

A PROJECT OF
ICONIC AMERICA
— OUR SYMBOLS AND STORIES —
WITH DAVID RUBENSTEIN

MY AMERICAN STORY

A Guideline for Community Storytelling



From ancient oral ballads to captivating social media posts, storytelling preserves history and culture. This guide offers a structured approach to engage your community to capture, share, and record stories.



My American Story Storytelling Guide

Public media stations are master storytellers, seeking to collect and share stories that explore history, encourage civic dialogue, deepen understanding, and connect their communities. Inspired by the series *ICONIC AMERICA: OUR SYMBOLS AND STORIES WITH DAVID RUBENSTEIN*, we have created this guide to support public media organizations, libraries, museums and community institutions in recording stories about the things that matter to their community.

Stories about local symbols, icons, and iconography can be a powerful way to celebrate the unique heritage, culture and individuals that shape a community. Through photos, videos, and written narratives, these stories can come to life and connect people across generations.

This guide provides a step-by-step approach for crafting engaging and compelling stories.



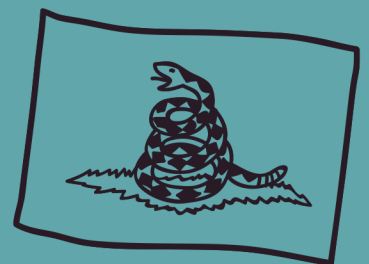
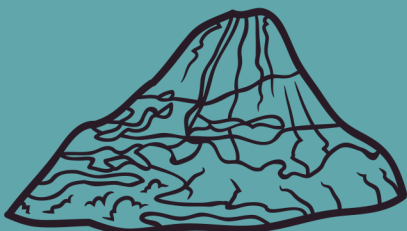
ICONIC AMERICA

— OUR SYMBOLS AND STORIES —

WITH DAVID RUBENSTEIN

ICONIC AMERICA: OUR SYMBOLS AND STORIES WITH DAVID RUBENSTEIN is an eight-part PBS documentary series.

Names, dates, and battles, that's often how American history is told. But history is all around us. It's a living, breathing story encapsulated in our physical world. From our flags to our statues and sacred texts, we live alongside and interact with history every day. In this series, David Rubenstein examines the history of America through some of its most iconic objects, symbols, and artifacts, diving deep into their story and using them as a gateway to the past. Each episode unpacks a symbol from history — the Statue of Liberty, the Gadsden Flag, Fenway Park, and the Hollywood Sign — familiar items with deep and significant meaning. He both tells the story of and goes beyond each object, using their stories as a portal into the lives of the extraordinary American figures who helped create, shape, and use these objects. This is not simply an examination of our country's history but the story of us and where we are today.



Exploring Icons

Storytelling is a timeless art that has the power to captivate and inspire. It is a powerful way to celebrate the unique heritage, culture, and individuals that shape a community through photos, videos, and written narratives that come to life and connect people across generations. As the old adage goes, "Write what you know."

This guide seeks to provide structure through a recommended step-by-step process of the selection, exploration, creation and sharing of stories about icons in your local community.

Storytelling plays a pivotal role in preserving stories and history - and you can be a part of that!

Let's Get Started! What Are Your Local Icons?

Let's explore the unique landmarks, people, events, and symbols that shape the identity of your community or state. What makes your hometown special? How would you describe your hometown? Your home state? What **feels** like home to you?

In this guide, there are three mediums that we will explore for story capture: photos, videos, and written narrative. Before you select your medium, begin by thinking about what icons you'd like to focus on.

Decide whether you want to explore local icons within your immediate community or venture out to capture icons that represent your entire state. Consider the diversity of subjects available, from historical sites and famous figures to cultural festivals and natural wonders. A few suggestions for identifying a subject:

- Brainstorm ideas with friends, family, coworkers, teachers or in a classroom with students [see next pages for worksheets]
- Research topics in your local library or online
- Consider your personal knowledge

Look for stories that are compelling, inspirational, or have had a lasting impact. Take some time on the following pages to contemplate and brainstorm ideas.

EXPLORING YOUR HOMETOWN

Sometimes the best way to discover your local history and icons is by being a tourist in your hometown! Check out these step-by-step suggestions and begin your journey.

List 3 different places to visit and explore your community! It could be a park, museum, historical site, organization or landmark.

1.

2.

3.



Select a site for a visit and list some of things that your learn, inspire you, or help you feel connected to your community.

BONUS: Find a museum docent, park staffer or librarian and ask some of the following questions during your visit.

What does this site or icon mean to you?

What is your favorite fact or story about this icon?

Where could I go to learn more about this icon?

BRAINSTORM YOUR LOCAL ICONS

Work on identifying local icons that you would like to consider
for this storytelling project!

What makes your hometown special and
unique? What **feels** like home to you?

If you were visiting a different country,
what words/objects/people would you use
to describe your hometown or state?

What are three things that make you proud
of your state or hometown and why?

1.

2.

3.

Notes:

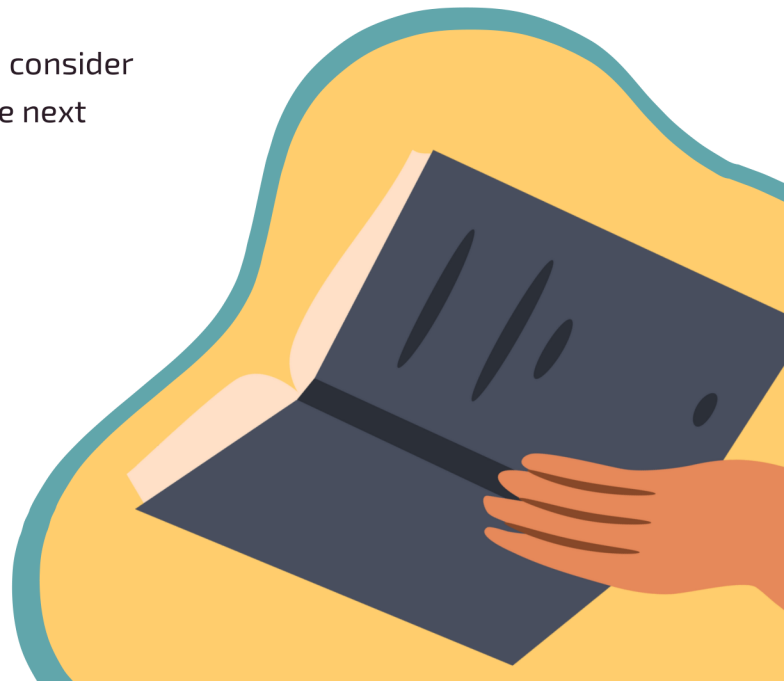
Research and Gather Information: Head to Your Local Library!

Once you have selected an icon to explore, delve into historical records, local archives, personal interviews, and community resources to gather accurate and detailed information. Collect information, anecdotes, facts, and personal experiences to create a rich narrative.

As you begin gathering information, consider heading to your local library for help! Libraries offer a variety of tools that can help you uncover details about your community's past.

- **Local History Collections:** Ask your librarian to direct you to collections that focus specifically on local history.
- **Archives:** Some libraries house archival materials that are not available elsewhere, such as old photographs, letters, diaries, and official documents. These collections often provide firsthand accounts and unique insights into local history.
- **Newspaper Archives:** Libraries often maintain archives of local newspapers, which can be a goldmine of historical information.
- **Local History Books and Publications:** Search through the collection of books, articles, and publications that focus on the history of your town or region.
- **Digital Collections:** Libraries may have digitized documents, photographs, historical films, and other materials that you can access online. These digital collections make it convenient to explore local history from anywhere.
- **Local History Librarians:** Librarians with expertise in local history can offer guidance, recommend resources, and help you navigate the library's collections effectively.

As you explore your icon's history and significance, consider what elements might help you tell a story. Go to the next worksheet "Explore the Significance of Icons."



EXPLORE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ICONS

When planning to tell a story about a historical object in your community, it's important to consider various aspects to craft a compelling narrative to highlight its journey, challenges, and contributions to the community. Here are some guiding questions to set you on a path of success!

What is the historical object? What is its significance?



Why should people care about this object? Why is it important to you? To others?



While you conduct your research, consider the object's history. When was it created or acquired? Who owned it or used it? What noteworthy events and stories are associated with it?



Who are the people connected to the object? Why is that important and what does it tell us about the icon?



Objects and their meanings may evolve over time. How has your icon changed throughout the years?

How Will You Tell Your Story?

Have you selected an icon that you'd like to share a story about? Next, decide on the format(s) you'll use to tell the story—photo, video, and/or written narrative.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING

AM I MORE OF A VISUAL COMMUNICATOR?

DO I LIKE TO EXPRESS MYSELF IN WORDS?

AM I A FILMMAKER AT HEART?

Exploring and sharing local icons can help you connect with your community and your history in a meaningful way. By preserving these stories, you contribute to the rich tapestry of your local heritage and inspire future generations to appreciate the legacy of these icons. The next section will get into more detail about the different storytelling mediums.

Creating Photo Stories

Would you like to share photos of a local icon?

- You could plan on curating a collection of relevant photos that capture key moments in the icon's life.
- Use captions to provide context, share anecdotes, and convey emotions.
- Arrange photos in a sequence to tell a visual story.

Crafting a Short Documentary

Although a video might be time-intensive, it can be a compelling way to show and share your icon and hear directly from experts and members of your community.

- If you plan to tell a story through video, script a compelling storyline that includes interviews, narration, and visuals.
- Plan to incorporate interviews with family members, friends, colleagues, or experts who can provide insights and personal anecdotes.
- Blend historical footage, images, and videos to enhance the narrative.

Writing Engaging Narratives

Is writing your passion? Then explore the icon through a well-developed story. Begin with a captivating introduction that hooks the reader's interest.

- Organize the narrative in a logical sequence, covering key events and moments.
- Infuse personal anecdotes, quotes, and descriptive language to create a vivid portrayal.
- Conclude with a meaningful takeaway that emphasizes the local icon's impact.

Photography

Photography is a powerful medium that allows you to capture moments, tell visual stories and explore your local history. And with portable digital cameras and smartphones, photography has become a uniquely ubiquitous medium for artistic expression.

This guide is designed to support your creative journey and document local icons—the unique landmarks, people, events, and symbols that shape the identity of your community or state. Through your lens, you'll uncover hidden treasures, showcase the extraordinary, and celebrate the ordinary in a compelling way.



Select Your Icon: Decide whether you want to explore local icons within your immediate community or venture out to capture icons that represent your entire state. Consider the diversity of subjects available, from historical sites, monuments, people, cultural festivals, food and natural wonders.

Research and Planning: Conduct research on the local icon(s) you intend to photograph. Learn about their history, significance, and cultural context. Create a list of potential locations, events, or subjects you'd like to capture.

Storytelling through Images: Photography is a visual storytelling medium. Think about the message or narrative you want to convey through your photos. Consider themes and emotions that resonate with the chosen icons.

Equipment and Techniques:

Familiarize yourself with your camera's settings and features. Experiment with different angles, lighting, and composition techniques to create visually compelling and meaningful photographs.



“

Photographs open doors into the past, but they also allow a look into the future.

”

Sally Mann, Photographer

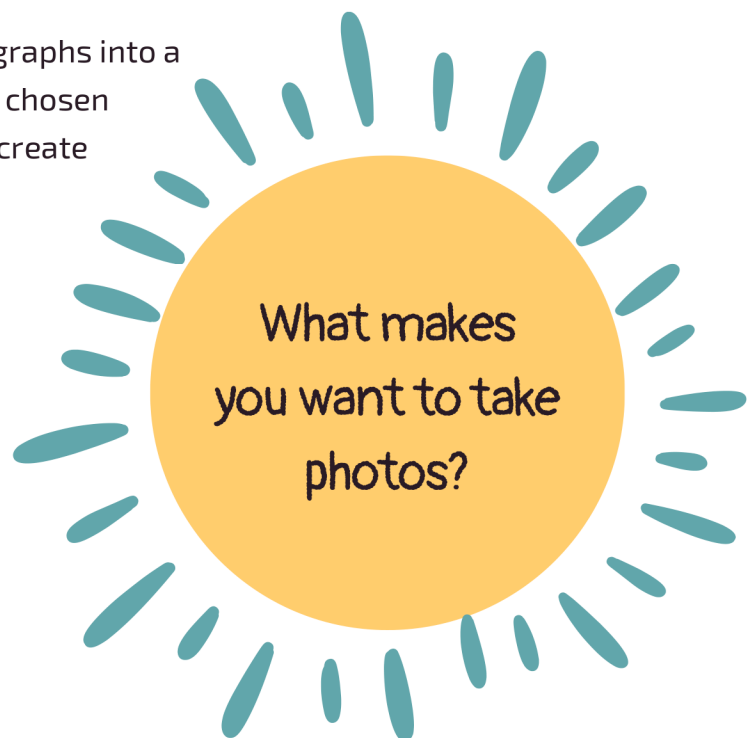
Capturing the Essence: When photographing local icons, aim to capture their unique qualities. Focus on details, textures, colors, and moments that encapsulate the essence of the subject. Does different lighting help evoke different emotions/feelings about the object?

Connecting with Subjects: If your local icons involve people, engage with them respectfully. Build rapport, ask for permission, and seek their stories. Capturing candid moments and genuine expressions can add depth to your photographs.

Exploring Perspectives: Challenge yourself to capture your subjects from different angles and viewpoints. Experiment with close-ups, wide shots, and creative compositions to provide a fresh perspective.

Editing and Enhancement: Post-processing is an essential part of photography. Use editing tools to enhance colors, contrast, and clarity while ensuring your edits maintain the authenticity of the scene.

Creating a Series: Consider organizing your photographs into a series that tells a comprehensive story about your chosen local icons. Sequence your images thoughtfully to create a visual narrative.



Documentary Filmmaking

Creating short documentary films about local icons is an opportunity to delve into the heart of your community or state, capturing its history and preserving its stories. This guide equips you with the tools and insights to embark on your filmmaking journey that not only showcases your creative talents but fosters a deeper connection to your surroundings and the people who make it special.

Select Your Focus: Decide on the local icon(s) you want to explore through your video. These could include historical sites, notable individuals, cultural events, landmarks, or any subject that embodies the spirit of your community or state.



Pre-Production Research: Conduct thorough research on your local icon. Dive into its background, history, significance, and impact on the community. Create a detailed outline or script for your documentary. Explore different perspectives and engage with community members from diverse backgrounds to capture a range of perspectives and stories about the treasures. These varied viewpoints will enrich your storytelling.

Storytelling Structure: Define the structure of your documentary. Consider elements such as interviews, archival footage and photographs, narration, and on-location shots to tell your story. Develop a compelling narrative for your subject that highlights its historical, cultural, and social significance. Help craft a story that your community will care about by weaving together personal accounts, facts, and anecdotes throughout your video.



Interviews: Engage with local experts, community members, and individuals associated with your chosen icons. Conduct interviews to gather firsthand accounts and perspectives that add depth to your film.

Visual Aesthetics: Experiment with camera angles, shots, lighting, and composition to capture visually engaging footage. Plan your shots to create a visual narrative that enhances your storytelling.

Capturing B-roll: Collect supplementary footage (B-roll) that provides context, showcases the environment, and adds visual interest. B-roll can include shots of locations, events, and details related to your icons. B-roll can also be useful when editing the final project, allowing you to insert edits in a more seamless-looking manner.

Editing and Post-production: Use video editing software to assemble your footage, add transitions, captions, and music, and refine the overall flow of your documentary. Focus on maintaining a cohesive and engaging narrative.



Narration and Voiceovers: Record clear and engaging narration or voiceovers that guide the audience through the story. Ensure your narration complements the visuals and adds depth to the narrative.

Sound and Music: Enhance the emotional impact of your documentary with carefully selected background music and ambient sounds.

“
In a sense I've made the same film
over and over again. In all of them I've
asked, 'Who are we as Americans?'
”
Ken Burns, Documentary Filmmaker


Written Narrative

Storytelling through the written word is a captivating way to share stories of local icons that shape the community. Use the power of written narratives to delve into the significance, history, and cultural heritage of these icons.

Choosing Your Local Icon: Select a local icon that resonates with you. It could be a historical site, a person of significance, a community event, or anything that holds a special place in the identity of your community.

Selecting a Narrative Style: Does songwriting resonate with you? How about graphic novels? Perhaps poetry? Or would you like to write a journalistic piece or a historical work of non-fiction? You could incorporate your iconic object into a work of fiction! Let your creativity flow!

Research: Dive into comprehensive research about your chosen local icon (see research section). Visit the library and unearth historical records, interview experts, and immerse yourself in the context that surrounds the icon. Explore different perspectives and engage with community members from diverse backgrounds to capture a range of perspectives and stories about the treasures. These varied viewpoints will enrich your storytelling and provide a holistic representation of your community's heritage.



What do you like
to write about?



Crafting the Narrative Arc: Develop a clear narrative structure for your story. Introduce the icon, and spend time to build up its historical context, explore its significance, and conclude with reflections that tie its impact to the broader community. Tap into your interviews and conversations in the community to draw on their reflections and incorporate quotes or perspectives. These elements can provide insights into the emotions and perspectives of those connected to the icon.

Setting the Scene: Be sure to paint a vivid picture of the icon's surroundings. Use descriptive language to help your readers visualize the environment - help set the stage for the narrative.

Character Development: Whether it's a person, place, or event, breathe life into your local icon by portraying its unique traits, history, and role in the community.

Weaving Historical Context: Integrate historical facts, anecdotes, and milestones that contribute to the icon's identity. Help the reader understand the icon within the broader historical timeline of the community.

Conveying Emotions: Explore the emotional impact of the local icon on individuals and the community as a whole. Show how it has shaped memories, traditions, and sentiments.

Pacing and Tension: Good narratives elicit emotions from the reader. Create a balance between informative and engaging storytelling. Maintain a pace that keeps your readers invested, building tension as you uncover your icon's significance.

Reflecting on Significance: In your conclusion, reflect on the icon's importance to the community's identity, culture, and history. Invite readers to contemplate its lasting impact.



Guidance for Organizations

If you are an organization that is interested in facilitating workshops, consider additional steps to engage your community around a storytelling activity.

Building Strong Partnerships

Use this as an opportunity to build new or strengthen existing partnerships and extend impact in your community. Get your partners to the table early and rely on them as experts to inform your work, connect with their constituency, and support and promote community storytelling activities. Partnerships may include the following: historical organizations, museums, local parks and memorials, libraries, local Humanities chapter organizations, K-12 schools, universities and colleges, and civic groups.

Partnering with community organizations can have a significant impact on your organization and the community. By collaborating with local partners, you can gain valuable insights into the community's needs and interests, and tailor plans accordingly.

Social Media Engagement

Partners can help get the word out about your workshops or storytelling activities, and share collected stories through social media and traditional press releases. Utilize existing programming tools like the ICONIC AMERICA Photo Challenge, which encourages amateur photographers to share icons from their hometowns on social media with #IconicAmericaPBS and #IconicPhotoChallenge. For more information on this, visit pbs.org/weta/iconic-america/through-the-lens-iconic-america-photo-challenge. The toolkit can be found at: <https://bit.ly/IconicPhotoChallenge>.



Guidance for Organizations

Collaborate with Local Artists

Enlist local artists, photographers, videographers, and writers to contribute their creative talents to your storytelling project. This collaboration adds depth and uniqueness to your stories. Artists and art organizations can become valuable partners and help to amplify your storytelling activities.

Engage the Community through Wrap-Up Events

Share the stories you collect through local newspapers, community websites, social media platforms, and public events.

Organize screenings, exhibitions, or storytelling sessions to showcase your community's work and encourage local participation. See if a gallery or library is interested in hanging photos, screening films, or listening to readings.

Preserve and Archive

Consider creating a digital archive or repository to ensure your community's stories are preserved for future generations. Collaborate with local historical societies or museums to ensure the longevity of these storytelling efforts.

“
**Storytelling is the most powerful way
to put ideas into the world.**
”
Robert McKee, Professor & Author

Suggestions for Educators

Storytelling is an excellent activity for students to explore local history. Photography, written narratives and short documentaries are all different approaches that you can share. This guide was written for the general public, but is easily adopted for students.

Incorporating storytelling and photography into the exploration of local history not only makes the subject more engaging and relevant but also equips students with a wide range of skills and experiences that will benefit them academically and personally. It fosters a deeper appreciation for the past and a greater understanding of the role of history in shaping their community and their own lives.

Appealing to different learning styles, these activities allow for multimodal learning while developing critical thinking skills through historical research. This also allows students to explore their creativity through different narrative or artistic styles as they craft their stories.

As you incorporate storytelling into your classroom, make sure that you set aside time for:

- Brainstorming local icons
- Focusing on appropriate medium for students
- Supporting classroom time for research
- Support of crafting a compelling narrative

The best part is celebrating and sharing the stories that your students create! Reserve time to allow students to share their stories with classmates and possibly sharing in a larger forum, like a screening event or on display at the school library.



Credits

Iconic America: Our Symbols and Stories with David Rubenstein is a production of Show of Force, DMR Productions, and WETA Washington, D.C. David M. Rubenstein is the host and executive producer. Maro Chermayeff, Jeff Dupre, Joshua Bennett and Sam Pollard are executive producers for Show of Force. John F. Wilson is executive producer for WETA. Bill Gardner is the executive in charge for PBS. Chris Ullman is producer for DMR Productions. Jonathan Scheinberg, Prisca Pointdujour, Sam Lacroix, Alexandra Nikolchev, Sally Rosenthal, Matthew Horovitz, Lizzie Mulvey, and Ken Levis are producers for Show of Force. Kate Kelly is producer for WETA. Rick Van Meter is supervising producer. Allison Hanna is archival producer. Gary Lionelli is composer for the original score.

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