



BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY LAUNCHES GROUNDBREAKING ORAL HISTORY PORTAL

Web-based listening portal provides unprecedented access to rich collection of oral histories for researchers and general public alike

April 26, 2017 Brooklyn, NY— The voices of filmmaker Nelson George, Celia Vice, who helped found El Museo del Barrio, and world renowned jazz artist Randy Weston can now all be heard at the stroke of a key. Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) announced the launch of an on-line portal that now makes its collection of oral histories easily accessible by historians, archivists, researchers and the public. The portal, or website, hosts nearly 250 interviews documenting the histories of Brooklyn's diverse ethnic and cultural communities. Some of these interviews date back to 1973, with narrators born as early as 1880.

"I didn't know anything about that part of Brooklyn," remembers Nelson George, talking about Fort Greene in the early 1980s. "I had no inkling I would move here." It turned out George ended up living just a few blocks from where up-and-coming director Spike Lee lived, just as Lee was making his mark on Hollywood. Pretty soon, the Brooklyn neighborhood was brimming with musicians, artists, writers, and actors like Branford Marsalis, Terrence Blanchard, Thulani Davis, Harry Connick Jr., Wesley Snipes, and Laurence Fishburne. "You could see Halle Berry walking down Dekalb Avenue to Spike's office, which was quite a sight."

George's recollections of Fort Greene's late '80s-early '90s transformation into a hub of Brooklyn's arts scene comes from just one of the nearly 250 oral history interviews available.

Users of the portal need not be specialists to navigate the site, which is built using the Wordpress platform in combination with custom plugins and is mobile friendly. As users listen to interviews in the collection, they can follow along on a transcript or utilize indexed descriptions. The design of the site removes cumbersome barriers often found in research libraries, and makes access to the rich, descriptive material found within the collection easy, even to a novice user.

The portal culminates a project initiated by a 2015 National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grant to BHS to digitize, process, catalogue, and make accessible interviews that comprise nine previously unavailable oral history collections. Additional funding from New York Community Trust made it possible to build the web interface. These collections provide a wealth of historical evidence about the lives of twentieth-century and twenty-first-century Brooklyn residents, and reveal how diverse communities sought to

preserve vital social, political, religious, and even culinary traditions while embracing new identities as Brooklynites, New Yorkers, and Americans.

Highlights of the collections include:

- The Puerto Rican Oral History Project, initiated by John D. Vasquez, a founder of Puerto Rican Studies at City University of New York (CUNY) focuses on Brooklyn's Latino/a history. The interviews feature Brooklyn residents who arrived from Puerto Rico via steam ships between 1917 and 1940, a time when Brooklyn was the center of Puerto Rican life, politics, and culture.
- Three collections describe the rich cultural, political, and social history of Crown Heights: Organizers and participants talk about the history of the West Indian Carnival—now one of the largest in the Western Hemisphere; members of the Lubavitch Jewish community discuss their faith-based commitment to the neighborhood; and community organizers and residents talk about the aftermath of the 1991 neighborhood unrest known as the “Crown Heights riot.”
- Interviews with activists, founders, workers, and residents reveal the history of the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, the nation's first community development corporation that will be marking its 50th year in 2017.
- The AIDS/Brooklyn Oral History Project collection contains interviews conducted for Brooklyn Historical Society's 1992 historical exhibition, one of the first in the nation. The ethnic, gender, sexuality, and class diversity of narrators in this collection challenges any singular narrative of the disease and its impact on those whose lives were impacted by it.

“BHS is proud to advance the field of oral history, and make these rich primary sources available to a broad audience” said Deborah Schwartz, President of Brooklyn Historical Society. “With a full-time oral historian on staff, we believe that our ability to capture history as it is being made in the 21st century is a great resource for scholars and students of all ages. This new portal introduces the discipline of oral history to audiences far and wide, and we anticipate a myriad of creative uses by all who find it on our website.”

“American history now has a Brooklyn accent,” said Brian Purnell, Associate Professor, Africana Studies and History, Bowdoin College, and author of *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn*. “And that accent comes in as many different and beautiful and complicated sounds as you would hear anywhere in the county of Kings. These oral history interviews are an absolute treasure. They let you view the soul of the nation's hometown: Brooklyn, U.S.A. Enjoy them. Learn from them. Record your own oral histories about Brooklyn, and add to them.”

“Oral histories are meant to be heard, and this portal invites us to explore Brooklyn's history by listening to the actual voices of hundreds of narrators who lived it,” said Zaheer Ali, Oral Historian, BHS. “Every accent, every vocal inflection, every laugh, every pause, reminds us of the fundamental humanness of our recorded past. These are people who generously shared their lives with us, and we are extremely excited to be able to amplify their voices so that even more will get a chance to listen.”

“The portal is also a contribution to the galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) industries,” said Julie I. May, Managing Director of Library & Archives BHS. “What we've built for the oral histories can be adopted by other repositories of a similar size with oral histories, photographs, artifacts, and fine art collections. It is open source and the custom plugins are freely available on GitHub.”

Visit the Brooklyn Historical Society's oral history portal: <http://www.brooklynhistory.org/library/oralhistory/>

About Brooklyn Historical Society

Founded in 1863, Brooklyn Historical Society is a nationally recognized urban history center dedicated to preserving and encouraging the study of Brooklyn's extraordinary 400-year history. Located in Brooklyn Heights and housed in a magnificent landmark building designed by George Post and opened in 1881, today's BHS is a cultural hub for civic dialogue, thoughtful engagement and community outreach.

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