Hands-On History: How to Create Storytelling Projects to Reach Your Audience

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Choosing the Best Way to Share Your Community's Story

   Do you, your family, or community have an important story to tell to a larger audience? Do you have special photographs, keepsakes, or heirlooms in your possession that you would like to share with others? Are there histories that you and your community are stewarding that you want to preserve for future generations? Is your group working towards the recognition of a historically meaningful person or event? These are all great reasons to begin a storytelling project.

   While there are many ways for storytelling to take shape, this leaflet focuses on ways to physically commemorate and share African American history. Physical storytelling projects exist out in the world and can be accessed by outside visitors. Examples of physical storytelling projects include:

- Exhibitions
- Pop-up museums
- North Carolina highway markers
- Wayside markers
- Powerpoint slideshows
- Print publications
- Websites
- Posters

Each of these is a different kind of **format** that delivers historical information and stories in a unique way.

Understanding your Audience and Setting Goals for your Storytelling Project

   The first things to consider for any storytelling project are, "Who do I want to reach?" and "What is the best way to reach them?" Your answers to those questions should impact the type of storytelling project you choose to pursue. Some other things to consider as you ask yourself these questions might include:

- Is my audience local or geographically spread out? Do I want to reach people at a regional or national as well as at a local level?
- Will my audience respond best to a physical or virtual project or both?
- Is my focus on sharing this history with others or preserving it for future generations?[1]
- What do I want my audience to take away from this project?
- Do I have an abundance of physical or visual materials I want to share with my audience?
- Is there an especially meaningful site or physical location associated with the story I want to tell?
- Do I want to share this story directly with my audience through public programs and presentations?
- Does my group have a wide network that could put historical resources like booklets or leaflets into people's hands?

[1] For a dedicated resource related to this question, especially as it relates to digital archives, like someone's emails, photograph collection, or oral history with a family member, check out the UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries' Community-Driven Archives project's webinar, "Digital Archives: Management, Access, Preservation" at https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/community-driven-archives/2021/02/12/digital-archives-management-access-preservation/.

You might select a specific format for your storytelling project based on how you or your group respond to these questions. For example, if your audience is spread out geographically, perhaps a website is the best way to reach them. If they are spread out geographically but don't have a high level of comfort with navigating the web, then perhaps a small traveling exhibition is the best way to go. If you plan to personally share specific histories with your audience and you have the ability to travel your area to present at local events and meetings, perhaps a simple Powerpoint presentation will accomplish your goals–especially if you are working with a small budget. If you want to commemorate a special site or the location of an important moment or person in our state's African American history, maybe a NC highway marker is your best bet. If your group's main goal is to preserve a specific story for future generations, then your group might want to invest in a project that is maintainable over time, like a website or a booklet.

There are many different directions your storytelling project could go. That is why it is important to figure out which type of format is the best fit for your intended audience and project goals. The following section defines and breaks down best practices for different physical storytelling project formats.

Examples of Storytelling Projects

Storytelling as Interpretation

Storytelling projects are about much more than the delivery of information. They are vehicles for connection between people. Exhibit developer Beverly Serrell defines **interpretation** as "communication between a knowledgeable guide and an interested listener, where the listener's knowledge and meaning-making is as important as the guide's."[2] When you are deciding on your project, think about the format that will best allow you to connect with your audience and to evoke a meaningful response based on how you share your story through **content creation**.

If interpretation is the "what" of storytelling, then content creation is the "how." Creating content simply means pulling together the "show and tell" elements of your story with your audience in mind. That might mean writing out the important parts of your story, captioning photographs for a community-curated exhibit, pulling out quotes from an oral history interview, or dividing up your story into pages on a website. The work of creating content can be as simple as putting a pen to paper or typing up the same material and saving it online.

The following sections will discuss the pros and cons of different kinds of project formats and define the type of content creation required for a given format.

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[2] Beverly Serrell, Exhibit Labels, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015

Temporary and Traveling Exhibitions

Exhibitions, sometimes called exhibits, are visual and sometimes interactive displays that engage visitors through a clearly communicated set of ideas. Physical exhibits tell a story at a specific place (e.g. at a museum, library, or community center) through a curated set of objects, images, and other media. They aim to tell a complex story through a variety of simple-yet-engaging mediums.

Pros: Exhibits are visually engaging, good for group learning, and can be a great way to share oral histories,[3] photographs, and archival documents. They evoke emotion similar to film/movies. They can be portable, enabling them to travel from place to place.

Cons: Exhibits do not work well without strong visuals, and generally require graphic design. In terms of reaching visitors, they are less sensitive to individual needs, especially for people who need more time based on learning needs, and are often inaccessible to people with vision impairments. They can be a hassle to set up, depending on materials.

Content creation required: Exhibition curation involves the identification of powerful images, quotations, and archival materials that, together, interpret the story you want to share with your audience. Historical objects can also be incorporated if you have people in your group who are knowledgeable about how to care for and look after them. Exhibit text includes a title, introductory text for each thematic section, and captions. Each archival image or object requires a courtesy line reflecting the permission you acquired to include that item.[4] If using standard-size retractable banners, a good rule of thumb is to tell one story/thematic section per banner, each with its own unique title and content.

Materials needed: Portable stand-up banners in a range of sizes are often an easy, cost-effective way to create a temporary and/or traveling exhibition. One standard size is 34" x 80" but bigger sizes can present an opportunity for creative design on a banner as large as 8'x10.' Banners like these are fairly lightweight, fully retractable, and come in storage bags so they can break down easily and travel from place to place. You can contact a fabric printing company for more information about banner printing and shipping costs. If you are working with a graphic designer, they can help you send your fully designed files to the printer.

Courtesy of Bull City 150 www.bullcity150.org

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(3) For more on conducting oral histories and including them in exhibitions, see the UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries' Community-Driven Archives project's blog post and related webinar, "Why Are Oral Histories Important for Community-Driven Archives?" https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/community-driven-archives/2021/01/28/why-are-oral-histories-important-for-community-driven-archives/.

(4) For more on permissions and copyright, see the UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries' Community-Driven Archives project's blog post, "Copyright and Community-Driven Archives." https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/community-driven-archives/2021/02/12/copyright-and-community-driven-archives/.

Alternative to an exhibition:

1) Never underestimate the potential impact of a *Powerpoint slideshow*. Powerpoint is a user-friendly computer program through Microsoft that allows you to attach text, digital images, and audio or video to individual slides to support storytelling. Each slide can hold a different part of your story or aspect of your larger project. This is a low to no-cost option that works great for those who enjoy working with groups, whether at in-person or online events, and giving talks about histories you have uncovered and their meaning for your audience. Save your Powerpoint presentation as a PDF file on a thumbdrive, and a multimedia presentation highlighting your story is available to you and your audiences at any time.

2) Powerpoint slides can also be used to create simple text and image panels for a *table-top exhibition*. This is a low-cost exhibit option for groups wanting to save money on graphic design and printing services. You can create a table-top exhibition by printing Powerpoint slides with your home printer, mounting them to foam board with adhesive spray, and arranging and mounting your panels to one or more tri-fold cardboard table-top displays. An exacto-knife is helpful for cutting your panels to the desired size. Make sure to give your exhibition a clear title in a large font and display it prominently.

North Carolina Highway Markers

The North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program is a joint program between the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (NCDNCR) and the NC Department of Transportation (NCDOT) to commemorate important people, events, and sites of state history. North Carolina residents can apply to have the state erect a historic marker at a given location of statewide significance. The State's Marker Advisory Committee chooses the markers that will go up across the state based on a strict set of criteria.

A group of NC residents unveil a new historic marker connected to the history of Shaw University. NCDCR

Pros: The process is very straight-forward. The criteria for any given application is available on the NCDNCR website. Read the criteria carefully to make sure your project applies. If accepted, the state supplies the materials and labor for the installation of the marker and helps with promotion of your unveiling event if you need assistance, including issuing a press release to statewide media.

Cons: It is a very selective program, so you and your group may want to consider pursuing an application for a historical marker alongside a homegrown commemorative project. The text on the markers themselves must be very short (~20 words or less), and much history has to be condensed into a few words. Since highway markers are place-based, the audience reached by a given marker is limited to those who pass by its physical location.

Content creation required: Namely, a description of the rationale behind your proposed marker in a clearly written application. Any individuals whom you propose for commemoration must be deceased for at least 25 years prior to your application. Note that the application requires you to share copies of historical sources that you cite in your application (e.g. pages from a book or an annotated bibliography). You might consult with the NCDNCR staff on the requirements before starting your application. They can be reached at ncmarkers@ncdcr.gov.

Materials needed: None, aside from your application materials, as well as any printed materials and refreshments for your marker's unveiling event after the NCDNCR Marker Advisory Board has approved your application and NCDOT has installed the physical marker.

Alternative to a Highway Marker:

1) A community-led "pop-up" museum is a one-day or multi-day event series that brings community members together to tell stories around a specific theme or topic through sharing objects and images. The Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History describes it as "a temporary exhibit created by the people who show up to participate."[5] Participants arrive, label their artifacts, and stay to engage with what other participants brought to the event.[6]

2) A wayside marker is an interpretive sign at a site of historical meaning or importance. Wayside markers often take the form of a single panel attached to a frame anchored into the earth to become a permanent mini-exhibit commemorating the history of a specific place. They can be made affordable by ordering a frame for a designed panel that can be screwed into a wood base and driven into the ground with basic tools (See photo right of what this set-up might look like.). Make sure to consider the accessibility of your wayside marker for people of varying abilities, especially in terms of the location of the marker and the height of the panel for wheelchair users.[7]

3) The NC Civil Rights Trail Marker Program is a great option for commemorating specific sites related to North Carolina's Civil Rights Movement history.

Materials for lower-cost wayside marker / Photo by Kimber J. Heinz

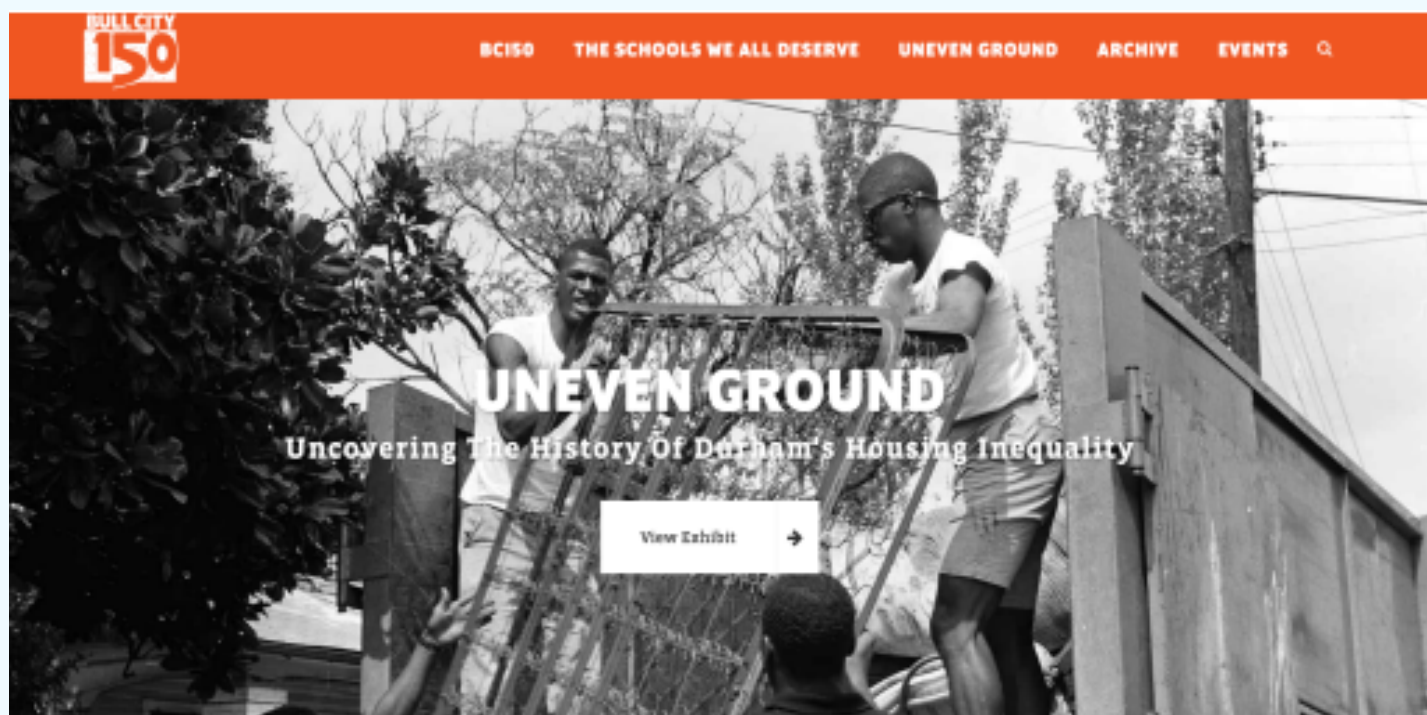**(5)** See the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History's Pop-Up Museum (MAH) resource page at https://www.santacruzmah.org/pop-up-museum.
(6) For a how-to guide on creating your own pop-up museum, see MAH's pop-up museum organizers' kit, http://popupmuseum.org/pop-up-museum-how-to-kit/.
(7) For more on accessibility best practices for wheelchair users, see "How to Create Accessible Wayside Exhibits," https://106group.com/how-to-create-accessible-wayside-exhibits/.

Websites

Hosting your project on a website or telling a story through a digital project is a great way to make your project accessible to a broad audience outside of your local area or region. Websites are a big part of daily life in a Web 2.0-driven world where our online actions contribute to how material on the web shows up on our phones and computer screens.[8] People's "likes" or ratings recommend artists or restaurants to us; their shared posts on social media reach us through our mutual networks. We can easily connect to people across the globe in just a few clicks. However,

Photo by Devry Becker Jones, December 23, 2021, HMdb.org

because of the diffuse content on the web, it is also easy for quality work to get lost in a sea of online resources. Web-based tools are a great option for people committed to reaching a wide (national or global) audience and able to navigate the challenges the web presents.

Home page of a history project website / Courtesy Bull City 150 bullcity150.org

Pros: Web-based storytelling has the potential to reach diverse online audiences of people across the country, or even the world. It is often low-cost or totally free, and hosting a project on a website can greatly improve accessibility for people who may not be able to make it to an in-person event but who are able check out a digital project from the comfort of home, including those who are not able to spend much time outside of their home due to disability and chronic illness. If maintained properly, websites can ensure the preservation of a story for a longer period of time than a one-time event or temporary exhibition.

Cons: Websites require a fair amount of investment on the front end to get them set up and to troubleshoot technical issues. If you want to reach a lot of people, websites require ongoing promotion and getting the word out via online and in-person channels to make them relevant to your audiences. They also require regular upkeep, like ensuring that you are up-to-date on annual web hosting fees and making sure that external links to other websites are still working. In other words, websites are living projects that require ongoing care–which are different from exhibits, historic markers, and other more static physical storytelling projects.

(8) For more on Web 2.0 and its impact on storytelling projects of all kinds, see Letting Go? Sharing Authority in a User-Driven World, Eds. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011.

Content creation required: Websites can host a variety of types of **media**, such as text, images, and audio and video clips. All of these types of media can be formatted to become content on your website. Formatting requires getting familiar with the specific **platform** with which you are working. On the simpler side, Wordpress and Omeka are different kinds of web-based platforms that are user-friendly and free or very affordable. Each of these platforms will tell you how to format your text or images, for example, in ways that will let you easily host them on the site.[9] What kinds of media you want your site to host is up to you, and can be totally based on your comfort level. Simpler is often better if it helps you reach your audience. Writing for the web is short and clear. Use short paragraphs and bullet points whenever possible. Like exhibitions, outside and borrowed media items (e.g. a photo you found in a library archive) require permission, and all permissions should be included as captions on the finished site. Consider adding a statement about copyright to your site, so visitors will know if and how they can share your work with their networks. [10]

Materials needed: Aside from identifying and paying for web hosting (available through companies like Reclaim Hosting, Dreamhost, and others) and a platform like Wordpress or Omeka, there are few other materials required.

The Negro Motorist Green Book listed places where African Americans could receive services while traveling during the Jim Crow era. The publication included categories such as hotels, restaurants, gas stations, and barbershops.

Durham's DeLuxe Barbershop was listed in the Green Book from 1950-1952. The barbershop and its original owner, Sterlin Holt, Sr., are examples of the people and places across the state who held prominent roles within the community in addition to assisting travelers.

Derrick Green in Front of DeLuxe Barbershop. Courtesy Lisa R. Withers

Archival Seedling Lisa R. Withers is connecting with descendants of North Carolina Green Book proprietors to build a collection of memories and historical materials about the legacy of some of the places listed in the Green Book. Her first oral history was with Derrick Green, the current owner of DeLuxe Barbershop.

Read more about the history of DeLuxe Barbershop and Durham's historic Hayti district here.

Inside DeLuxe Barbershop. Courtesy Lisa R. Withers

Derrick Green Clip: Details and Audio Transcription

Listen to Derrick Green talk about DeLuxe Barbershop and its legacy. This is an excerpt from Lisa Withers's oral history interview with Mr. Green. Courtesy Lisa R. Withers

Page of an Omeka website / Courtesy Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Alternative to a Website:
1) Print publications like booklets can contain much of the same information and content that might go on a website, and are printed and bound or folded so that they can be easily distributed. If your intended audience is not internet-savvy or does not usually seek out information online, then creating a printed booklet or leaflet might be the best way to get your story out to the world. You can print and distribute it yourself or find an organization or publisher to work with. Another option is to identify print publications, such as newsletters or magazines, that interest you and your audience and reach out to them about writing a column or longer piece about the story you wish to share with a larger audience.

(9) For media formats that are compatible with the Wordpress platform, for example, check out: https://wordpress.com/support/accepted-filetypes/.
(**10**) See the UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries' Community-Driven Archives project's blog post, "Copyright and Community-Driven Archives." https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/community-driven-archives/2021/02/12/copyright-and-community-driven-archives/.

Artwork by Sanya Hyland / justseeds.org
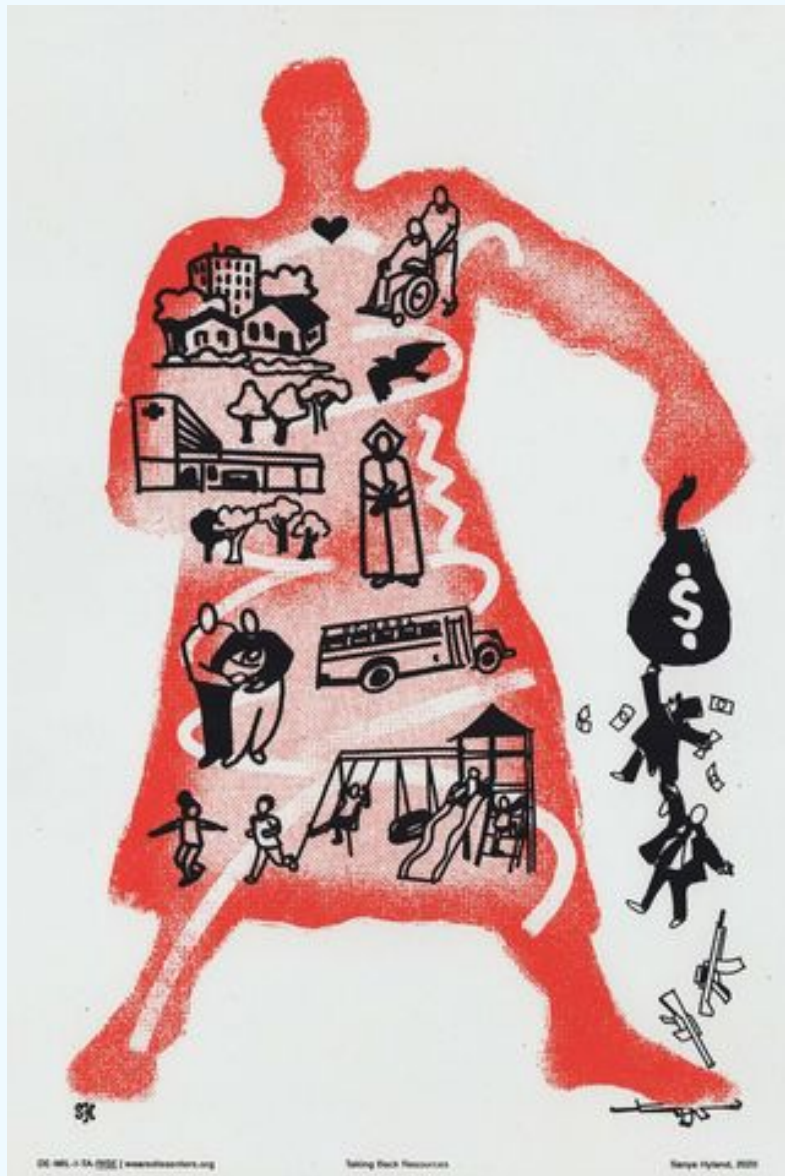
2) Another option is to create a visual-heavy poster or **poster series** that people can hang up as artwork while learning about a piece of history.

Resources

Adair, Bill, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, *Letting Go? Sharing Authority in a User Driven World, Eds.* Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011.

"How to Create Accessible Wayside Exhibits," https://106group.com/how-to-create-accessible-wayside-exhibits/

Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History's Pop-Up Museum (MAH) resource page at https://www.santacruzmah.org/pop-up-museum.

MAH's pop-up museum organizers' kit, http://popupmuseum.org/pop-up-museum-how-to-kit/.

Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015.

UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries' *Community-Driven Archives project's blog post,* "Copyright and Community-Driven Archives." https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/community-driven-archives/2021/02/12/copyright-and-community-driven-archives/.

UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries' *Community-Driven Archives project's webinar,* "Digital Archives: Management, Access, Preservation" at https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/community-driven-archives/2021/02/12/digital-archives-management-access-preservation/.

Wordpress. https://wordpress.com/support/accepted-filetypes/.