

# KentuckyHistoricalSociety

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(502) 564-1792 • <http://history.ky.gov>

## Kentucky Civil Rights Oral History How-To

These tips on using oral history to learn about civil rights in Kentucky were compiled by the staff of the Kentucky Civil Rights Project with Kentucky Oral History Commission for use in conjunction with the documentary, [Living the Story: The Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky](#).

If you are interested in learning how to conduct oral history interviews, be sure to read the tips for successful interviewing below. If you want to conduct interviews on the civil rights movement in particular, you can also find here some sample questions to get you started.

We hope you will contribute your interviews to the [KY MEdia Bank](#) for other's to access and share. If this is a classroom or group project, here are some suggested tips for adding your content to KY MEdia Bank.

### Tips for Successful Interviewing

#### Supplies:

- Recording equipment
  - [for upload in KY MEdia Bank](#): smartphone, ipod, tablet, laptop computer, portable field recorder - anything that records digital audio or video
  - [for donation to an archive](#): recording equipment that records in .wav or .pcm file format, for examples check out [Ask Doug](#) on the [Oral History in the Digital Age](#).
- Notepad and Pencil
- Questions and Notes from pre-interview research

#### Getting Started:

First, recruit appropriate people to talk to. Choose people based on their experiences and knowledge of the subject matter. For the civil rights movement, choose people who are over age 50—preferably 60 to 80 years old or older.

Once you have agreed on a time for the interview, find a quiet place to conduct it. Turn off radios and televisions, and close the door if appropriate.

Before you begin, make sure your recording equipment is working properly. Use of an external microphone is recommended. You can use an android [smartphone](#), iphone/[ipod/ipad](#), tablet, [laptop](#) or even a desktop computer if needed. Whatever you have available to you that records audio or video.

As the conversation proceeds, keep these tips in mind:

- With the recorder on, make sure you clearly state the reason for recording the interview (ie: this is a part of my class's civil rights documentation project) and ask the person being interviewed if they agree to be recorded during the interview and if that recording can be shared with your class and online.

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- Be respectful.
- Listen carefully, and do not interrupt. Take notes to help you keep track of follow-up questions. Do not share stories about yourself or your reactions to the subject's stories until after the formal interview is over.
- Nod your head and use eye contact as much as possible to show you are paying attention. (This may be harder to do if you are taking notes.)

If possible, make a copy of the interview and give it to the interviewee. Such a gift will be greatly appreciated by both the interview subject and his or her family.

If you're ready to get started interviewing people about the civil rights movement now, here are some sample questions.

## Sample Oral History Interview Questions

The following questions will serve as a starting point if you are planning to interview someone about the civil rights era in Kentucky.

Of course, every oral history interview should be tailored to the individual being interviewed. Before the interview, ask your subject for some descriptive information regarding their experience they will share during the interview. Explain that having this information in advance will help you frame your questions. The following questions are suggestions for the type of questions you might ask your interviewee, not all of these questions will apply to each individual being interviewed. Please modify and add to the following generic suggested questions as needed.

### General Questions:

1. Could you please give me some basic background information about yourself—your full name, date and place of birth, parents and siblings, ancestors, spouse and children, education, religion, community involvement, professions, political party, etc.?
2. Did you attend the 1964 rally in Frankfort? Did any of your friends, family members, or colleagues? If you were there, describe the rally as you remember it.
3. Do you recall the effort to secure access to public accommodations under Governor Combs and Governor Breathitt? What do you remember? At the time, what did you think about this campaign?
4. Growing up during segregation, can you recall an early incident when you recognized a difference of treatment on account of color?
5. Have you traveled outside Kentucky? If so, how did travel affect your thinking about race or about segregation?
6. Were there people in your life who encouraged you to think about the treatment of African Americans in society? If so, can you name several?
7. Were there articles, books, films, speeches, newspapers, or theater performances that influenced your thinking about race relations?
8. Describe your memories of segregation in Kentucky. What was it like?
9. Were you ever personally discriminated against because of your race? How did you respond to this treatment? How did it make you feel? Did you ever confront the discrimination? If not, why not?

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10. Do you remember family members, friends, or individuals in your community being discriminated against under legal segregation? In education, public accommodations, employment, etc.? How did this make you feel?
11. How did national sports figures like Jackie Robinson, Hank Aaron, Muhammad Ali, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar affect your thinking about integration? How did you feel about them and their accomplishments?
12. Do you recall when you first heard about the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? Describe that recollection. Did his death influence you in any way in your advocacy for civil rights?

## **More specific questions for active civil rights movement participation:**

1. Was any of this treatment ever violent? If so, how did the black community respond? The white community? Were the responses to the discrimination different depending on race? Were there differences between how young people and older people responded?
2. Did men and women respond similarly or differently to legal segregation? Did women and men in your community feel differently about racial segregation? If so, in what way?
3. Did you have civil rights heroes locally? Nationally? Who were they? Why?
4. Are there records of civil rights activity in your community? Photos? Where are they located?
5. Were you involved in any civil rights organization (e.g., NAACP, CORE, Urban League)? What was the membership like? Were there more women than men, more men than women, or about equal numbers? Were there both black and white members? Who held the elected positions? Who did the “organizing” work (collecting dues, arranging meetings, hospitality, telephone campaigns, etc.)? Can you recall any of the more active members? Describe them.
6. How were women treated in meetings of civil rights groups? Did they hold leadership roles? Did they sit on committees? Were their ideas for action different from or similar to those of the men in the group? Did they perform office work, telephoning, and hosting more than the men in the group? Did the women ever talk together about organizational focus or actions?
7. Describe any involvement of your church or synagogue in civil rights. Was there support for speaking out against legal segregation in your church or synagogue? How was that demonstrated?
8. [for women] Were you a member of a sorority, the League of Women Voters, the YWCA, or any other women’s organization that worked to eliminate legal segregation? What tactics and strategies were used?
9. [for men] Were you a member of a fraternity, the Masons, the YMCA, or any other all-male organization that worked to eliminate legal segregation? What tactics and strategies were used?
10. If you attended a segregated school, how did it compare with schools attended by students of the opposite race? Were there any interactions between the white and the black schools?
11. If you were one of the first students to attend an integrated school, will you please describe that experience? How did you feel about being a “first”? What student organizations did you belong to? Did you play athletics on an integrated team? Describe some of these experiences.
12. If you attended college, please describe your experience there. Was it predominantly an all-white or all-black college? Did you belong to any student organizations concerned about civil rights? Describe any black faculty members [or white, if the subject attended a black college] you recall. Was the student body interested in civil rights advocacy? If you belonged to the Black Student Union, did you ever network or attend meetings with students from other colleges’ black student groups?
13. [for women] Do you recall any white woman [or black woman] with whom you were friends as a child? At school? At work? In your civil rights advocacy? What was that relationship like?

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14. [for men] Do you recall any white [or black, if the subject is white] man or woman with whom you were friends during segregation? At work? At school? In your civil rights advocacy? What was that relationship like?
15. How did you see the role of President John Kennedy with regard to civil rights? President Lyndon Johnson?
16. How did the escalation in Vietnam affect your thinking about race relations? Did you personally serve in Vietnam? Did any of your family members, friends, or colleagues? How did the war affect them and their attitudes about race?
17. How did the Black Power movement affect your thinking about race? Were you involved in any groups or any activities in which Black Power ideology may have changed previously held attitudes?
18. Did the thinking about African roots and heritage affect your thinking about race and racial relations before 1975? If so, how? Describe any events you might have attended to celebrate African heritage during this period. Did you travel to an African nation before 1975?
19. Did you ever attend any out-of-state events focused on achieving racial equality (e.g., the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Freedom Summer, the Selma-to-Montgomery march)?
20. Where do you think African Americans in Kentucky have made the most progress since 1930? Where do you think the least progress has been made? Did African Americans gain from the civil rights struggle? How? Did they lose anything? What issues still need civil rights advocacy?