

Connecticut Oral History Interviews: An Untapped Resource for Genealogists

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Whether or not you have interviewed members of your Connecticut families, you may find that recorded interviews of their contemporaries can provide relevant background information about your ancestors' times, occupations, activities, and places of residence. Information from recorded and transcribed interviews can help flesh out those bare ancestral bones! Perhaps your ancestor worked in a textile mill in Manchester or Willimantic or fished in Long Island Sound. Interviews with others who worked in those occupations will tell you what that work was like. Was grandma a union activist? Learn about the experiences of other Connecticut women activists from their interviews.

Historians in Connecticut, particularly at the University of Connecticut, have pioneered and led the way in the development and completion of a variety of oral history projects. They have received recognition on local, state, and national levels and have been prominent in oral history associations in New England and beyond. While a resident of Connecticut I participated in several oral history projects administered by the University of Connecticut Oral History Project and funded by the Connecticut Humanities Council. In the early 1980s, another historian and I spent over a year tracking down and interviewing twenty-one elderly Connecticut women who had been politically active from the early 1900s to the mid-1930s. We asked them about their occupations and political activities, information of potential interest to anyone with a female family member who was involved in political life in Connecticut early in the century. Another project I worked on during the 1980s involved interviewing elderly men who had spent their lives fishing on Long Island Sound from very traditional wooden sailboats. They described an occupation and way of life that have since disappeared. These interviews are available at the University of Connecticut Thomas J Dodd Research Center in Storrs and at the Connecticut Humanities Council in Middletown.

University of Connecticut Center for Oral History

The Oral History Project of the History Department at the University of Connecticut, organized in 1968, was the pioneer in the field. It became the University of Connecticut Center for Oral History in 1981. Through TAPESCRIBE, their professional transcribing service, the center has assisted many oral historians to transcribe the spoken word into the more easily used and distributed written form.

The UConn project includes more than 900 oral history interviews. On their website you will find a [list of their projects](#), followed by a list of interviewees for each project and the number of pages in each interview. Many interviews are of potential interest to genealogists. The majority of early interviews were with elderly individuals who could recall life at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Among them are interviews with mill workers, tobacco workers, sailors, Connecticut Socialists and Communists, and survivors of the Holocaust who later lived in the state. The Peoples of Connecticut project includes interviews of African-Americans, French-Canadians, Irish, Italian, Jewish, Polish, Puerto Ricans, and individuals of various European ethnic origins.

Unless the interviewee restricted use of an interview, researchers have access to both audiotapes and transcripts of interviews at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut at Storrs.

Also available at the Dodd Research Center is the Italians in New London Oral History Project of 1997-98 wherein forty-four longtime Italian-American residents of New London described their life in that city on videotape.

Stonington Fishing Oral History Project at Mystic Seaport

The focus of this project was on the lives of fisherman, their families, and other workers in the commercial fishing industry of the Mystic-Stonington area during the twentieth century. Interviews with photographic illustrations are available at the Mystic Seaport Library in Mystic.

Manchester and Cheney Silk Mills Oral History Project

For information call: Manchester Historical Society (860) 647-9983

During the 1970s and 1980s history professor John Sutherland of Manchester Community College and his students interviewed about ninety elderly Manchester residents, many of whom had worked at the Cheney Brothers Silk Mills. In some cases they were the second generation of their family to have done so. The focus of the project was to trace about one hundred years of Manchester history (1880s-1980s) through interviews that revolved around working class life, immigrant life, and the Cheney Silk Mills. Anyone who had ancestors living in Manchester during that time would find valuable information about residents' lives and working conditions at the mills. Tapes of these interviews are currently being transcribed and these transcriptions, as well as the tapes, will be available at the Manchester Historical Society in the near future.

Greenwich Library Oral History Project

For a list of interviews, click on the link above, then choose "Library Catalog," then "Library Catalog on the Web," then "Library Catalog: Subject: [type in] Greenwich, CT.—Biography"

Friends of the Greenwich Library sponsor the second largest oral history project in Connecticut. Organized in 1973, interviewing began in 1975 and continues to the present. The taped and transcribed interviews are of individuals who, since the 1890s, have contributed to or witnessed the making of Greenwich history.

Of the more than 600 interviews, about 125 thought to be of widest interest have been published in book form with indexes and illustrations. Tapes and transcriptions of all interviews are available at the Greenwich Library and those published in book form may be obtained through interlibrary loan.

The focus of some interviews is on life in various Greenwich neighborhoods or villages beginning in the 1890s: Old Greenwich, Belle Haven, Mead Point, Mianus, Byram, Riverside, Sound Beach, Cos Cob, Old Greenwich, and Banksville. Greenwich occupations such as oystering, fire fighting, newspaper publishing, and public health nursing are included. The experiences of African American and Jewish residents are recounted in other interviews.

Public Libraries and Local Historical Societies

Many town libraries and historical societies have small oral history projects that focus on interviews with longtime town residents. Due to lack of funding, transcriptions may not be available. So be prepared to listen or watch taped interviews. You can learn about the majority of these interviews by contacting both the library and historical society in the town of interest and asking for a list of their oral history interviews.

If it is not too late to interview your Connecticut ancestors, dust off your tape recorder and make a date! You will be glad you made the effort.