

## **Using Elder Stories to Understand the Continuity of History**

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### **Overview**

A perennial challenge that we face as history teachers is how to make history relevant to our students. There are many ways to turn the material environment into thresholds to historical events: architecture, cemeteries, monuments, place names and landscapes can all be turned into thresholds to historical narratives found in history text books. This unit seeks to enrich the task of connecting local resources to broader historical narratives while helping students to recognize ways in which local historical narratives are embedded in ordinary language and how they can be “read” out of ordinary materials, especially through the stories of neighborhood elders. The collection, transcription, and reading of the stories of elders will be a way to introduce students to concepts that are used by historians and folklorists to piece together and understand how historical narratives frame our lives.

By reading and collecting stories from elders in a community, students should be able to use these primary sources to gain an understanding of their present day lives and make a prediction of how the future will be influenced by such knowledge. It is imperative that students in the social studies understand the connection between past, present, and future time; the unit stresses this connection and allows teachers a way to explore it easily in their classrooms.

Teachers at almost every grade level can adapt this unit to fit their needs. It is necessary to stress at every level that history is not only a study of past events, but also an ever-evolving understanding of how those events affect people today and will affect people tomorrow. But “history” does not shape our world just by having happened: it shapes our world through processes of transmission. Too often in the school the telling involves a teacher using a textbook and teaching aids to transmit the story to students, who are treated as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. In this unit, students will be

encouraged to identify and explore the many forms taken by historical discourse in their own lives, and to reflect on how they evaluate their own sources of history. In particular, students will be encouraged to explore and appreciate the role of elders and the “objects of memory” that precipitate historical narratives in deepening a sense of participation in a time frame that exceeds the human life span. That sense of participation, grounded in storytelling, is vital to an understanding of historical continuity.

Having students understand this concept of continuity in history is the key to getting them hooked on the course material for the rest of the year. Using elder stories and interviews with elders in the students’ community is essential to making this understanding fun and relevant.

As previously stated, this unit was intended for use primarily with students studying African-American History at the high school level. However, this unit can exhibit positive results using similar resources at the middle and elementary school levels, in various History courses. At any level, the purpose is to demonstrate change over time, cultivate respect for one’s elders and their experiences as learning tools, and grasp through first-hand experience some of the ways historians use primary and secondary sources. For teachers wishing to impress upon students the power of primary sources, this unit is ideal; it not only presents them with examples such as the WPA slavery narratives from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it also encourages students to create primary sources out of interviews with members of their community. Analysing and reflecting on such sources, students learn to engage in higher-level thinking. The preparation can be more labor intensive for the teacher, but the level of difficulty can be adjusted according to the grade and skill levels of participating students.

In short, this unit is meant for teachers at all grade levels to get their students elbow-deep in the methods and materials most commonly used by modern historians and history writers. Once students recognize how they disconnect themselves from history, and learn that their own time is not the center of history, they can experience and create communal connectedness through interviews with elders. Having worked to produce a primary source (a tape-recorded interview and transcription), students can explore how interpretation produces the secondary source, that is, a historical narrative of their community. This experience should motivate a fuller engagement with the rest of the course be it 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Social Studies, 7<sup>th</sup> grade Geography, or 11<sup>th</sup> grade American History. Using all or part of this unit at the beginning of a school year is a perfect and entertaining way to introduce the relevance of studying the past. It is meant to serve as the foundation for the rest of the year’s lessons and should encourage teachers to bring the present day and primary sources into their classrooms as a foil to the textbook past that often seems so irrelevant.

## **Rationale**

Exploring the students' experience of history as something that is part of everyday life, produced through ordinary forms of communication is a way to make the work of the historian not only relevant, but subject to critique. Like the elders whose recollections will help students write a history of their neighborhood, the author of the textbook has a point of view. Two assumptions account for the greater authority given to the textbook. One is that the author has made a good-faith effort to correct for "bias," or point-of-view. The other is that things that appear in print are more authoritative. Textbooks lure students into a false sense of security. "If I read it in the textbook, it is true!" All teachers cringe when they can even sense this statement in the minds of their students. So then we must ask ourselves, both teacher and student: What is the purpose of studying History at the elementary or secondary level?

Here is where History teachers become guides to life. Students look to teachers for the answers, the right versus the wrong, truth versus fallacy. They tend to want an assurance that life is full of absolutes and that their teacher knows everything and is willing to share. The student is then confounded when the teacher must admit that he/she are not an encyclopedia; they are instead a self-help book. Thus, a teacher does not give "the answer", he teaches the student how to find an answer with the information given. As the saying goes, "Give a man a fish, he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will never go hungry." In much the same way, teaching is not only about imparting knowledge or skills for a single subject, but for providing students ways to think about the world around them. Armed with an open mind, students become the teachers.

This is all meant to get students to the realization that History, and life, are open-ended subjects with many ways to approach the same topics. How, then, should these subjects be approached? Academically, it is important to instill a few key skills in students very early on in their education. This requires the massing of a historian's "toolbox". Teachers fill the "toolbox" with skills that can help students make informed decisions in a variety of situations. Ultimately, skills and concepts are being explained and demonstrated to students by teachers and then students are encouraged to apply these "tools" appropriately, first with practice and then throughout life and without further guidance. A teacher has done his job when he can pose a question and his students can take opposing points of view to respond on both "why?" and "why not?"

The overarching and arguably most important concept that can be learned is the continuity of history. Succinctly, it is the idea that past events influence the present and help us predict the future. Understanding this concept provides the answer for why humans study History. Not only do we as a species have a desire to understand the present state of things, we also have the ever-present yearning to predict our future. In both cases, a well-rounded study of the past is essential to satiating our appetites. Why are things the way they are? What does the future hold for us? One need only look at the past to come up with a satisfying answer. As educators, however, we must realize that a satisfying answer is not enough. Instead, we must strive for a "good" answer, a "fair"

answer, a “well-researched” or “fairly unbiased” answer. This is where a historian’s “toolbox” can come in handy.

We produce and consume history not only through textbooks, but also through various forms of communication – written and oral – that make up “historical discourse.” By “historical discourse,” I mean the many genres, or forms, of communication we use to present history as a model that links past, present, and future events. Genres of oral communication that establish historical continuity can include: stories of how places were settled or named; of how a family’s name was changed; how a child’s name was chosen; stories about why certain foods are consumed on special or ordinary occasions; sayings and proverbs that preserve memories of people who used them; or the recurring events that bring sayings and stories to mind. Occasions on which historical discourse is most prominent may include rites that mark important life events, including birth, naming, marriage, anniversaries, and death. At larger corporate levels, events that commemorate the foundings of neighborhoods, towns, and nations are similarly marked by oral and written rehearsals of historical narratives. Rehearsing the stories of various social groups is a way of renewing in individuals a sense of participation in a larger group by calling attention to shared origins and destinies. Written forms of communication that fix historical discourse on such occasions may include local historical pamphlets, cookbooks, texts of speeches, tee shirts, mugs, posters, and so forth.

Our students have all been exposed to these forms of communication, and exploring their knowledge of the ways in which historical information is transmitted in community life can be a way to motivate them to explore history further on their own. The teacher’s task is then to relate these communal productions of historical narrative to the history text book. History textbooks that deal broadly with state, national, and world historical events cannot make the connection to local events and communities that are affected. This is a key connection that can be made through the students themselves. Guiding students through the discovery of how people in their communities, particularly older generations, relate their life experiences to larger historical events, is an effective way to teach them what history is and why it is important to them.

Widening the view of historical discourse beyond the history textbook will facilitate understandings of conceptual tools on which historians rely, including the concept of continuity, the distinction between primary and secondary sources, and the need to identify and correct for bias, both in reading and in writing history. Turning to community histories will require the understanding of some additional concepts as well, including the linked concepts of cultural memory and the human unit of time, and the concepts of genres of speaking and objects of memory. Skills to be cultivated in students include critical reading and writing and critical listening and speaking. These skills will be cultivated through planning and conducting tape-recorded interviews with community elders, the transcription and analysis of the interviews, and the writing up of a local history narrative, based on transcriptions and additional research into source materials.

Sources come in several categories, the two most common being primary sources and secondary sources. Tertiary sources and the like also exist, but will not be dealt with in this unit. Once students possess knowledge of the differences between primary and secondary sources, they are able to label source material appropriately and can begin to analyze source material to explore the continuity of history.

One of the goals of Social Studies is to engage students with source material, and to familiarize them with the functions, biases, and limitations of different types of primary and secondary sources. Preparing students to evaluate source materials in the future helps them to develop higher-level thinking and analytical skills. Our personal objective as educators is to bring history alive and promote higher-level thinking by constantly and consistently engaging students with source materials. However, students need instruction on how to properly label and analyze source material before becoming engaged. This unit will get the students to that point by building on the students' own experience: How are oral genres of historical discourse labeled and evaluated in everyday life? How do they function? What points of view and social relationships are preserved in the transcriptions? What experiences of national and world historical events are registered? How would you determine their usefulness in the writing of a local history?

Examples of the kind of use that historians of these primary sources will be examined as well, and students will reflect on how the meanings of the source materials may be affected by the historians' use of them. How does the historian use such materials to represent multiple points of view?

Students will learn to learn how to look at both oral and written sources as windows into another, unfamiliar world in order to fully grasp the blurred division between primary and secondary sources. Two helpful ways to look at a source are interpretation and point of view, both of which are discussed below.

One source frequently relied upon by historians are newspapers. What genres of communication and historical discourse are captured in newspapers? Is the writer's point of view hidden or exposed? Does it engage openly with the points of view documented in writing? Does it use labels for spoken genres, such as "hearsay," "rumor," "story," "account"? Today's newspaper story is a compilation of facts and opinions, a source with a secondary point of view. However, as time passes and the emergent nature of the story becomes less urgent and present, the same newspaper story serves as a primary reference to the "people's" feelings at that date in history. As readers, we see the same story differently as we look through different eyes and for different purposes; context means everything when categorizing a source. The same can be said of an interview. A black woman recalling her family's move up from Georgia to Boston during the Great Migration is bound to pepper the tale with "how other people felt" about her move into a primarily white neighborhood. On what basis do people decide whether hearsay is

reliable? One would not write this up as history, but as a woman's story. A student hearing this story can take at face value the idea that this woman believed she was experiencing animosity and prejudice, and those feelings in another light are real, factual, and can be powerful first-hand testaments to a time and place. To determine how to relate the woman's story to larger historical events that stimulated the migration north, one might consult secondary sources to see what sense has been made of such accounts by other historians. Categorizing a source as primary or secondary is challenging, but what must always be kept in mind is the point of view of both author and reader and the reason for interpreting the source.

Primary sources require students to fill their historian's "toolbox" with a variety of smaller skills, namely: telling the difference between primary and secondary sources, reading bias or point of view in a primary source, contextualizing a primary source by using secondary sources, and applying a primary source to the history continuum. The difference between primary and secondary sources has already been explored above. What follows is a discussion of the other skills needed in order to properly use primary sources. Oral histories are used as examples to demonstrate these skills because of their connection to the unit's purpose.

#### *Reading Point of View in a Primary Source*

Teachers must be able to use students' strengths to create learning opportunities. In the case of determining the point of view of a primary source such as an elder story or oral history, teachers must break down the steps of listening and understanding into bite-sized lessons for students. Point of view is difficult to separate from context of time and place, but – for the purpose of this discussion – context will be explored later.

A point of view, or bias, can help explain an individual's purpose for telling a story, and her stake in the story's outcome and its meaning. A historian may use a point of view as a measure for how much of someone's story we will believe or discount. But a skilled historian will develop an account that embraces multiple points of view, accounting for the different kinds of impact historical events may have on different groups. Just as there is a craft to the writing of history, there is a craft to the telling of stories, and storytellers can also appropriate multiple points of view in the telling of their stories. Because both history writing and story telling are governed by rules, we can tell that another point of view has been introduced. It is interesting to compare how the writer of history frames different points of view, and how the storyteller frames different points of view, and what might these frames tell us about the point of view of the writer and the teller?

Oral histories can be staged in a way that allows recollection to appear through stories. I alluded to these above as windows, and that is not a frivolous allusion. A story is an intricately framed social event that provides an opportunity for vicarious participation in historical events. If an elder begins to offer a story about what it was like to move from a

farm in Georgia to a Philadelphia neighborhood, she may conjure up the events vividly enough that her listeners' attention is diverted from the classroom here and now to the time and place of the story. To vivify the world she is conjuring, the elder may use tense changes – shifting into present tense to make the events more immediate; gestures – conveying the tight staircase in the Trinity house they moved into; changes in voice and facial expression as she animates the characters that populate her story. Absorbed in this alternate world, students can be said to *experience* it. Having experienced it, the student has a basis for understanding continuity as a gift of cross-generational communication, that makes accessible a time and place that no longer exist, except through the art of this storyteller.

It is important that teachers show students the merits of taking a step back when listening to an oral history in order to reflect on the stories and their meanings. Taking a step back, means exploring how one's own beliefs or feelings came to intermingle with those of the storyteller. It is important that students learn this skill before moving on. One example for practicing this skill is to take a common word such as "curve". Ask students to come up with one definition of the word "curve". Because "curve" means different things – a type of pitch in sports, a graph in mathematics, a stretch of road when giving directions – students will come up with a variety of answers. When all are shared aloud, it is imperative to point out that one word can have many meanings, just as one story can have many meanings for being told. The lesson here is that students must take as many scenarios as possible into consideration when reflecting on a story; this provides an open mind capable of finding a more relevant point of view to an oral history.

Point of view also conveys perspective. When students ask, "where is the storyteller coming from?" they are not only asking about place (time period, physical location, context), but also about attitude. Teachers need to be tuned in to both of these meanings when that question is asked. The pragmatic philosopher, Kenneth Burke, said "Culture is the dancing of an attitude." What is the attitude that is being danced in genres of historical discourse: whether names, proverbs, scrap books, or stories. Attitude helps a listener decide how much of the story is fact-based and how much is rooted in opinion. And here, "opinion" emerges as the practice of evaluating the events of a story. It is essential that students recognize the relationship between fact and opinion, especially when working on an oral history. Storytellers are able to take facts and contextualize them, illuminating their significance points of view that students will have to account for

For example, an American World War II hero might tell a story with a negative slant toward the Japanese, lumping in Japanese-Americans who were his neighbors and were eventually sent to concentration camps in America. In his eyes, all "Japs" might be the enemy, but it is important for students to see past this personal stereotype and take these words out of the context the war hero has given them. By de-contextualizing his words, students can make a greater observance that there might have been wide-spread anti-Japanese sentiment in the armed forces during World War II; this provides a greater

lesson than the war hero could have hoped to teach. One example of how to de-contextualize is to have students ask themselves “why” frequently, while they listen. “Why would he use a derogatory term like ‘Jap’?” “Why is he speaking so quickly during this part of the story?” Dehumanizing terms like “Jap” turn people into objects with no valid point of view, and invites us to recover that other point of view in reflecting on the story. How would someone who has been placed in a concentration camp have felt about this language? How did this language, and the attitude danced in it, contribute to the creation of concentration camps? What parallel situations do we see in the world today? When students draw back from the imaginary world of the story to reflect on its events, they can start to see the bigger picture and chart the wider implications of historical events.

### *Objects of Memory and the Human Unit of Time*

Since some of the interviews may take place in the classroom, it is important to recognize the role of setting in prompting oral history. One of the functions of storytelling for the elderly is to conjure up a time and place that is no longer accessible, even if that time and place was in this neighborhood. Memories may be stored in and prompted by aspects of a physical setting, or recurrent events set in a habitual past. Aspects that can be used to prompt recollection may appeal to any of the senses – a smell, a taste, a tune, or the sight of a tree in autumn. In the face of tumultuous change, an elder may have saved some objects as souvenirs that can precipitate the stories that allow them to inhabit places long gone, and to entertain younger generations in those places by conjuring them vividly. Such objects, that folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett terms “objects of memory” serve as thresholds to those places. When prompted, a person can also take bystanders into the past, suspending reality and transcending present time and situation. These objects are powerful because they give the bystander an item upon which to focus, making the memory more real. Not only that, a bystander may have their own associations with the same object, providing an opportunity to share memories, create new memories, and inform each others’ pasts with new information.

In the case of stories and oral histories solicited from elders, objects of memory are important bridges to the past. People die, taking their memories and folklore with them, but their objects remain into the future. While not every memory associated with an object may be passed on, and while the stories might become diffused over several family members or generations of randomly unconnected people, the significance of the object is paramount; without the existence of the object, there would be very few instances when memories would be shared orally. The objects ensure that at least some of the oral folklore connected to the previous owner will live on. In this way, objects of memory provide a sense of security that certain stories will outlive their storytellers.

For example, in her book *Children of Strangers*, Kathryn Morgan relates a story from her grandmother Caddy about “The Grapefruit and the Orange”. In short, the story “not



only shows that selfishness sometimes interferes with common sense; it was used along with innumerable other stories to remind us that there was no such thing as the ‘good old days’ for black people” (58). The simple object of a grapefruit has the ability to remind anyone in the family of this story and the lesson to be learned. Even though grandmother Caddy is no longer with the family, her wisdom lives on through this object of memory that others can remember, re-contextualize, and share.

The object of memory can anchor what anthropologist Margaret Mead called “the Human Unit of Time,” that is, the length of time represented when an elder tells a story he learned, as a child, from a very old person, to a young child who then grows old and tells the story to the youngest child she knows. An elderly woman in Camden, New Jersey, described her grandmother’s story of seeing President Lincoln to a group of students at Cramer Hill Middle School in 1977. The human unit of time stretches from the time of Lincoln through the next six generations. Such first-person accounts have the vital function of situating elders and children in a temporal framework that transcends and incorporate their overlapping life times.

As far as objects of memory go for providing point of view (or reading it), the person hearing the oral history surrounding the object may have their own associations with said object. This is where teachers must think about how their students learn. Objects of memory and the stories surrounding them provide a great opportunity for community-making; that is, they allow for interactions that assume context, take things out of context, and create ways to re-contextualize. Taking a step back, teachers might see that some students need to be given a storyteller’s original context before being able to decipher the storyteller’s point of view. Other students might be able to naturally assume context, but have trouble separating their personal point of view from that of the storyteller. It is important when dealing with elder stories centering on an object of memory that students learn to take themselves out of the picture first and be transported by the storyteller’s memory. Once original context and point of view have been determined, it is then the turn of the student to help de-contextualize and re-contextualize the object for use in the future.

### *Contextualizing a Primary Source Using Secondary Sources*

As previously stated, secondary sources are materials that interpret the past and future context from primary sources. It follows then that secondary sources rely on primary sources to exist. Authors of textbooks cannot create history from imagination; they look to primary sources such as maps, newspapers, interviews, diaries, political treaties and papers, etc. to unlock the important events of the past. More than that, primary sources provide a way to view these events through point of view or bias, as we have already discussed. However, for students to approach the task of reading a primary source successfully, they must be provided with a myriad of secondary sources that have already

done some of the hard work of interpretation. The best way to learn any skill is to see it modeled first, and to copy the act as closely as possible to achieve the same result.

Students are well served by using secondary sources to contextualize the primary sources with which they will be working. These models provide students with not only instruction on how interpretation is done, but also with information that they can use themselves to help re-contextualize their primary source material (in this case, an oral history). Which secondary sources students may use are important in such a project as this. The process of contextualization, de-contextualization, and re-contextualization can be cyclic and sometimes requires other primary sources to be used to help students create context for an oral history. However, pure secondary sources (other peoples' interpretations of the past) are very helpful when beginning to read, understand, and interpret oral histories and elder stories.

Secondary sources allow students to engage in an ethnographic study of the elder telling a story. Ethnography is the study of cultures. Even though elders in a community share much of the "community culture" with students, elders seem to be difficult to understand for many younger people. This is due to culture that springs forth from growing up in a common era. The generation gap is a real issue of time that separates shared memories over decades. Students can use the method of destrangement to overcome the generation gap in order to find meaning and create context for interpretation of the elder stories they hear.

Destrangement is the process of making something strange familiar I introduced this concept above with the example of taking the point of view of those who were placed in concentration camps. We do this often when we think we hear something that wasn't really said; a mumble with no apparent meaning becomes a commonly used or heard phrase, allowing us to respond with some significance to the mumblers. In much the same way the process of destrangement asks students to find something familiar in the elder's story that they can understand. This commonality will provide a jumping-off-point for both parties to understand each other better. Asking the storyteller for clarification is one method of destrangement. Finding words that sound familiar but might need to be defined allows students to use secondary sources to help create context and familiarity.

Source materials such as encyclopedias and textbooks are great places for students to start their search for meaningful context. Many elders make references to places or time periods in their stories that are very familiar to them but which make it difficult for young listeners to follow along. Stories about the Great Depression or the "Truman Years" can be confusing to students who don't understand the American political, social, or economic landscapes of these time periods. Textbooks and encyclopedias allow students to do some surface research to help their understanding so that they can get more from the stories they hear. For example, if someone were to tell you a story about "iPods" and "crunking", you might not glean the entire meaning of the story until you defined these

mysterious modern terms. Time periods, famous people, place names and relationships – these are all “vocabulary terms” for students who are trying to understand personal histories from decades before their birth.

### *Applying Context through Family Trees*

Family trees act similarly to maps when constructing context for oral histories. Maps can help the listeners orient themselves to the places discussed by an elder. When discussing a topic such as the Great Migration (a large movement of African-Americans from the rural South to Northern cities), a map can be invaluable. Maps allow people to make connections that the speaker may omit in their stories. Family trees provide the same advantage in a different sense. When used properly, the construction of family trees through oral prompting by a student can persuade elders to illuminate missing elements that provide context.

In Kathryn Morgan’s compilation of family folklore she makes it a point to highlight the relationships between her family members. Even the title – *Children of Strangers* – gives the idea of family connections significance. The entire book is full of various stories told by Caddy, her great-grandmother, but they show perspectives from all her cousins, aunts, uncles, and parents and their different situations in life. Without knowledge of these situations – level of education, place of birth, travel destinations, etc. – the reader might be lost and would surely lose some of the intention of the stories. Morgan provides context for all of the Caddy folklore in the first chapter, “Family History”, so that the reader can follow along and absorb the true meaning of the stories being shared.

Students working with elders should be encouraged to compile similar family histories, especially when there are unknown people mentioned in the oral histories. Prompting elders to talk about relations mentioned in their stories allows the elders to fill in some important blanks for students. What constituted a family unit when this person was born? Was it normal to live with an older relation? How many kids were normal in a family? Can a migration pattern be found within the family tree? All of these questions help students to orient themselves to the time, place, and norms that an storyteller might take for granted. This allows students to take a step back from the story and view the information with a critical eye, a skill which is invaluable when working with primary sources.

### Applying a Primary Source to the History Continuum

Once primary sources have been read and analyzed, they can be applied to the history continuum. Primary sources when isolated usually deal only in the present time – when the source was created. However, using the tools described above, it can be seen that deconstructing and contextualizing primary sources allows them to bridge the past and

the present. By recontextualizing primary sources, students can make the jump from the past and present to the future. In this way, one primary source can help create a timeline of significance that is meaningful to a student of the Social Studies.

Timelines are the natural model of the history continuum and are very accessible to students. Timelines allow students to evaluate cause and effect relationships and to make predictions based on aggregate knowledge. These skills are useful when teaching consequences and historical cycles. Primary sources such as elder stories are very functional resources for creating timelines. They provide depth of personal experience that can help to augment a pre-existing timeline, such as might be found in a textbook.

## **Objectives**

The intention of this unit is to serve as an introduction to any Social Studies course, taught at a variety of academic and grade levels. The specific modeling of this unit fits an African-American History course for 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. African-American History is a required element of Social Studies education in the Philadelphia public school district and was fashioned as a “seminar” course to match the “survey” course of United States History in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. The topics covered are narrow, but the ways in which they are to be covered are broad and numerous. The course serves as a platform for teaching the skills necessary to succeed in high school Social Studies as well as in post-secondary education. Therefore, the skills covered in this introductory unit to an introductory course are based more in the melding of conceptual and practical knowledge.

Adaptability is highlighted here because of the all-encompassing nature of the concept of continuity. Also, elder stories can be used to understand and inform a wide-range of topics in the Social Studies. Lastly, students from all age and ability groups can grasp the applicable nature of elder stories and should be able to apply the stories to the concept of continuity. As previously stated, the unit is meant to be adapted not only to the needs of the students, but also to the needs of the teacher. Some things covered here might be better covered over the course of a year in small parts as opposed to over a short, week-long unit. Some teachers might realize their students need less conceptual instruction and more practical application or vice versa. Whatever the situation, the unit is designed to be borrowed in part or in whole.

There are several goals in this unit. All goals lead to the completion of a project utilizing the skills learned over the duration of the unit. In the case of African-American History, this will hopefully be the first project of the year and provide a jumping off point from which to begin the study of the continent, peoples, and culture of Africa. By the end of this unit, students should be able to identify and categorize primary and secondary sources, with an emphasis on primary sources such as oral histories and interviews. Also, students should illustrate understanding the continuity of history (past → present →

future) by explaining how historians use each of these time periods to study and construct/predict history.

Two goals of the project are linked to performance-based assessments. Students will be required to produce two products by the end of the unit; the first is a taped and/or transcribed interview and the second is the elder's family tree. Students will interview elders in the community with the intention of creating resources for the class to use throughout the year. One resource will take the form of a migration map; the purpose of which will be to show from where current African-American Philadelphians can trace their ancestry and the migration of family members (this information will come from the family tree). Another resource would be a timeline of important events; the purpose of which will be to connect the broad historical events we study in the course to real accounts from elders living through or reporting about that time period. With a template of questions in hand (Worksheet One), students will conduct an interview with a member of the community, preferable from a senior center or other community hub. The rest of the materials are intended to use the information from the interview to create a variety of useful and applicable secondary sources for class use throughout the year.

## **Strategies**

Because the purpose of this unit is to get students working with materials in preparation for the rest of the school year, it follows that the strategies for the unit will be varied with lots of room for exploration. Students should be encouraged to read a lot of primary sources and to make a lot of assumptions about those sources; as the year progresses, they will find more significant meaning in the resources and become more skilled at using secondary sources and their own knowledge to aid their interpretations. What follows are some strategies with specific resources mentioned to help teachers match relevant material to the desired concept.

### *Categorizing Sources*

On a basic level, it is important that students be knowledgeable about the differences between primary and secondary sources. There are several ways to introduce students to the concept of a primary or secondary source. Some methods do not require the use of documents, others rely heavily on working with the sources to highlight the differences. Students at any grade level can be introduced to this concept, and the concept can become more sophisticated as the grade level increases; high school students may already know the differences between primary and secondary sources, so interpretation methods may be a better use of class time. These methods are meant to be tailored to the needs of the students and teacher.

The first and most obvious way to identify different types of sources is to activate prior knowledge in the student population. Have the students define "primary" and

“secondary”, asking what these words might mean in general. Then build definitions for the words that relate to source material. Finally, make a list of sources with student input for both types. This is a very bare bones way to introduce source material and it is highly effective because of the student input; teachers are aware of what is already known and what will need to be taught as they continue with the concept.

At the high school level it is suggested that students actually use some primary and secondary sources to become more familiar with what – up until this point in the year – will have been an ethereal concept. Students can start by using a partner interview – talking to another student with a set of questions. Interviews may have come up as one of the primary sources in your class list, but the types of questions asked in an interview truly determine primary or secondary status. Have students ask each other what they did over the weekend. This is an example of a primary source because they are hearing the information “from the horse’s mouth”. Then, ask students to write a short story using the interview information to share with the class. Since they are retelling their classmate’s story, they are acting as a secondary source, much like a newspaper story. Another exercise is to look at a secondary source such as an encyclopedia article and try to figure out what primary sources could have been used to create the article and why the author chose those sources. This exercise also helps students make the connection that secondary sources rely on not only primary sources but also the discretion of the author to create meaning and point of view. This gives depth to the concept being learned that is very appropriate for high school students.

### *Reading Slave Narratives*

Once students are able to categorize sources as either primary or secondary, it is important to let them work first hand with primary sources. For most of their formal education, they have been provided with other people’s interpretations of what really happened in history. When students read something “from the horse’s mouth”, it creates an entirely new experience that activates their critical thinking skills. In the African-American History course for which this unit was conceived, slave narratives provide a fitting entrance into the world of primary source literature.

There are several ways to access slave narratives for use with students. Many colleges and universities have done work with cataloging these resources, and many places provide online access to the original WPA (Works Progress Administration) slave narratives collected during the American Great Depression. Some libraries also have such resources available in hard-copy and online. Because of the great number of slave narratives collected, each story is going to have a different focus and each person is going to share a different set of significant events from their life. This unit uses narratives from two different sources. The American Studies department at the University of Virginia provides several varied narratives in text form online. The Schomburg Center for

Research in Black Culture, sponsored by the New York Public Library, runs a website aimed at teachers with a selection of narratives with lesson plans to accompany them.

Many teachers will find the latter more helpful if they are starting out fresh with primary sources work because lessons are already structured around the content of the narratives. The University of Virginia site is better for picking out random narratives for students to work with. The purpose of using the narratives is to show students the textbook information from a completely different perspective. It is one thing to read “slaves were officially freed when General Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse.” It is a different thing altogether to read that a slave, upon hearing the news, went up to her mistress, flipped up her dress, and told her to “kiss my ass!” as Caddy did in Kathryn Morgan’s family history (18). Questions such as “what caused her to do that,” “what were the probable results of her actions,” and “what would you have done” are all ways for students to engage in the primary source text and make their own conclusions about the stories of history and their significance.

### *Interviewing an Elder for His/Her Story*

Students will find this part of the process both the most difficult and most rewarding experience. Many students have real trouble with communication. This spans generations and usually is caused by not being able to find common ground with another person. This unit encourages students to practice methods of de strangement – ways to capitalize on similarities between interviewer and interviewee – so that both parties will feel more at ease and each person will be more willing to open up and share information.

The Smithsonian Institute has created a website that helps students with the nuts and bolts of preparing for and participating in an interview specifically with an elder. The book, *The Grand Generation: Memory, Mastery, Legacy* by Mary Hufford, Marjorie Hunt, and Steven Zeitlin, provided the basis for the website’s materials. The intention of *The Grand Generation* is for young people to be given the tools to access all of the first-hand knowledge and information locked up in the minds of elders. The hope is that this information can help students interpret their own lives and situations in light of what they may learn from people that lived through very similar experiences.

This unit takes the idea further by encouraging students to apply the knowledge they glean from elders to what they will be learning in a history class. This combines the interview results with the creation of a timeline enriched with first-person accounts that creates rich meaning and context for the study of what can sometimes be boring and disconnected subjects. The benefit of using a resource such as the Smithsonian’s website is that it gives teachers and students step-by-step advice for how to proceed from the conception of the interview idea to the final cataloging of what was collected. Having students conduct physical interviews also allows them to contribute to the wider library

of primary source material, making the future study of primary sources seem more significant and relevant.

### *Creating the Family Tree*

One possible addition to the interview is asking students to create a family tree of the elder with which they speak. Family trees add a great amount of depth to personal narratives because of the immutable facts they contain. Storytellers are apt to play up or down certain characters in a narrative, but a family tree highlights the biological relationships the storyteller has and illuminates the significance of more emotional relationships for the reader/listener. Family trees also provide place information to help the reader/listener create an idea of migration or settlement patterns that might affect the story or provide helpful background information. Finally, the family tree can help students begin their timelines, linking stories related to certain family members with events from history, providing context, helping make the timeline a more relevant and user-friendly secondary source.

When creating someone else's family tree, it is difficult to think of what students should know about the family members of the elders they interview. There are so many things that could be helpful to know about these people, it's difficult to know where to begin. Here follows a list of some things that should be included and that many elders will know about their family members: Given Name, Married Name, Date (or Year) of Birth, Place of Birth, Occupation, Date (or Year) of Death, Place of Death. Other things could be included at the discretion of the teacher and to fit the overall purpose of the family tree.

### *Using a Timeline*

In this unit, a timeline is a good way to process all of the varied information students have collected during the interview process so that the entire class can benefit from and use the information over the course of the year. History is a linear subject at heart, dealing with dates and cause/effect relationships. The history continuum highlights this and students find comfort in the predictability of the subject. Many students however are unable to make good cause/effect connections owing to the fact that they don't remember or never learned the "cause" or "effect" piece of the puzzle. Visual timelines are useful, widely applicable, and relevant, especially when students have a hand in creating them.

As this unit was intended for use in an African-American History class, the scope of our class timeline will be limited by the constraints of the course. Each class will have their own constraints and they should be set by the teacher before work on the timeline begins. Students may find it hard to fill in information on a blank timeline. Teachers may want to provide a timeline with important topics that will be covered throughout the year and students will be given the opportunity to augment the timeline with excerpts from



their elder's personal narrative or family tree. Also, students may not be able to go back in history any further than the age of their elder or his/her parents; this is at most 100 years. Many would view this as a drawback, but it might be constructive to have students create mock interviews with people from 100+ years ago that they can add to the timeline, such as an interview with Olaudah Equiano as he travels through the Middle Passage or Harriet Tubman as she delivers slaves over the Mason-Dixon Line.

The purpose of the timeline is to get students oriented with the history continuum and the idea of cause and effect. The past explains the present and helps to predict the future. Everything that happens either was caused by something or will cause something else to happen. This encourages students to think globally and to appreciate consequences in history and in life. As a teaching tool, the timeline appeals to all learners, but especially visual learners who may require a physical manifestation of the cause/effect relationship. Having a timeline created by students that can be referred to throughout the year encourages ownership of the ideas learned and of the process – all of the things teachers look to give to students to encourage good practices.

### **Classroom Activities**

What follows are lessons that serve to bring the unit to life. These lessons do not take the teacher from the beginning to the end of the unit, although the first and last lessons are included here. The interview process is not included. Teachers should format the class to the personal needs of the students and should feel free to add or subtract any step in the process. Other possible lesson ideas are addressed in the Strategies section of this unit.

#### *Introducing Continuity*

Lessons are centered upon the students and so it is always helpful to start a lesson activating the knowledge of the students with which you will interact. In order to introduce the concept of continuity/discontinuity and also to address estrangement and bestrangement, this activation occurs by taking something familiar to the students and having them react to it. Using the quote “One can never step in the same river twice for the waters are always flowing” to start the class allows students to react not only to the literal phenomenon of the referenced physicality, but it also asks students to apply this quote to their lives. The world is constantly changing around them, events that happen today affect tomorrow, and we all grow with each step in our daily relationships. After students have had time to make free-associations relating to this quote, the main question that should be used as a focus point is this: “How do we get from point A to point B in time?” It is the journey, after all, that concerns a historian the most.

After introducing the focus question, it is important to engage students in a call/response discussion to inform them of their purpose in the class. Asking students to compare themselves today to their infant-selves provides some clarity to the subject at

hand; how do we grow up? There is all at once a great sense of the continuing process of aging pitted against the disjointedness of reaching and surpassing milestones. Here we see the yin and yang of continuity and discontinuity in its full realization. How can we “grow up” if there is nothing from which to depart? – continuity. How can we still be our former selves if we have passed a milestone such as infancy? – discontinuity. While a baby may not fully resemble a grown woman or man, the humanness of the infant still remains. In much the same way, our habits, innovations, fears, goals, etc. are both similar and dissimilar to those of our ancient and recent ancestors; similar in their existence to fulfill a need and dissimilar in their realization and implementation. Create a class definition of “continuity” and “discontinuity” using information from this discussion.

Once these terms have been defined, students should be given the assigned reading to further immerse them in the concept at hand. Students can find the same dichotomy discussed above in David Dalby’s article on American terms with African roots. Many words that are used in common American English today resulted from borrowing from slave vocabularies that relied on native African languages such as Wolof. As students read through the article, they won’t necessarily make connections instantly between words that they often use and languages they have probably never heard. After students have read the article in class, the question could be posed, “where do words come from in the first place?” Students can then be guided to the realization that words come from necessity, and that a slang term such as “dig” with one meaning in proper English (“to use a shovel to create a hole”) could just as easily have been derived with a second meaning (“to understand”) from another language with a similar sound (138). This material will probably fill the first of two periods, and so a useful home assignment would be to have students make a list of words that they use that have meanings that differ from proper English.

The previous night’s homework serves as an appropriate bridge into the next day’s focus. Students should have out their homework terms and be prepared to define them in proper English and in their own slang culture. Many young people will have an easy time identifying slang terms that they use as code to keep their parents and other elders from understanding their conversations; this is another tool to use in teaching continuity. Slang and code language has always had a place in every society, as much to exclude outsiders and to cement together users. In preparation for students interviewing elders, it is a good idea to have them think of ways that they might be misunderstood by people of another generation. By having students look at their own language, mannerisms, and habits critically it allows them to practice bestrangement. As previously mentioned, bestrangement asks a person to make the familiar strange in order to fully grasp the conceptual nature of their own culture and how it is perceived by outsiders.

Having students look at their own youth culture critically before interacting with elders can help them bridge the generation gap much more effectively and also create a self-awareness that will be useful in practices of destrangement (making things foreign

seem familiar). Worksheet One (see appendix) is a good starting point for bestrangement exercises because it asks the student to look at what they consider common. After a brief discussion of the functions of slang, the terms “bestrangement” and “destrangement” (both defined previously) should be defined by the teacher for the class. Worksheet One should be introduced as a method of practicing bestrangement and destrangement for their upcoming interviews. Once this has been done, it is important for students to take a step back and think about how others may relate to this information; using music groups as an example, could they define “rhythm and blues” to someone without using colloquial terms? Vocabulary is the key in helping to bridge the generation gap, and teachers should provide a list of popular bands/musicians, sports, movies, actors, and dance moves from the time period of students’ grandparents or great-grandparents, asking students to create a similar list based on their teenage culture for the elder with which they will be working. This activity overlaps nicely with methods of practicing destrangement, especially creating the comparable lists of popular culture items and terms mentioned above.

This lesson is an ideal start to the unit because it covers not only the larger concepts but also introduces the interview that will eventually occur. It should take two 45 minute periods to complete the entire process of introducing these overarching questions and setting up the expectations for the interview. What is important is that by the end of the lesson students are familiar with the terms 1) continuity, 2) discontinuity, 3) bestrangement, and 4) destrangement and also how these terms relate to studying history and humanity. Students should also have completed Worksheet One in preparation for creating interview prompts that they can use when collecting their elder stories. The standards addressed in these two lessons are 7.3C, 8.1A, and 8.3C.

#### Reading Primary Sources: The WPA Slave Narratives

During the Great Depression in America the Works Progress Administration (WPA) paid journalists and writers to collect and chronicle the lives of surviving former slaves, many close to or over 100 years in age at the time. While the students’ interviews will not be as dramatic or as wide in scope, these narratives can help students orient their thoughts around what they might ask in an interview and also what they can hope to discover from a conversation with their elders. In order to activate prior knowledge for this lesson, ask students the following two questions: “If you passed today, what would you like to be remembered about your life?” and “If you passed today, how would your life story fit into the history of 1) your family, 2) your school, 3) your community, 4) your country?” These prompts open up the comparison of local impact to global impact that is reflected in the slave narratives.

Students may come up with several responses, especially to the second prompt. Give each student ten small stickers, telling them that each sticker represents an impact that they have made with their life, a footprint they have left behind which affects others. Drawing concentric circles on chart paper – each labeled with family, school,

community, and country – have students place their stickers within the circles, dividing them according to where they think they make the greatest impact. The stickers do not all have to be used in one circle. After all the stickers have been used, ask students where they collectively are making the greatest impact and ask why they think that might be. This activity is intended to visually represent what many teenagers internalize: the belief that their actions make only small impressions on the earth and that their influence is more local than global. It is appropriate to start a discussion with students about the far-reaching implications of what they do on a daily basis and how their decisions and actions (causes) can cause great reactions (effects) in all levels of society.

Once students have seen and discussed the concepts of global v. local and cause & effect, they are ready to dig into the slave narratives. The preface to their introduction is that each individual narrative “offers a fragmentary, microcosmic representation of slave life. Read together, they offer a sweeping composite view of slavery in North America, allowing us to explore some of the most compelling themes of nineteenth-century slavery, including labor, resistance and flight, family life, relations with masters, and religious belief” (Fort). That being the case, a modified jigsaw allows students to read individual narratives with the intention of sharing insight with classmates that read a different account. By the end of the lesson, students will have an idea of how individual slaves recounted their life and its significance (local thinking) and they will also have the tools to translate these several narratives into a commentary on the significance of slavery (global thinking).

The modified jigsaw model divides the classroom into groups according to how many different sources are being used. Four sources provide good breadth of topics and also enough commonalities for comparison. Each group member is expected to answer the questions concerning his or her individual narrative in order that s/he can join another group and relate what was learned. Some of these questions are specific to the content of the narratives and others set up students for the larger group discussion. Once the questions for all four narratives have been broken down separately, students will switch groups making new groups with four students that studied one of each narrative. The questions discussed in these second groupings relate more specifically to global ideas such as shared experiences, the negative repercussions of being enslaved, and successes from life after the Civil War. The questions used with each reading must be tailored to the content of the narrative (there are several narratives to choose from on the website), but the collective questions for the second part of the jigsaw should include the following: 1) What do the speakers say about their experiences with their masters? What can you determine about the general relationship between a slave and his master before the Civil War from these experiences? 2) What national events do the speakers mention (if any)? Do the speakers have local or global perspectives on these events? 3) What general statements can you make about life for slaves and former slaves using information from these readings? Do these statements match up with your preconceived notions concerning the lives of slaves? Why or why not?

This lesson ends with each group having completed the answers to the final questions and then sharing the answers in a class discussion. Ideally the lesson would take one 45 minute period, but the narratives are long and so it is a good idea to budget time over two 45 minute periods, ending the first day's work with the first group's jigsaw responsibilities and beginning the second day with the formation of the new groups. The second day should end by reevaluating a global v. local outlook on life. The discussion should also cover why people share their stories (memoirs/narratives/interviews) and what historians have to gain by studying this source material in and out of context. It is helpful to remind students of bestrangement and destrangement as a way of creating context. By the end of the lesson, students will have analyzed other people's interviews in preparation for taking a critical look at the interviews they will eventually conduct. The standards addressed in this lesson are 8.1C, 8.3A, and 8.3B

### *Creating a Classroom Timeline*

Once the interviews have been conducted students can begin to analyze the elder stories they have collected. The purpose of dissecting the interviews is to gain insight into periods of time with which students might otherwise be unfamiliar. Because so many learners respond to visual prompts and organizational charts, a timeline can be invaluable for arranging all of the students' information. Timelines are tidy snapshots of dates in chronological order; the form of a timeline allows students to identify cause-effect relationships. This lesson intends to flesh out a basic timeline of African-American History with personal accounts gathered from elder stories. The lesson should begin by displaying a bare-bones timeline of African-American History at the front of the classroom. Students will be required to have out their transcribed interviews in preparation for analysis.

As previously mentioned, teachers should fill in many universally recognized important dates. Suggestions for some dates are: legislative milestones (amendments, laws, court cases), important accomplishments of famous people (Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Frederick Douglass), revolutions and revolts (Stono Rebellion, Nat Turner), riots (Phoenix Riot, Race Riots), and general historical events that relate to African-Americans. The timeline should span the entire period of African-American History. A starting point could be difficult, but 1619 is a good year to choose; the first shipload of Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia on this date, marking the beginning of the mingling of the African and American cultures. The timeline should also mark the present date, and it is a fun idea to chronicle milestones in the class as the year progresses on the present end of the timeline. Because the history continuum and continuity will also eventually be applied in class, it is also a good idea to include a future leg of the timeline that allows for predictions of what could occur based on patterns and cause-effect relationships.

With their transcribed interviews in hand, students should take a close look at the timeline in front of them. Many will be able to immediately relate stories that they heard from their elders to time points on the timeline. Students should work in groups of four and come up with four stories to include on the timeline. At least two of these stories should directly relate to the important events already in place. One or two may be events that were not originally included on the teacher timeline but still provide insight into the life and times of African-Americans. Many students will not have entries to write for early periods of the timeline, especially the antebellum period. This can be fixed by asking students to go back and remember the WPA slave narratives that they read and analyzed earlier in the unit. Ask the students what dates are important in these stories? Do any of these stories relate to the dates already listed on the timeline? Depending on the narratives used in the previous lessons, students should be able to fill in some entries around the Civil War and during the antebellum period. Once the time points have been chosen, the entries may be written; this portion of the lesson may be completed for homework or could be saved to do the next day if there is no time left in class on the first day.

With the time points chosen and a short 5 to 7 sentence entry written to be placed on the timeline, the timeline can finally be assembled. A traditional cut-and-paste method is recommended for creation of the timeline; other methods are discussed below. Students should take one of the four entries created by the group and copy them neatly or type them on a computer. An extension should be made out of the timeline at the appropriate time point and the entry should be affixed to that time point. Earlier in the process (especially if one timeline is being created using information from more than one section for a course), the teacher should ensure that no time point on the timeline has too many entries. Many of the elders will probably have a story about one moment in time, but only one or two entries should be made for any single time point. This ensures that the timeline stays relevant and addresses many different periods in African-American History. The completed timeline should be laminated (or otherwise protected) and displayed in a prominent place in the classroom for easy reference throughout the year.

This lesson serves as the culmination of the unit. Once the timeline has been created, the rest of the year's lessons can refer to the stories and primary sources found there. The intention was to create a visual resource that could be used by students to understand the concept of continuity in history and all that goes with it, specifically cause & effect relationships and global v. local thinking. The physical creation of the timeline should take about two 45 minute periods with one period set aside for analysis of the interviews and the other for writing an entry and correctly placing it on the timeline. By the end of the second lesson a physical timeline should be placed somewhere within the classroom. Suggested alternatives to cut-and-paste paper timelines are electronic timelines (functioning similarly to a database) and photo/object of memory timelines (using visual prompts to recall the stories connected to the dates). The classroom's resources dictate which timeline best suits the students. Students should also be required to present to the

class at least one of the entries that they have added to the timeline. This ensures shared knowledge of events on the timeline. By the end of the lesson, students will have analyzed their transcribed interviews, created timeline entries, assembled the timeline and presented one of their timeline entries. The standards addressed in this lesson are 7.3C, 8.1A, 8.1B, 8.1C, 8.1D, 8.3A, 8.3B, and 8.3C.

### **Annotated Bibliography/Resources**

#### **Student Bibliography**

Dalby, David. "Americanisms That May Once Have Been Africanisms." Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel. Ed. Alan Dundes. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990) pp 136-140.

*Students can use this at the beginning of the unit to see how words from the African past have traveled to America and become a part of the culture with no visible trace to Africa*

Fort, Bruce, ed. "American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology." Accessed 24 March 2008. <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/wpahome.html>>

*A compilation of select WPA slave narratives from the 1930s, examples of primary sources in the form of interviews*

Morgan, Kathryn. Children of Strangers: The Stories of a Black Family. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

*Select short stories from this book as examples of primary sources; select analyses from this book to help students see the link between past stories, present life, and future applications*

Smithsonian Institute. "The Grand Generation Interview Guide." Accessed 18 February 2008. <<http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/migration/seek1/grand1.html>>

*A guide for students to use as they prepare templates for interviews; also provides logistical help for conducting interviews with older people*

#### **Teacher Bibliography**

Anderson, Elijah. "The Black Inner-City Grandmother in Transition." Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999) pp 206-236.

*Teachers can use this article to help understand cycles in family history and the emergence of patterns in culture, specifically of teenage pregnancy and the grandmother as the head of the household*

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. "In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience." Accessed 20 May 2008.

<<http://www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm>>

*This website has many different lesson plans and primary/secondary sources that deal directly with the varied migrations of African-Americans all over America from the beginnings of slavery to the present*

### *Suggested Classroom Materials*

This unit doesn't require too much in the way of physical materials. The only things that are really needed are bodies, which may or may not be easy to find. The unit hinges on using elders in the community to siphon information into the classroom. Therefore, it is critical that at least some students be given access to elders in order to conduct interviews. Originally this unit was conceived to use the students' own family members, but the West Philadelphia neighborhood in which this will be implemented was not conducive to such a setup owing to the fact that many students do not live with biological family members because of foster situations or immigration processes. Thusly, a community/senior center will be called upon to provide willing participants who want to share their stories with the next generation. Logistically, all or some students in a class may be called upon to participate in the interview process and it is at the teacher's discretion whether the interviews and subsequent other products should be completed individually or in small groups. Teachers who have multiple sections of the same course may want to isolate 5-10 students per section to participate and create resources for the class at large.

## **Appendices**

### Worksheet One

When interviewing someone, it is important to put them at ease. Both you and the subject should be comfortable. Part of your comfort is coming prepared with questions you plan to ask and it is your responsibility to put your subject at ease by letting them know what you plan to ask ahead of time. You should ask clear questions that are easy to understand. Also, be sure to ask open-ended questions – there is nothing exciting about listening to a lot of "yes" and "no" answers! You are intending to learn something from this person, so they should be doing 80% of the talking. However, if they get confused, it is your job to put them back on track, so listen carefully and pay attention!

Below are some questions to get you started on this interview. These questions are for you to answer before you conduct the interview. They will help guide what you will ask.

1) Think of something that you love to do. What is it? \_\_\_\_\_



2) Think of your favorite musical artist or group. Who is it? \_\_\_\_\_

3) Do you think that school is important? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

4) What issues in politics are important to you or your family? \_\_\_\_\_

5) Do you have a large or small family? How important are they? \_\_\_\_\_

Once you have answered these questions, think about how you can make them into questions to ask your subject. For example: “Something I love to do is play jump rope. Did you ever play jump rope as a kid? Do you remember any games like that you played? Where did you learn them?” These types of questions will allow your subject to tell you a story. You should let them tell you as many stories as they like, but try to make sure they relate to your 5 questions. Here is one other question you should add at the end:

A) Do you have a special object that you keep with you? Is there a story related to that object? What is the story and why is it important to you?

Now that you know what questions you will ask, you’re ready to go out and ask them! Be sure to end the interview by helping your subject create a family tree. There might be even more stories to hear once you ask them about where they came from!

### *Addressing Pennsylvania State Standards*

The Social Studies standards for the state of Pennsylvania cross four different areas of study – Civics and Government, Economics, Geography, and History. This unit can potentially cover material from any of these areas depending on the topics chosen for the final project, but the primary work will be done within the areas of Geography and History.

*Standard 7.3C – The Human Characteristics of Places and Regions; Culture*

*Standard 8.1A – Historical Analysis and Skills Development; Chronological Thinking*

*Standard 8.1B – Historical Analysis and Skills Development; Historical Comprehension*

*Standard 8.1C – Historical Analysis and Skills Development; Historical Interpretation*

*Standard 8.1D – Historical Analysis and Skills Development; Historical Research*

*Standard 8.3A – United States History; Contributions of Individuals and Groups*

*Standard 8.3B – United States History; Documents, Artifacts, and Historical Places*

*Standard 8.3C – United States History; Influences of Continuity and Change*