

Oral History Interviews

Conducting Oral Interviews for Agricultural Properties

Below are some tips for conducting oral interviews. Additional information on best practices and links to resources on interview processes is available on the [Oral History Association website](#).

- Always record the date and time and the names of both interviewer and interviewee, the organization sponsoring the interview, and the project for which the interview is being conducted.
- Try to ask open-ended questions rather than questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.”
- Where appropriate, try to follow up on answers.

Essential Questions to Ask

The following key questions should be asked during interviews to understand changes in farming practices and alterations to the farm:

- What were the main agricultural products of the farm after World War II? How did things change in the 1960s, 70s, 80s?
- What changes were made to buildings or landscape features, such as additions, new buildings, removal of old buildings, moving buildings, making contour strips, adding or removing fences, clearing woodlots, etc.? When were these changes made?
- Are there family stories or even old photos and documents that you'd be willing to share?
- Consider using existing data as a conversation point:
 - The 1927 agricultural census says that x farm produced y. Do you ever recall hearing about these activities?
 - Here is a printout of the 19## aerial. Can you identify any of the landscape features or talk about what the aerial is showing us?

Additional Questions to Ask

The following additional questions can be asked during interviews, if time and resources permit:

- In your experience, what is the most notable agricultural change on this farm? Please explain. Responses may address changes in crop/livestock mix, farming methods, profitability, markets, regulations, development pressure, etc.
 - Follow up question: Approximately, when did these changes occur on the farm?
- Can you tell us something about the farming methods that were used? (Examples: crop rotations; introduction of new machinery for various tasks; animal feeds grown on the farm or purchased from outside; no-till crop production; were animals pastured or confined; what animal breeds or seed varieties were used)

2022 Update to PA's Agricultural History Project:
Additional Guidance for Using Pennsylvania's Agricultural Context

- Were any products processed on the farm for household use? How long did home processing continue? What buildings or spaces were used? Who did the work?
 - Examples: vegetable garden products being canned, dried, stored in root cellars, made into relishes; pigs being converted to ham, bacon, scrapple, sausage; beef slaughtered for fresh or frozen meat; chickens producing eggs and meat for the family
- Was the farm ever tenanted? If so, do you know who rented the farm and what were the terms?
 - Was it a cash rental, share rental, something else?
- Did hired workers ever live on the farm? If so, what did they do? How were they housed?
- Who did what work on the farm? Did anybody in the household hold a job off the farm? What were the reasons for seeking off-farm work? What were the benefits and drawbacks?
- When was electricity installed? How about water indoors?
 - Note: Typically, plumbing amenities were not added all at once. Usually running water in a kitchen sink would come first, and indoor toilets and/or bathrooms would come later.
- How did work rhythms change with the seasons? Did seasonal patterns change over time?
 - Example: timing of plowing or harvesting might change with new crop varieties)
 - Did your family make use of various government and educational programs aimed at farming communities? Agricultural Extension, Soil Conservation District, government commodity or set-aside programs, etc.