



Echoes of the Past: Somerset Public Library

Final Report - Ideas to Action 2024

By Renee Reckner, Somerset Public Library, July 2025

Number of people involved in or impacted by the project since Ideas to Action funding:

We estimate 301 people have been involved and impacted by this project. Our breakdown for this number is as follows: 5 library staff (planning, recording, editing, website management, signage installation, testers), 6 interview participants (local residents who shared their stories), 1 graphic designer (created signage and visual materials for this tour), 15 Senior Center members (offered input on topic selection and historical context), 8 Somerset Champions (participated in shaping the tour and promoting it), 2 Village Department staff (provided approvals for signage placement on public property), 3 people involved with the sign placement on Town Hall property, 3 local businesses (hosted signs and helped share the tour with customers), 215 website visitors accessed the tour through QR codes or direct links, 43 community interactions (engaged with the project at Somerset's Pea Soup Days celebration)

Do you anticipate that your project will continue after Ideas to Action funding?

Yes. This project is absolutely intended to continue for years to come. From the start, we have been committed to creating a sustainable and long-lasting oral history initiative. In fact, that long-term vision is what led us to shift from our original plan of using a GPS-based app platform (which carried a \$600 annual subscription fee) to instead building the tour into our library's own website. This change ensures that we can maintain and grow the project using in-house expertise, without the burden of ongoing external costs. By housing the content on our own platform, we have full control over updates, accessibility, and future enhancements—supporting the project's ongoing impact well beyond the grant period.

Did your project encourage partnerships and collaborations with any community partners or other WiLS members? Who did you connect with during this process and how might you sustain those connections?

Yes, this project fostered several meaningful community partnerships. Early on, we sought input from the local senior center and community booster club to help guide the selection of stories and historical moments to feature. We plan to return to both groups to present the final project

and invite them to contribute additional local stories. Many community members have rich personal histories to share, and we hope to encourage written submissions that we can archive as part of our ongoing effort to preserve local heritage.

We also deepened our collaboration with the local historical society—several of its members are featured in the audio recordings for the walking tour. They've enthusiastically shared their segments with friends and family, proudly serving as local historians and ambassadors of the project. This engagement has strengthened our connection and opened the door to future collaborations.

Additionally, we reached out to village departments and a few local businesses to request permission to place signage on their property. These conversations have been positive and helped us build new relationships across the community. We plan to stay in touch with these partners, periodically delivering tour brochures and checking in on signage maintenance to ensure continued visibility and shared ownership of the project.

Thinking about your project, what was the most innovative part? What can you, or your community, do now that it couldn't before?

The most innovative aspect of our project was how it reimagined local history as an accessible, everyday experience. By placing physical signs with QR codes throughout the community—at parks and local businesses—we connected passersby directly to oral history recordings hosted on our library's website. With just a smartphone, anyone can spend five minutes listening to a story from the past, right where it happened, at any time of day.

What makes this especially unique is that it was led by the public library. When we launched the project, there was no active local historical organization taking on this kind of work. We saw an opportunity to fill that gap by stepping into the role of community historian—collecting, preserving, and sharing stories that were previously tucked away in file cabinets or fading from memory.

By combining simple, familiar technology with community storytelling, we created a sustainable and engaging way to bring local history to life. It's history that meets people where they are—not just in books or archives, but in the flow of their daily lives.

How do you think other WILS members could use what you learned and accomplished at their own organizations?

One of the key lessons from our project is the value of starting with what you already have. Many libraries and museums hold rich historical materials—oral histories, photos, documents—that, with a fresh approach, can be repurposed to reach the community in new and engaging ways. Our walking tour combined previously recorded oral histories with simple signage and QR codes to

create an interactive experience that brought local stories into everyday spaces like parks and businesses.

Other WiLS members may find inspiration in this approach: look inward, identify compelling narratives, and find creative, sustainable methods to connect them with your community in meaningful, accessible ways.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about your Ideas to Action project?

Even people who are not necessarily interested in history are excited by this project. I had the pleasure of speaking with a little girl who was thrilled to spend time with her grandparents and visited 3 different parks in one day with them. For her, it wasn't the audio that I spent so much time on that she appreciated, it was the opportunity she had to spend time with family and make memories together. I've also had the chance to speak with residents who told me they knew everything they already could about Somerset, but took the tour anyway since it was new, and found that they did end up learning a few things. It was very uplifting to hear their excitement and see how animated they became at realizing there was still more history to learn.

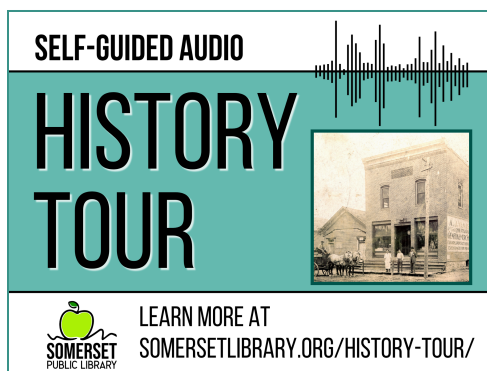
Project product(s):



History Tour website

<https://www.somersetlibrary.org/history-tour/>

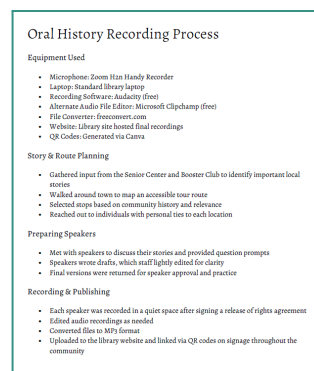
Read more about the Somerset History Tour that showcases the people and places that shaped Somerset. Find the audio recordings, tour map, transcripts, and amenities along the way.



History Tour yard sign



History Tour sign



Oral History recording process