

WOMEN'S HISTORY THROUGH FAMILY HISTORY: A VARIATION ON A THEME

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The undergraduate family history project has become a standard assignment in survey courses around the country over the last twenty years—sometimes as an optional project and sometimes as a required assignment. This activity, which documents the lives of two or more generations of a family or evaluates a family member in light of a historical event, has become popular in part because it has several advantages over typical undergraduate research papers—it generates a high level of student interest, it is more difficult to plagiarize, it builds a deeper relationship between professors and their students, and it allows students to connect personally with the material presented in class.¹ In teaching a U.S. women's history course for undergraduate majors, I have modified this project to take advantage of these benefits, while at the same time using it to introduce higher-level research skills.²

My assignment asks students to complete an eight-to-ten page research project that focuses on a woman from their family. They examine an important event or significant experience in the life of the woman and then compare their findings to the historical scholarship on the topic. For example, students can examine their grandmothers' activities during World War II and then compare those experiences with the historical literature that describes women during the war. To do this successfully, students must familiarize themselves with and engage secondary sources on their topics, work with primary sources, and develop critical thinking and writing skills.

To make the project manageable and encourage students to work on it throughout the semester, I break the assignment into eight different stages, with three separate deadlines.³ In stage one the students locate primary sources about the female family member that they wish to study. I encourage them to use diaries, letters, scrapbooks, photographs, family bibles, and any period newspaper clippings that might be available. Students who do not have access to a collection of family documents conduct oral interviews to gather the evidence necessary to complete the assignment.

¹David H. Culbert, "Undergraduates as Historians: Family History Projects Add Meaning to an Introductory Survey," *The History Teacher*, 7, No. 1 (November 1973), 7-17.

²I have used this project with non-history majors and it works with a few modifications. First, I set a minimum number of secondary sources I expected them to use. And second, in addition to using peer review, I encouraged students to come to my office and discuss their rough drafts, so I can provide additional feedback. This extra step allows me to redirect some students, who approached the topic more from a biographical standpoint, back to exploring a specific historical topic.

³See appendix 1 for a research project time table.

During stage two students pick a topic upon which to situate the research. This is an important stage, because I want to ensure that students do not write a life history or biography about their female family member. Instead they must emphasize a specific topic or event in the life of the woman. While students who rely on documentary evidence are constrained to write about a subject that the material covers, those conducting oral interviews have a little more freedom in choosing a topic. I encourage students using oral interviews to discuss briefly with the interviewee what the female family member considers to be some of the most important events in her life. I also provide students with a list of ideas to help them define the scope of the project. Good topic ideas include the woman's experiences during the Great Depression, the woman's thoughts about school desegregation, whether the woman supported or opposed the women's liberation movement, what marriage and family life was like during a specific decade, the woman's experience doing wage labor, the woman's reasons for religious conversion or missionary work, and the woman's experiences participating in sports.

For stage three of the project students use the library to locate secondary sources by historians with which to compare the experiences of their subjects. During this stage, I give the students guidance on locating sources. Since I teach at a small liberal arts college, which has few women's history sources published before the mid-1980s, I warn students not to rely on just our library's collection. Instead, I encourage their use of easily accessible book and article databases, such as "WorldCat," "America: History & Life," "ArticleFirst," and "JSTOR." I want these history majors to search as widely as possible for sources, so I do not insist that they identify a minimum number of books or articles, requiring instead that they examine all relevant historical literature.

In some instances students' research ideas have been so innovative that they had a difficult time finding secondary sources on their topic. These cases are not necessarily hopeless. Usually if they broaden the scope of the sources they examine, they still can focus on the initial topic. For example, one student recently wanted to examine the issue of widowhood during the 1950s. Unable to locate many sources that dealt specifically with widows during this period, he used sources that focused more generally on family life and women's roles during the 1950s, and compared how his widowed grandmother's experiences differed from the majority of post-war women. Another student wanted to compare her mother's migration from Nigeria to the United States in the early 1970s to that of other women. While few studies focused on this precise topic, there were several monographs that examined immigration from Africa or the impact of immigration on women following the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act that she found useful.

During the fourth stage, students are urged to begin thinking about their thesis. For some students, this is their first research project and the idea that they will design an argument or an interpretation about a historical subject often confounds them. Therefore, I do not require them to develop a thesis statement at this point. But rather to come up with a historical question that their papers will attempt to answer. Students examine secondary sources to generate ideas for their historical question. Some recent

historical questions include: What was life like for girls during the Great Depression? What workplace struggles did women face during World War II? How did women handle family responsibilities while their husbands served in the military during the 1950s and 1960s? What challenges did black women in college face during the civil rights era? What obstacles did women politicians face in the 1980s? How did women cope with single motherhood during the 1990s? How were women treated in the workplace at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

In the fifth stage of the project, students describe their research question and prepare an annotated bibliography that includes all of their primary and secondary sources. I require an annotated bibliography—rather than a standard bibliography—to force students to actually check the sources out of the library or to order them through interlibrary loan. An annotated bibliography also helps students become more familiar with the historical approaches that others have used to study the topic because they must write a sentence or two about the argument and scope of each source. In a fifteen-week course, this assignment comes due by the third or fourth week. This deadline encourages students to work on the project early and ensures that any books or articles they need can be requested through interlibrary loan to arrive in time to be examined.

During the sixth stage of the project students begin to do the actual research by taking notes on their secondary and primary sources. In addition, those who need to conduct oral interviews must develop a list of questions to ask the female family member, schedule a date and time for the interview, locate a recording device, and then conduct the interview. I provide students with a list of oral interview guidelines and a waiver form to facilitate their efforts.⁴ I also offer to look over their list of questions before the interview. It is important to stress during the development of questions that the interviewer will want to ask the interviewee about being female, as well as about the specific topic being addressed. Questions that attempt to determine whether a subject has faced discrimination, special problems, or advantages because of her gender are a significant component of doing women's history. In addition, I remind students that some of the best sources of information for questions and themes to cover in the interviews probably can be found in the issues covered by the secondary sources.⁵

After students have completed their research, in the seventh stage they develop a thesis statement, compose an outline, and write a rough draft of the paper. While I provide some general guidelines on the paper's format, at this point I am more

⁴See appendix 2 for a sample waiver form.

⁵The oral history guidelines I provide my students are modified from Willa K. Baum, *Oral History for the Local Historical Society* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1995), to address some specific issues for interviews with women about their experiences. See appendix 3 for a copy of the oral history guidelines.

interested in whether the papers successfully integrate the experiences of the female family members with the secondary sources. The students submit their rough drafts in the ninth or tenth week of the semester, and these are peer reviewed in class. The peer review process is helpful in two main ways. First, peers provide students with another set of eyes when it comes to topic development, analysis, evidence, transitions, grammar, and spelling. Second and more importantly for this project, by reviewing and evaluating a paper written in the same style as their own paper, students acquire a better understanding of what the assignment is trying to accomplish and how better to approach the subject. In order to ensure that the rough draft and peer review are taken seriously, together they comprise half of the grade for the entire project.

The final stage of the project consists of writing the final draft of the paper after taking into consideration the peer reviewer's comments and any comments that I have made. I include several specific style suggestions with the first draft, such as margin size, font, page length, title page format, use of quotations, and acceptable styles for the notes and bibliography.⁶ This part of the assignment is usually due in the thirteenth or fourteenth week of the semester, which leaves me adequate time to grade and return the assignments by finals week.

Many of these women's history papers have been thoughtful pieces of scholarship, which do remarkable jobs integrating primary sources into the secondary literature. Others have been enjoyable studies of subjects not typically covered in lectures, but obviously important to the lives women have lived. To most students, I recommend that they keep a copy of their papers as a part of their family history, perhaps filing it away with old photographs and other personal documents that have long-lasting meanings to them and their families.

This assignment helps to fulfill many of the goals I have for my upper-division history classes. For instance, it is an effective way to teach traditional research skills. By completing the paper successfully, students will have learned how to locate various kinds of secondary sources and engage their arguments, how to develop a thesis statement that answers a significant historical question, how to support an argument with both primary and secondary sources, how to structure an academic research paper, how to follow the standards of English grammar to craft an eloquent paper, and how to identify and attribute sources in notes and bibliographies. Moreover, the paper benefits from some of the learning outcomes that family history promotes, including inspiring

⁶ Good sources to assist students in the process of writing research papers include Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, fourth edition (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004); William Kelleher Storey, *Writing History: A Guide for Students*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Richard Marius and Melvin E. Page, *A Short Guide to Writing About History*, fourth edition (New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 2002).

creativity, requiring students to broaden their view of what constitutes a historical source, and evaluating the reliability of personal papers and individual memories.⁷

The project, however, goes beyond the skills a student gains when completing a traditional undergraduate research paper. First, it requires that primary materials be an essential component of the research. While some history reports might require students to look at period newspapers, letters, the personal papers of presidents, or census material, this evidence rarely becomes essential to the paper's thesis. Usually it only serves to highlight the argument the student has developed by looking at the monographs, essays, and articles of published historians. The women's history through family history assignment, on the other hand, places primary research at the center of the paper and asks students to use secondary sources as supporting or contradictory evidence.

This project also advances undergraduate research skills by providing many students with the opportunity to conduct oral interviews. Students are not required to use oral interviews in their papers, but most find it a satisfying way to gather the evidence for the assignment. Out of the eighty or so students who have completed this assignment, only two or three of them chose to use family letters or diaries rather than oral interviews. Conducting oral interviews provides students with additional skills in developing questions that produce evidence, communicating effectively orally in a one-on-one situation, and synthesizing the material gathered for use in a historical paper.⁸

Another benefit of this project is that it requires students to critically compare their primary sources to arguments and theories put forth by published historians. Students are expected to explain any instances where the lives of their subjects do not fit or follow the women presented in the secondary sources. This forces students to evaluate the evidence, approach, and methodology used by other historians, rather than uncritically accept whatever thesis has been presented. Many students end up exploring whether the lives of their mothers, aunts, or grandmothers differed from published accounts because of the region they were from, their family structure, or their religious backgrounds.⁹

⁷ Jane Stephens, "The Appeal of Personal Roots: Research Made More Palatable," *The History Teacher*, 27, No. 3 (May 1994), 311-315, provides more detail on the outcomes one can expect from a family history research project.

⁸ Margaret R. Yocom, "Family Folklore and Oral History Interviews: Strategies for Introducing a Project to One's Own Relatives," *Western Folklore*, 41, No. 4 (1982), 251-274, discusses some specific approaches to use when conducting oral interviews with family members.

⁹ This project also addresses some of the concerns expressed by Stephanie Coontz, "The Challenge of Family History," *OAH Magazine of History*, 15, No. 4 (Summer 2001), 28-30, about the difficulty of seeing families in a historical context.

Finally, this project is especially valuable in a women's history course for reinforcing the idea that history does not have to be about great events, important and powerful people, or tremendous economic changes. While some students do choose to examine their female family members' actions during a significant historical event, such as the Great Depression, the civil rights movement, or the Vietnam War, others explore more social and cultural topics, including single motherhood, women in the workforce, and women in higher education. As Gerda Lerner has suggested in her famous essay on placing women in history, the "shift from a male-oriented to a female-oriented consciousness" is one of the most significant challenges of exploring the lives of women.¹⁰

Despite these advantages, there are a couple of concerns that professors should note when considering this assignment. First, they must allow some flexibility for students who do not have access to a female family member or whose family refuses to participate in the assignment. During the first year I used this assignment, for example, I had an international student who found it impossible to conduct a satisfactory interview or attain primary sources from her family overseas. Instead, I made arrangements for her to use the unpublished personal papers of a local woman as her primary source. Similarly, in another semester, a student interviewed her father and uncles about her grandmother because no female family members wished to participate in the project. Such alternatives allow students, who for whatever reasons do not conduct primary research on a family relative, to still benefit from the assignment.¹¹

Another issue that merits special attention is the fact that most of my students come from middle-class white families and, when doing research, tend to assume that the only women who existed came from the same racial and class backgrounds as themselves. When I examine their bibliographies, therefore, I often encourage them to look at sources that discuss other races and classes of women, so that they can compare their family member's experiences to these women as well. This process reminds students of another important theoretical factor in women's history, that women can be divided by race, class, and sexual orientation, as much as they are united by gender.

Student reactions to the assignment have been fairly positive. In a recent evaluation, over 93% of the students commented that they found this family history paper assignment more interesting than other research papers. One student commented that the project "is not only a good way to explore a topic by interviewing a woman who lived through the event, it is also a way to learn something interesting about a

¹⁰ Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies*, 3, No. 1-2 (Fall 1975), 5-14.

¹¹ Kirk Jeffrey, "Write a History of Your Own Family: Further Observations and Suggestions for Instructors," *The History Teacher*, 7, No. 3 (May 1974), 365-373, offers some further justifications for the necessity of flexibility by instructors when assigning family history projects.

family member that otherwise might have remained hidden.” In addition, a little over 62% of the class noted that the project required them to develop more research skills than other papers. Many of the evaluations also commented on some of the challenges students face completing this assignment, including trying to assimilate primary and secondary research and writing the paper in a way that makes the research significant to more than just one particular family. In the end, I continue to assign this project not just because students enjoy it or because I see it as an effective way to teach higher-level research while reinforcing some of the underpinnings of women’s history, but also because students value the connections it establishes between them and one of their female family members. As one student wrote on an evaluation of the project, “I have learned some really interesting things about my grandmother that I didn’t know before which has greatly increased my respect for her.”¹²

APPENDIX 1

Research Project Time Table

First Stage	Locate Primary Sources	Weeks 1 & 2
Second Stage	Choose Specific Topic	Week 2
Third Stage	Locate Secondary Sources	Weeks 2 & 3
Fourth Stage	Develop Historical Question	Week 3
Fifth Stage	Annotated Bibliography	Week 4
Sixth Stage	Interview & Note Taking	Weeks 5-8
Seventh Stage	Rough Draft	Week 9
Eighth Stage	Final Draft	Week 13

¹²Anonymous, Women’s History Project Evaluations, 17 October 2003. The project evaluation involved 17 students who were enrolled in History 375: U.S. Women’s History at Berry College during the fall of 2003.

APPENDIX 2

Waiver Form

ORAL HISTORY WAIVER FORM
I agree to allow this taped interview to be used for the purpose of a class research project in History 375 at Berry College
<i>Please fill in the blanks.</i>
Printed Name: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

APPENDIX 3

Oral History Guidelines

1. This interview must be tape-recorded and should last at least 30 minutes.
2. Before the interview, develop a list of questions (around 20-25) you wish to cover. Your first five or six questions should focus on the interviewee as a woman.

Some possible questions include whether girls and boys were treated differently in school, in the community, or in your subject's family. You can ask the interviewee if she was considered a tomboy while growing up. Ask her about any benefits or limitations she experienced because of her sex. Was she urged to conform to certain dating, marriage, or career expectations? Did she ever face discrimination or receive preferential treatment because she was a woman? If so, what did she think about it?

The remainder of your questions should concentrate on the specific topic you have chosen, whether that is women's educational opportunities, domestic responsibilities, participation in social movements, workplace choices, or survival during wars, economic downturns, and political instability. It is a good idea to look over your secondary sources to see what kinds of questions professional historians have asked about your topic.

I'll be happy to look over your questions if you bring them by my office.

3. Schedule an appointment with your subject. The ideal interview setting involves only the interviewer and the subject in a location with comfortable seating and no outside distractions.
4. Before leaving for the interview make sure that your tape recorder is functioning properly, that you have spare batteries, and that you have your list of questions and a notepad for jotting down ideas.
5. Have your subject sign a waiver form stating that you can use her interview for the purpose of this research project. This waiver form must be turned in with your final project.
6. At the start of the interview tape-record an introduction in which you state the date, where the interview is taking place, the time, who is conducting the interview, and who is being interviewed.
7. The interviewer should limit his or her remarks as much as possible. Ask brief questions then allow the subject to tell her story. It is fine to prompt the interviewee to expand further on a topic, but do not turn the interview into a dialogue.
8. To avoid getting "yes" or "no" answers, start your questions with "what," "why," "how," and "where." For example, instead of asking "Was it hard to get a date during World War II?" ask "What was dating like during the war?"
9. Only ask one question at a time. Save follow up questions for after your subject has finished answering the initial query.
10. Make your questions brief. Elaborate explanations of why you are exploring certain topics or detailed information about the time period are unnecessary.

11. Save potentially embarrassing questions involving single motherhood, divorce, and career setbacks, until your subject is comfortable with the interview process. Begin instead with some background questions about the subject's childhood and family.
12. Do not immediately ask another question after your subject finishes speaking. A moment of silence might give her a chance to think of something else to add to her response.
13. If you think of a question while your subject is speaking make a note of it rather than interrupt her story.
14. Negative questions often elicit interesting results. For instance, instead of placing an event in a favorable light ask what was bad or wrong with a situation. "What constraints did sororities place on their members?" will generate a different range of responses than only asking what sorority life was like. A subject might be inclined to make only favorable comments about an experience unless prompted to remember other aspects.
15. Continuous taping of the interview will be less distracting than switching the tape recorder on and off. Unless the interview is interrupted by a phone call or other intrusive event, leave the recorder running even if some of the material is unrelated to your topic.
16. When the interview is over thank your subject for her time, and send a thank-you note soon after.
17. Take notes from your taped interview to include in your research project. Make sure to accurately quote your source.