

PERSONAL & FAMILY LEGACY

This section contains information about creating a Personal & Family Legacy—a letter, book, audio recording, or video—that tells your family’s story to be given as a gift to the next generation.

The most common reason for gathering family stories is that if we don’t, we will lose them. How many of us have wished that we had an audio or video recording of our own parents or grandparents, but it was too late? Whether you do the project yourself or hire a professional to help, seize the moment today while loved ones are healthy and memories are clear. You’ll be glad you did, and your family will thank you!

You are never too young to start a Personal & Family Legacy. If you are in your thirties, forties or fifties and raising a family, now is the time to collect the stories of your parents and grandparents. It will be one of the most valuable gifts you can give to your children. If you are a grandparent yourself, the younger generations will treasure knowing about your experiences and the wisdom you’ve gained over a lifetime. Here are just a few reasons, regardless of your age, to create a Personal & Family Legacy:

- **To be remembered.** Telling your story in your words will ensure that your children and grandchildren know who you are and what inspires you. If you are curious about your grandparents, there’s a good chance your grandkids will be curious about you.
- **To share a wonderful life adventure.** Celebrate the great moments of your life. Your stories will inspire those closest to you to celebrate their own lives.
- **To better understand yourself.** An inscription carved into the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece, reads: “Know Thyself.” Stories are the threads in the fabric of a family’s history. They explain why you are the person you are. As you recall your life stories, you’ll gain greater insight into the person you have become.
- **To have fun.** Reliving a particularly significant or enjoyable part of your life is a great activity. Recent academic studies have shown that the act of reviewing one’s life can bring a sense of accomplishment, joy, and peace of mind.
- **To help family and friends.** By sharing a story of how you overcame personal, financial, professional, spiritual, or other challenges can help others overcome their own difficulties. When elders share their wisdom and experiences, younger generations learn about surviving—and thriving—in difficult times. Who better to teach these lessons than a family member?

The pages that follow contain tools, exercises, and suggestions for creating your own Personal & Family Legacy. You do not need to do all of them; just start with the ones that are most comfortable and easiest for you. The most important thing is that you do *something* that tells the story of your family. It will be a gift that will last for generations!

Getting Started

Here are some helpful tips to think about before you begin crafting your Personal & Family Legacy. These suggestions will help you more easily recall events of your life and make doing the project more enjoyable and fun.

1. Gather treasured items: photos, documents, news clippings, heirlooms, and other items that represent your life. These items will act as memory “sparks” to help you recall stories.
2. Complete the information forms on the pages that follow. To help you get started, divide your life into stages:
 - Heritage: parents’ and grandparents’ lives and traditions, and the world you were born into
 - Early Childhood: birth to age 5
 - Childhood: ages 6 to 12
 - Adolescence: ages 13 to 17
 - Early Adulthood/College: ages 18 to 24
 - Early Work and Family: ages 25 to 39
 - Middle Age and Grandchildren: ages 40 to 65
 - Retirement: age 65+
3. If you wish, ask family members if there are particular stories that they want you to include.
4. Some other things to think about:
 - What are the major “themes” in your life? What do you think is the most important overall story to tell future generations about your family’s journey—challenges, endurance, triumphs, etc.? Is there anything in particular that most people don’t know or that should be preserved, explained, or celebrated?
 - Who are the influential family members you want to talk about? Why are they important? What were the major events in their lives? Do you have documents or clippings about them?
 - What do you remember about your parents and grandparents? Do you know where they lived, their education, careers, beliefs, talents and abilities, and major events in their lives? How did they meet?
 - What stories would you like to tell about each of your children?
 - What are the major turning points and special memories in your life: your proudest moment, your toughest challenge, your favorite job, how the world has changed during your life, etc.
 - What elements from popular culture—books, movies, music, sports, etc.—influenced you?
 - Who are the people—both famous and ordinary, family and non-family—who have influenced your life?
 - Where have you and your family moved to or traveled to, and what are your most vivid memories about the places you have been?
 - How have your feelings, beliefs, and/or ideas changed over the years: politically, socially, personally, morally, or in any other way?
 - Were you or your family involved in political or religious movements or military service? How did these experiences affect your lives?
 - What is your message to your children, grandchildren, and future generations?
 - Don’t forget to recall the funny stories!

About My Family

My Name: (First, Middle, Last): _____

Maiden Name (if applicable): _____ Nick Name(s): _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Please provide additional personal information in the Personal Timeline below.

My Father: Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Nick Name(s): _____ Occupation: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

My Father's Father: Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Nick Name(s): _____ Occupation: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

My Father's Mother: Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Maiden Name: _____ Nick Name(s): _____

Occupation: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

My Mother: Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Maiden Name: _____ Nick Name(s): _____

Occupation: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

My Mother's Father: Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Nick Name(s): _____ Occupation: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

My Mother's Mother: Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Maiden Name: _____ Nick Name(s): _____

Occupation: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

My Siblings (*Attach another sheet for additional siblings.*)

1. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

2. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

3. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

4. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

5. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

My Spouse (1st Marriage): Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Maiden Name: _____ Nick Name(s): _____

Occupation: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Wedding Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

Notes: _____

My Spouse (2nd Marriage): Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Maiden Name: _____ Nick Name(s): _____

Occupation: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Wedding Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

Notes: _____

My Children (*Attach another sheet for additional children.*)

1. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Other Birth Parent's Name: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

2. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Other Birth Parent's Name: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

3. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Other Birth Parent's Name: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

4. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Other Birth Parent's Name: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Death Date: _____ Place: _____ Buried: _____

My Grandchildren (*Attach another sheet for additional grandchildren.*)

1. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Parents: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

2. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Parents: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

3. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Parents: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

4. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Parents: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

5. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Parents: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

6. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Parents: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

7. Name (First, Middle, Last): _____

Parents: _____

Birth Date: _____ Place: _____

Answers for Your Family

Anticipate that your grandchildren and descendants will have questions about their ancestors—that means you! So take some time to answer these questions. Even if they are not curious now, know that they will be curious after you are gone. It will be your last best gift to them.

For each of these questions, try to include a story by describing your experiences: start with the setup (background information, details that explain the context), tell what happened and include descriptive details (appeal to the senses of sight, sound, smell) and talk about how you felt as events were unfolding; be sure to include a “high point” (a moment of revelation, the peak of action, etc.), and conclude with your insights into what the event meant to you and others, and what you learned.

Personal

- What name were you given when you were born?
- Did you have a nickname? How did you get it?

Early Life

- When and where were you born? How did your family come to live there?
- Can you describe the house you lived in when you were a child?
- What kinds of games did you play?

Extended Family

- Did you have any close relationships with aunts, uncles, cousins, or other extended family members?
- What traditions did your family have while you were a child?

Grandparents (if you remember them)

- What is your fondest memory of them?
- What important life lessons did they teach you?
- What did they do for a living?

Parents

- How did your parents meet?
- What do you remember most about what they taught you?
- Describe a typical dinnertime in your home.

Siblings

- Which of your siblings were you closest to as a child?
- What games did you play with your sibling(s)?

Childhood & Education

- Describe the life-changing experiences you had as a child.
- What did you want to be when you grew up?
- Which subjects did you like best?

Spouse

- How did you meet your spouse?
- Tell about your wedding (when, where, who attended, etc.).
- What was your first year of marriage like?

Children

- What were they like when they were young?
- What lessons did you learn by being a parent?

Work & Career

- What was your profession and how did you choose it?

Travel

- What are the most memorable trips you have taken?

Faith & Values

- What values are most important to you? (*When talking about values, it is better to “show not tell,” which means to share a story that shows why the value is important to you. For example, if you value honesty, don’t just say, “I think it’s important to be honest.” Share a story about how you chose to be honest when you may have benefitted by being less than honest.*)
- If you a religious person, what does your faith mean to you?
- What are/were your favorite holidays and celebrations?
- What period in your life has been the happiest? The most difficult?
- What is the biggest mistake you ever made and what did you learn from it?

Legacy

- What is the one thing you most want people to remember about you?
- What values and principles do you consider most important?
- What or who have been your greatest sources of inspiration?

Personal & Family Legacy Projects

There are many ways to share the stories about your life and your family's history. Here is a list of some of the more common ways people have created a Personal Legacy.

Gather and Organize Your Personal Records

Yes, this can be a daunting task! But if you divide the project into smaller tasks, give yourself a deadline, and enlist the help of others you will have a greater likelihood of completing the project—all without the stress. Also include old family documents (birth certificates, military records, etc.). Purchase archival boxes, clearly label them, then give them away to someone in the next generation who will care for them.

Ethical Will or Legacy Letter

An Ethical Will (or Legacy Letter/Spiritual Letter) communicates your values, wisdom, family history, and life stories. It is meant to be an expression of love to the next generations. It can be any length (a brief letter or a book) and take any form (a document, oral history, video, etc.).

Memoir Book

You can document your life stories in a book, which can include photos and important documents. Guides abound on how to write your memoirs, or consider joining a local writing group. The biggest challenge is the discipline required to finish the project. Being a good writer helps, too! A personal historian can help you with the writing, editing and publishing tasks involved in producing a heirloom-quality book for your family.

Oral History Recording or Video

If writing isn't your strength (or desire), consider documenting your stories simply by recording them on audio or video. By recording your stories, your family gets to hear the tone and inflection in your voice. Also, the recordings can be done with an interviewer, such as a personal historian, which can make telling the stories more engaging and easier to do.

Heirloom Stories

Chances are that you have inherited a family heirloom and only you know the story behind it. If you plan on passing on these heirlooms, you would help your heirs by documenting the stories of these precious objects. One simple way is to write the history of the object on an index card or piece of paper and attach it to the object. If that isn't practical, attach a photo to a description of the object. You can then include that documentation in this binder for your family.

Family Recipes

Do you have beloved recipes that have been handed down from one generation to the next? Perhaps the recipe isn't written down, and after you are gone no one will know how to make it exactly the same way. If so, handwrite the recipe (it will be much more valuable to have it in the handwriting of the person who created it) and make copies for your family members. You can even compile a book of family favorites.

For more information about creating your Personal & Family Legacy, please contact David G. O'Neil, personal historian and founder of Story Trust (www.storytrust.com). He helps families, businesses, and organizations tell their remarkable stories—as memoir books, oral histories and videos. Phone: 617-755-3283; Email: david@storytrust.com