

**Oral History and the Documentation of Historic Sites:  
*Recording Sense of Place***

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**Abstract:** While technology and historical documents are vital for recording and interpreting cultural heritage, living memory can convey both tangible and intangible aspects of a site such as alterations, use, cultural significance, and meaning. Despite the widespread application of oral history in related fields, it is often ignored as a tool for documenting historic buildings and sites. However, because it records not only physical, but social, spiritual and ritual phenomena, the oral record is essential to understanding the intangible and capturing sense of place. This paper examines research and case studies in which oral history was used to document a site and its cultural context. The case studies recorded testimony about various aspects of historic sites including architectural features and alterations to an Ottoman-era house and hamam in Kars, Turkey, and urban social conflicts that led to the abandonment of a monumental 1930s swimming pool in Brooklyn, New York.

**Introduction**

Oral history, often employed in recording the history of events, places, and people, can also be used to document the material history of a historic site. Architectural or landscape features, alterations over time, and uses of space can all be captured using oral history as a methodology. Used extensively in anthropology, sociology, history, and related disciplines to gather information, oral testimony is rarely employed as a documentation tool in the preservation and conservation disciplines. The Association for Preservation

Technology (APT) Bulletin outlines research strategies for cultural heritage researchers: “with basic written sources now covered, the researcher might turn to oral history for documentation. Recent past owners of a property might have recollections about alterations they made . . . Elderly members of the community can have helpful recollections.” This is qualified with the statement “It is wise not to take orally transmitted information as absolute fact unless it is substantiated by other sources” (Reed 1982). Such qualifying statements show a common approach to using oral history as a method to fill in gaps in the historical record. They also show the subservient role oral history often takes to visual and written sources in the documentation and research of cultural heritage.

Oral history, defined as “the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction,” is rooted in the earliest forms of transmitting information about the past, the oral tradition (Thompson 1988). According to historian Paul Thompson, oral history is the first kind of history, and it is only since the 19th century that skill in handling oral evidence has ceased to be the mark of the great historian. Most writers of history, including Herodotus, Voltaire, Marx and Engels, among many others, mined the oral tradition, relying heavily upon first-hand interviews (Thompson 1988).

The historian’s reliance on documents shifted in the twentieth century, as new technology -- radio, television and telephone -- superseded the document as major forms of communication. Additionally, historians understood that documents, archived and often written by those in power, were subject to propaganda and selective editing and therefore did not guarantee a complete picture. Most importantly, documents offered scant history on those without major political power, such as minorities, women and the working class (Perks and Thomson 1998). This recognition revitalized historians’ interest in oral history and, coupled with new recording technology, led to pioneering projects such as the depression-era Works Progress Administration’s American Life Histories, which captured the voices of hundreds of former slaves, people who were not represented by the written record. This project documented the realities of slavery as direct, unmediated experience, creating a

shockingly accurate picture of pre-civil war African-American experience which had not previously been possible (Library of Congress, n.d.).

Despite its power to record experience directly, oral testimony has often been criticized based on its potential unreliability—the fallibility of human memory. While oral historians must consult all available records to be able to ask the questions they need to answer, and verify the results, some have argued that oral history’s strength actually lies in its unreliability, in the discrepancy between fact and memory. According to historian Alessandro Portelli, oral history can “reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events.” He claims that oral sources “tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did . . . Its importance may lie not in its adherence to fact, but in its divergence from it as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge” (Portelli 1991). Portelli argues that, while factual verification is necessary, wrong statements, or even fabrications, are stories that can represent an underlying meaning that is also significant to the historical discourse.

Taking into account the varying perspectives on oral history, this paper will show how oral history is an important tool for documenting cultural heritage. In some circumstances, such as in rural and isolated regions, those with little written tradition, areas with predominately vernacular architecture, or places where records have been lost to conflict or natural disaster, oral sources may provide the *only* available information (Buckendorf and Knight 1981).

This paper will briefly review previous research projects where oral history was used as a tool to document and interpret a cultural site. These include an island formerly inhabited by aboriginal fisherman, the lost architectural features of an abandoned 17<sup>th</sup>-century farmstead, and a site of Japanese-American internment during World War II. It will also examine two field projects where oral history was instrumental in documenting the architectural features, uses, and social and historical context of significant historic buildings.

## **Previous Studies and Methodology**

Oral histories have provided important source material for many historic resource studies conducted by the United States National Park Service, public agencies and universities. The following examples illustrate the variety of uses of oral history, from reconstructing the features of a historic house to re-establishing a local culture.

Mokauea Island is a three-acre islet near Oahu in the State of Hawaii. Originally home to 17 families whose livelihood depended on fishing, the island was taken over by the United States military in 1975, its inhabitants were forcibly evicted, and their houses burned. Though maps showed villages on the island dating to 1817, no written records existed that documented the importance of the island to the aboriginal fishing culture who occupied the site. The State Historic Preservation Office of Hawaii conducted 14 interviews with former residents of the island and compiled a history that documented the island's significance to the Hawaiian aboriginal people, including a history of occupation that dated back hundreds of years. This study resulted in a 65-year lease to the Mokauea Fisherman's Association, and the reoccupation of the island by five families who rely on fishing for their livelihood (Buckendorf and Knight 1981).

Oral History was also used by Brown University's Department of Anthropology to document a colonial farmstead located in rural Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Established in the 1640s and occupied since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Portuguese tenement farmers, the site contained the ruins of a 17<sup>th</sup> century timber frame house and out-buildings constructed in various periods. While extensive records exist that document the colonial and early-American periods of the farm, the availability of living former residents from the period of occupation by Portuguese immigrants lead researchers to incorporate oral history as a key component of the study. An archaeological investigation of the grounds and documentation of the structure was conducted using oral history to fill in details about the locations, changes and uses of out-buildings, and specific details about the main house such as use of rooms, remodeling campaigns, and alterations to the building's frame. By interviewing informants who had lived in the house as early as 1909, researchers were able to document the former

interior and exterior appearance of the dilapidated house. More importantly, oral history helped to reconstruct the general pattern of economic activity at the Mott Farm over more than 80 years, and to establish the position of the farmstead within the larger economic network of the Portuguese-American community (Brown 1973).

Another project that used oral history to reconstruct both physical structures and their social-historical context is the Manzanar World War II Relocation Camp National Historic Site in eastern California. Manzanar is one of ten sites in the western United States where over 110,000 Japanese-American citizens were confined from 1942 to 1945. The restoration and interpretation project, conducted by the U.S. National Park Service, used oral history to recreate and interpret a site with almost no physical remains, as the camp buildings were all demolished or relocated after the war. Oral history interviews with former internees helped to tell the story of a camp that held nearly 10,200 at its peak, and aided in the reconstruction of one of eight guard towers, at least one barrack and intern-built gardens and ponds. These restorations, along with Visitor Center exhibits featuring stories and images of camp life, give visitors a better sense of the Japanese-American experience at Manzanar (National Park Service 2000).

These projects illustrate the variety of applications of oral history, such as dealing with sites of negative or uncomfortable history, where the physical and historical traces of a historic site have been purposefully erased, or to tell the story of an under represented minority group. Additionally, they illustrate how effective oral history can be to reconstruct both the sensory and emotional experience, as well as the physical features of a historic site, adding to its sense of place.

### **Case Study: McCarren Pool, New York City, USA**

McCarren Pool was the largest of eleven giant public swimming pools built between 1934 and 1936 by Robert Moses and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which employed tens of thousands of workers displaced by the Great Depression. Designed to ensure safe swimming facilities for all New York City residents, the construction of the pools throughout the five boroughs of New York

provided the city's poor residents, who could not afford to travel to distant beaches, an escape from overcrowded and unsanitary tenement apartments in areas with few parks or outdoor spaces. A facility with monumental architecture and the capacity for over 6,800 swimmers, McCarren Pool functioned as a community center that served the ethnically diverse neighborhoods of North Brooklyn until the late 1970's, when violence, vandalism and poor maintenance forced its closure.

Slated for restoration in 1984, the proposed project was subsequently blocked by protesters from a local neighborhood who claimed that the pool had become a magnet for crime, drugs and conflict between the different ethnic groups that used the facility. Many saw the protests as a racially-motivated effort to keep pool users from other neighborhoods, largely minorities, out of the mainly white surrounding area. The pool remained permanently closed for more than 20 years, hindered by lack of funding and community discord over its potential reuse, during which it was stripped of most of its original decorative features. In the summer of 2005, the ruined structure was stabilized by the New York City Department of Parks and opened as a temporary public performance space.

Oral testimonies collected between 2003 and 2006 contributed a great deal to interpreting the site and its complex social history, much of which had been undocumented. The oral history project, conducted by this author and many others, began with an investigation of available archival resources, which included original architectural drawings and photographs, as well as newspaper articles that chronicled events at the pool over time. Missing from the historical record, however, was an accurate depiction of the neighborhood conflicts that caused its closure. Also omitted from the historical record was the experience of the pool's architecture, the feeling of thousands of people crowded into one space in one of the grandest swimming pools ever constructed, larger than three Olympic-sized swimming pools together, in the middle of New York City.

The oral history project aimed to fill in the missing social history while reconstructing the lost historic fabric of the pool from the point of view of its users. Of crucial importance was receiving perspectives from all of the members of the diverse Greenpoint-Williamsburg area of north Brooklyn, including Jews, Poles, Italians, Puerto Ricans and African Americans. Through community groups, those involved in

efforts to preserve the pool, and interviews within the surrounding neighborhoods, over 20 local residents provided information on the neighborhood, the pool, and the conflicts and prejudices that had led to its abandonment. Interviewees were also shown historical photographs and asked to remember specific aspects of the pool's architecture and spaces, the experience of using the pool, and the social conditions of the time. The following are excerpts from the interviews:

**Alan:** I was born in Williamsburg, and [lived there] till I left home when I was 15. McCarren Pool was the center of all the action. . . . it was tremendous, I mean, don't forget that there were so many different ghettos, I mean enclaves, of different ethnic groups. There was the Polish neighborhood, the Puerto Rican neighborhood, the Italian neighborhood, the black neighborhood, the Jewish neighborhood and . . . everybody used to gather there, and there was no fights there, it was very well maintained, well patrolled (Olsher 2004).

**Anne:** It was very beautiful in the evenings, it was completely lighted and the water sparkled a bright aquamarine. . . . this was the age of Esther Williams, she was in the movies, . . . and we swam under a clear, dark blue sky, and looked up at the stars. . . . For people like us, for city people, and for poor people, it all was beautiful (Marcus 2006, 68).

**Florie:** Just have it knocked down. If it became a pool, with the way things are, I don't think it would be good. The neighborhood... the neighborhood wouldn't go. In the 1950's it was good, the pool, but it changed so bad. When we had our kids, that's when we stopped going. A lot of people were afraid . . . (Marcus 2006, 80).

While many remembered the pool fondly, some testimonies were openly racist, attributing the decline of the pool to another ethnic group or those outside of their particular enclave. Many of these same people emphasized specific observations of the pool being dirty or violent in the 1970s. Upon further questioning it became clear that they had never actually used the pool in that period, but had only gone as children in the 1940s. These widely divergent and at times fabricated recollections of McCarren Pool illustrate how memory is dependent on a number of factors outside of personal experience, and can often appropriate collective or common experience as personal recollection. This echoes Portelli's argument that the strength of oral

history lies not in its ability to gather fact alone, but to reflect the beliefs of both the individual and their societal context. The oral histories of McCarren Pool aided in a re-examination of the building's significance and, combined with a renewed appreciation of the works of Robert Moses, the pool was designated as a landmark in 2006.

### **Case Study: Namik Kemal House & Mazulmaga Hamam, Kars, Turkey**

Located in eastern Turkey, the historic city of Kars lies in a multi-ethnic area that has had a history of warfare and border conflicts. The city's historic core contains many significant Ottoman-era structures including the so-called Namik Kemal House, the childhood home of Turkish poet Namik Kemal, and the adjacent Mazulmaga Hamam (bath house), both of which were constructed shortly after the Ottoman conquest of the city in 1534 (Gönen and Sert 2004). Few records remain that document the interior configuration and architectural details of the buildings, which were used for over 400 years and abandoned in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following their abandonment, both sites were used as garbage dumps and their walls and finishes were left to deteriorate. Beginning in 2004, the restoration of the house, to be used as a community center, was undertaken by the Global Heritage Fund, a California-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in collaboration with the Kars Municipality, Christensen Fund, Chrest Foundation and the Turkish Cultural Foundation. The restoration project was conducted as part of a larger economic development initiative known as the Kars Revitalization Project, which aims to promote development of the economically depressed region by promoting cultural tourism and local craft traditions.

At the beginning of the project, both sites were buried in over two meters of debris. During the excavation process, many architectural and archaeological features were uncovered. A buried ceramic tandoor for baking bread, pigmented plaster walls, wooden structural beams, and a complex drainage system that irrigated a small rear garden were found at the Namik Kemal House site. The excavation process, which involved the use of local workers, attracted a great deal of attention from local residents including some who were familiar with the buildings and one resident who had lived in the



Namik Kemal House as a child. When interviewed he was able to point out the function of the various features that had been excavated, and to reconstruct the finishes and uses of each room. The information provided allowed the project team to correctly identify and document the discoveries, and to understand their age and significance.

The excavation of the Mazulmaga Hamam, a river-fed bathhouse with a large, domed caldereum and a smaller tepiderium, also involved identifying lost elements of the structure. While the masonry shell of the building remained intact, features such as the furnace area, which had been roofed with a wood frame, and the wooden changing stalls, had long disappeared. Informants from the surrounding houses, including one 97-year old man who had lived near the Mazulmaga his whole life, were able to reconstruct the missing features from memory, giving precise information about size and location, finishes and decorative details. Additionally, informants helped to anticipate the finds of the excavation, recalling from memory where walls and staircases would be located, and helping excavators to avoid damage to the underlying structures.

The oral history component of this project, while not as formal as the previous case study, was nonetheless a crucial source of information in an area with few archival records. This project shows how oral history can be incorporated into any building investigation or conservation project, and becomes an invaluable source of information on specific features of a site.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined a number of projects in which oral history impacted both tangible and intangible aspects of a site, aiding in its preservation and interpretation. In cases such as the Manzanar Internment Camp and Mott Farm, the use of oral sources provided information that enabled the tangible, physical reconstruction and restoration of a site, as well as the intangible interpretation of historical events. At Mokauea Island, oral history facilitated a reinterpretation of the island and its reestablishment as a traditional homeland. Testimonies from neighborhood residents filled in a significant missing portion of McCarren Pool's troubled social history, and at Kars, Turkey, local residents helped to document the

architectural history of two significant buildings by recalling details that would have otherwise been lost.

Like all documentation techniques, oral history is a conservation tool, and at times, a method of conservation itself. However, these projects illustrate how oral history differs remarkably from other forms of documentation, as it incorporates the social context of a historic site and the memories of its users. These memories inherently involve a combination of individual and collective, as well as factual and fabricated experience. It is this capacity to capture both personal and collective experience, as well as imagination and interpretation that separates oral history from other documentation methods. By creating not only an image or measurement of a site or building, but a series of sensory impressions, oral history contributes to evoking sense of place. For this reason, oral history should not be thought of as unreliable and therefore subservient to other forms of documentation, but must be considered an invaluable resource for the documentation and interpretation of historic buildings and sites.

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