaper articles so that you have more context before you start asking people questions, or do you want to hear personal stories first and then check out what was being said in the media at the time? Do you want to begin speaking with elders or with youth? Are there rifts or factions in your community to take into account, or leaders who you should definitely speak with first, out of respect? Or do you want to explicitly *not* speak with leaders first, since you suspect they will tell the "official" story (or will they?)? Do you want to start informally, asking questions at gatherings, or with official sit-down interviews? Keep in mind that people may ask you "who have you already talked to?" when you ask them for an interview, so your first voices can have a lot of impact on the direction of your project. Keep in mind also that early narrators can recommend future directions for interviews and other resources.

Interviewing

I'm going to spend some time now delving specifically into the tools of interviewing that I have developed and taught over the past decade-or-so, since I assume much of what you will be doing is interviewing community members.

What makes a good interview?

Sometimes you want to do an interview **to get information**.
Other times you want **to hear personal stories**.

Sometimes you want to know **about a person's life.**
Other times you want to know **about a particular thing** that they know about.

For our purposes, a good interview is one that surfaces emotionally resonant memories. In order to do this, you have to get past "storytelling small talk"—the prepared remarks and the simple observation of "wow I remember that!"—and down to the same *click-into-place* feeling that you are working to get to in your own thinking.

Oral history methods are tools for getting to this deeper kind of storytelling, though you may want to use information interviews sometimes too. The key components of oral history are: open-ended questions, follow-up questions, and silence.

Types of interviews

- **For information:**
  - **o** Closed questions ("when did that happen?" "who decided that?)
  - **o** Prepared in advance (all interviewees can be compared, cover all your bases)
  - **o** Interviewee answers what the interviewer thinks is important to ask
  - **o** Interested in facts and clarity
  - **o** You probably want to take notes
  - **o** Who, what, when, where

- **For stories (oral histories):**
  - o Open ended questions ("why do you think…?" "do you remember when…?")
  - o Unscripted
  - o Allows the "narrator" to lead the direction of the interview, with the interviewer as a guide through topics of MUTUAL INTEREST (don't let them go on and on about things you don't care about!)
  - o Interested in interpretations, meanings, memory, imagination
  - o You don't want to take notes because it takes you away for the interview
  - o How, why
  - o Let the first 15 min AT LEAST be a "life history:" just let them tell the story of their life as they want to tell it. Then you can get focused on your research question, or continue
  - o For this project, you are conducting what is called a "focused interview." This means that while your conversation will be open ended and rely on good follow up questions rather than pre-designed interview questions, it *is* meant to draw out a certain kind of material from your narrator. You will want to keep your finger on that goal and lovingly guide your narrator there throughout the process, while also noticing if they are leading you somewhere interesting that you didn't expect, that might open up new possibilities.

Basic oral history interview principles

- **An oral history is shared property between interviewer and narrator.** You should return a copy of your interview recording (however you are storing them) to your narrator as soon as possible.

- **Ask for permission:** this can include a permission form if you are planning on saving the interviews in an archive (here is our form). It should be simple and clear. If you are talking with kids, be especially clear about what kind of permissions you need. Be sure that narrators know their consent is ongoing and conditional: they can withdraw or adjust the terms anytime before, during, or after the interview, but it's best to start with a simple, basic consent form instead of giving them lots of choice and conditions from the beginning, or the archive receiving the collection may never be able to share them!

- **Use their names?** In social science research, it is often considered most ethical to omit peoples' names from your research notes and final products. This is because the purpose of social science research is to make abstract claims about *people in general*, and so including individual people's names in your research oversteps boundaries by allowing them to be an individual. However, in oral history, the individual voice and the personal story are valued above all else. Naming people guarantees that *they will be remembered and acknowledged.* But some people may prefer not to share their names. You use your judgment, and we will help you with that.

- **Hospitality is key in an interview.** Sometimes people are more comfortable in their own space, but sometimes people would prefer to meet somewhere more neutral. Make sure each of you has a glass of water or another drink, a comfortable chair for sitting in for a while, and tissues.

- When you arrive in your chosen location, **listen to the physical environment!** Are there sounds that you can hear that can be removed from the environment, for example a ticking clock or an air conditioner? If they can't be removed, experiment with placing your recorder in different orientations and locations to minimize that background noise as much as possible. If there are sounds that are narratively relevant—children in the background, soundmarks, the sounds of work being done—be sure to mention them during the interview, either at the beginning or when they come up. Same with interruptions like sudden sirens, a likely occurrence during urban interviews.

- **Gentle eye contact:** too much staring will make people feel uncomfortable, too little will make them feel like you're not paying attention. You can practice this. See if you can find something that works for you and sets a tone of "this is not a regular conversation"—sanctifies it, even.

- **Attentive body language, including mirroring** their pose or position, and taking their lead about how close to sit and how much to lean in.

- **Mirroring language:** if you notice that your narrator uses specific terminology, use that too. Like if they refer to a time period by the place where they were living, don't refer to it as "the

nineties." If they call their grandpa "pop-pop," don't say "your grandfather." You may feel it's important to ask permission for this ("is it ok if I call him pop-pop?").

- **Active listening** means that you are not thinking about your next question as you are listening. This is hard to do but giving yourself permission to go slowly will help. A pause when they finish talking will signal to them that you are taking your time and that they can take all the time they need, too.

- **Patience:** silence helps draw out the stories, understandings, and interpretations that are underneath their usual patterns of thought.

- **Save them from themselves:** if a narrator gets stuck on a topic, or veers into a topic you don't want to go deep into (say, something really technical about their work or hobby, a rambling story about nothing in particular, or a personal tirade about a grudge or resentment), you can lovingly interrupt and redirect them. You don't have to let them dwell in something painful, but you can be skilful about guiding them close to something and letting them decide how deep to go.

- **Be there for them:** It is not ethical to bring your own business into an interview, which is why you are freewriting and debriefing with trusted collaborators throughout this process.. If your *narrator* is having a hard time, you can stop the interview, give them a tissue (bring tissues!), take your time, invite them to notice something that feels good to look at, invite them to slow down, all the things you are doing when you listen to yourself.

- **Record and save the interview** (see below)

Oral History Technical Basics

Recording your oral histories—gear and sound

- I just use my phone, but I used to use a Sony PCM-M10, which if you want to be able to share between people or not have a recorder attached to a phone, is a solid choice. It's good for environmental sound as well as voice—it records in stereo, taking in information in two speakers, as opposed to a microphone, which would record a voice in a single channel so that your headphones would hear left and right identically.

- This is the place to learn more about gear.

- The HowSound podcast will let you learn even more about these issues if they interest you.

- Invest in a wind screen for whatever recorder you use, because you may find yourself wanting to interview someone outside and wind will kill your sound. You can put a sock or the cut-off foot of a pair of tights over your recorder in a pinch.

- Just be sure your recorder is on a stable place in between you and your narrator—a tripod can help make sure the table doesn't conduct its own sound directly to the recorder and

muddy the voices, like the time I interviewed a man who smacked the wooden table with his heavy-ringed hand over and over throughout the interview.

- Sound check and listen to your room before you get started to make sure you troubleshoot any clear sound problems in advance.

Archiving your oral histories—basic best practices

- Save all sound files in .wav format if you can—.mp3 is good for online uses and sharing, but doesn't last as long or save as much information.

- Save in multiple places and formats (a high-quality external drive, cloud storage, a thumb drive elsewhere…). Use archival quality CDs for long term storage.

- Adopt a consistent metadata format for all of your projects. for example: PROJECTNAME_LASTNAME_FIRSTNAME_INTERVIEWDATE.WAV

- **Create a keyword list for every interview even if you don't make a full transcript!!!!!,** so that you and History Cambridge can easily develop search terms from your oral histories (*at least* all proper nouns, and big ideas). This will help YOU to get a picture of what the trends and topics are that come up over and over, too, so be sure you use consistent terminology throughout.

Sharing your oral histories—digital tools and platforms

- Soundcloud will host your audio files publicly or privately—you can tag them so the public can find them based on search, and they can be annotated in the audio, which is great. There are soundcloud plugins on many blogging platforms and websites which makes it easy to incorporate an oral history into a page.

- Editing softwares are a matter of personal taste. Radio folks favor hindenberg. I use reaper. Another free program is audacity. If you are doing lots of sound mixing, the gold standard is pro tools.

Your sensitive antennae: noticing how it feels in your body
As you do your research, see if you can notice what it feels like for you when you find, read, or hear something *important.* Is it a click-into-place? A zing or a jolt? Is it like an opening in a doorway? Is it like the brain explosion emoji 🤯?

SHARING + STORY

As your research process progresses, you'll want to start thinking about what it all means, and how you might communicate that back to your community and out to the city at large. In keeping with the idea of reciprocity, think about ways of sharing the oral histories that support that value.

Generosity, reciprocity, and analysis

I think of interpretation and communication as **offerings**.

What we are asking of you as a Storyweaver is not to simply collect and repeat what you hear, but to *weave stories together* to make something new and meaningful. This means you will need to *interpret* what you hear. How do you make sense of the stories you are now carrying? What do they tell and point you towards? How will you weave them together into a new narrative for the future? This process is both analytical and intuitive. At some point you will just get a *feeling* about what you hear. This may happen during the process even before you finish. Trust those feelings. All researchers get them. But in between the feelings, you can work the data (words, pictures, things, and ideas can be data as much as numbers can).

Here are some questions to ask yourself:
What are the patterns in what you are hearing?

> You might highlight keywords in your transcripts, draw pictures of commonalities you notice, write your impressions of themes and recurring words, stories, images, and places. Maybe you plot those things on a map. Maybe you make lists of keywords. Counting words that repeat can be a simple and revealing process.

Where do your instincts point you about what's IMPORTANT in what you're hearing?

Have any coincidences or surprises gathered around particular people, places, stories, or ideas? These are called *synchronicities* and *they do happen when we're on to something.*

You might try comparing things *within* your research —like seeing what the similarities and differences are between different people's accounts of the same event

You might try comparing with things *outside* your research—like seeing the similarities and differences between an interview and newspaper articles, or a secondary source

You might try asking narrators or community members or collaborators for how they interpret something you found out, and noticing the patterns or trends in *their* responses

Things you can notice about language

(these may also be things you can also track and engage with *during* an interview. What words, phrases, or areas of content signal these things to you? Can you prompt your narrator to move between different ways of talking so you can get a feel for their full range of experience?)

- Register - this refers to *how* a person talks. The pace, whether they use specialized language, the authority they have, the volume of their voice. Are they casual or formal?

- Collective narratives ("knowledge") v. personal narratives—does your narrator talk as if they were a book? "Back in those days everyone…" or do they bring you into their own lives "On Saturday mornings my mother…" I find that specific, sensory questions like "tell me about a

typical day" or "what did your bedroom look like?" can coax someone who has trouble getting down to earth. And questions like "why do you think that was so?" "I've heard some people say…" for the folks who struggle to interpret their experience on their own.

- Feelings and thoughts—does your narrator engage the tender parts of their story, build a wall against them, or get swept away by their undertow?

- If you find something that *frustrates* or *surprises* or *confuses* you, congratulations! You have (probably, once you figure it out) discovered two things: a **finding**, and a new question! A finding is just a way of saying "something you have found out."

Once you have a finding, or a new perspective, or an interpretation, or a synthesis, you have the opportunity to communicate your new ideas.

Sometimes researchers worry that they are "imposing" themselves onto their data/community/stories when they do this. If you are thinking of it as an offering though, you are not imposing yourself. You are *giving yourself* to the data and the community and the stories. It's an act of service, and of stewardship.

Stories

When we create stories out of our life experiences, we are organizing them into a structure so that we can make sense of them. The storyteller has to *give* it a clear beginning point and an end point, in order to have a shape; the storyteller chooses the theme and the events that matter, what to include and what to leave out, and the characters that are important. In this way, making stories can be tremendously therapeutic. It gives us a sense of control and meaning that we don't have when we're living through something.

A story about stories *and what they mean* to a community are the community's **narrative.**

Story Components

- **Setting and Environment:** In Cambridge we have abandoned houses and urban wildlife, old factories and new glass-and-chrome buildings, sunrises and sunsets, the Charles River, old trees and new trees, and many other possibilities for non-human forces that act in your story. The *setting* in your story can tell as much as the people do. Does your story take place in a single place, or in multiple locations? What are the main attributes of those places? What will help the audience really FEEL that place, what was the most important about those places in your research?

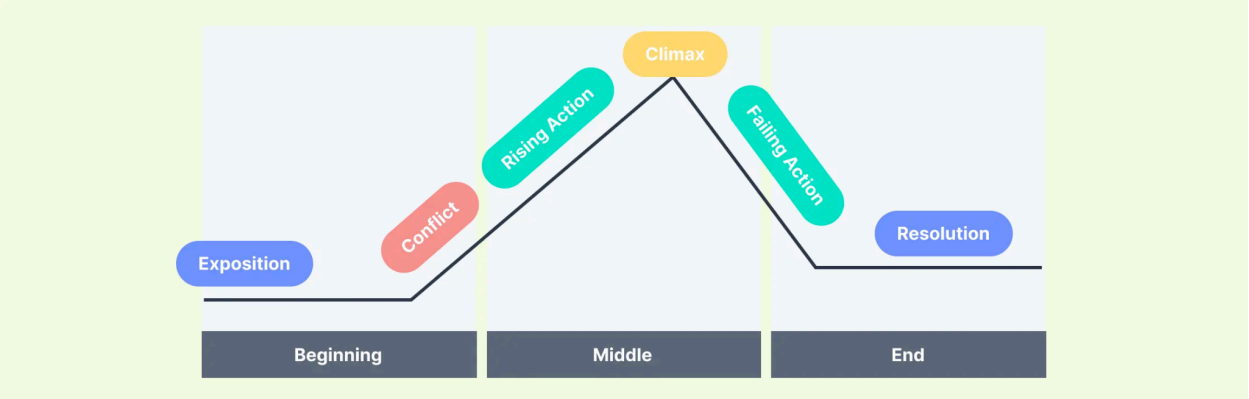
- **Narrator**: If there is an "I" in your story, who is it?

  A story has a main character —in your oral histories, did you notice a main character? It may have been your narrator themselves, but maybe it sometimes was a parent or a community figure or a sibling or a child. Sometimes parents realize that they are supporting characters in their child's drama; sometimes it's painful or even impossible for people to step into the

spotlight and see themselves as an important part of the story. Sometimes, people are unwilling to share the stage, and make everything about themselves. (There's probably some of all of this in all of us.) And sometimes, the main character could even be a whole group of people, acting together.

Will you tell the same story from many perspectives? A series of stories? One story that is a combination of many that you heard, or retell a single story that stood out to you as particularly powerful? Your own story, informed by all that you learned?

- **Plot: A story has a structure.** There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. It's not just a collection of information. It has motion and it holds together with a clear idea and plot. Often this looks like the structure of a literary plot: a conflict, a climax, and a resolution.



https://creately.com/guides/plot-diagram-guide/

Lives don't exist like this diagram, right? They just go and go, until they end. Nothing is ever as neat in our lives as a plot or a story. Sometimes the things we experience are "unbelievable" and "stranger than fiction" and "a coincidence you couldn't make up." Sometimes the things we experience are dull and repetitive, an endless series of details that never climax at all. Choosing how to shape these details into a structure is one of your most important storytelling tools, because it is a choice about what to emphasize and how to describe cause-and-effect.

- **Time:** When is your story set? Does it take place on a single day, or over a week, or over a long period of time? Maybe it takes place on the same day over many years. How will you communicate the passage of time to your audience?

- **Symbol, imagination, and metaphor:** Would it help your story to create a metaphor, or to personify an aspect of what seems unbelievable? Maybe you could look to fairy tales or myths and legends from your tradition to find them?

What makes a story feel authentic?

I don't know about you, but few things make me more annoyed than stories that feel too simple. Whether they are overly negative or overly positive, when it seems like everything is black and white, it all seems too easy to me. The characters feel fake, the plot seems forced, and the whole thing

makes me want to roll my eyes, no matter how heartwarming it is. Here are some of my observations about what makes a story feel real, by which I mean *emotionally true,* to me. I wonder what *you* think makes a successful story.

engage the specifics: no one is all good or all evil, and no story is all grief or all joy. Remember how we talked about finding the small thing in the room that feels good to look at? There are always those small things. Stories can use them really thoughtfully. You have an advantage here: your stories come from real life. The specifics and the real humans are already there. See if you can find ways to bring them out.

A story isn't hopeful because nothing bad happens. In fact, we can only have hope *because* bad stuff happens. Just like you can't be brave if you're not afraid, and you can't solve a problem if there's not one in your path to begin with. What really *is* the problem? Using your researcher's toolkit, get to the *heart* of it, and share your full understanding with your audience, as simply, vividly and clearly as you can.

What forms can a story take?

Stories are most commonly shared through writing and through speaking. Other methods add visuals: posters, artwork, backdrops, puppets, costumes, murals, videos. You can tell your story out loud live and in person, or record it for others to listen to later. Are you most drawn to one of these methods? Do you like the idea of having images to go with your story, or do you favor the words? Maybe there's a *sensory/non-narrative/nonverbal* component to your sharing, such as food, music, a parade, a showcase, a visit to a physical location. In one storytelling tradition, for example, the storyteller narrates with the help of illustrations on a large backdrop, which may be painted on a canvas or sheet that travels with them. Maybe you want to make or fix something, a physical thing, or collect physical things to share (an exhibition). Do you want to transmit your stories directly, so that people have to interact with you in order to receive the story, do you want to present from a stage, or do you want others to be able to find and consume it at their own leisure? Do you need a partner or collaborators to help you with this part, or are you excited to do it on your own?

Some of these decisions will come from your strengths. Some may come from your curiosity! And others may come from what you think the audience and the content require.

Story Circles

Interpretive stories—the kind we are talking about here—can "salt" similar, deeply meaningful stories in a community setting. This is the power of **witness and testimony.** When you weave stories together and make meaning of them in your own offering, then people can apply the themes and observations from that story to their own lives, and they feel inspired to share something similar, even if it was something they hadn't previously understood.

Story circles, then, can be a method for collecting stories, but also a space for just being together. The example stories serve as a guide post to keep people focused on the topic at hand without making it abstract: they can *feel* how it works in their own lives.

Here is one resource: **https://usdac.us/storycircles**

Public Programs

History Cambridge has many existing programs and opportunities for you to share your work. Maybe you can think of how your storytelling could fit into one or more of them?

. History Cafes over zoom and in person
. Guided tours
. Community gatherings
. Storefront installations
. Block parties
. Public signage
. Art installations
. Newspaper articles
. E-newsletter and website
. History Kits for bringing to schools and other community organizations

Maybe you want to collaborate with a partner organization or business, which is already a hub for your community. History Cambridge collaborates with many partners around the city, and the staff will be happy to help support you to find possible collaborators or develop a project with a collaborator that you have chosen.

We hope this guidebook is a useful beginning for your work as a Storyweaver. We are continuously revising and updating this guide as we experiment with our methods, so please reach out to us directly for the most recent edition.

Thank you for your work!