

Turn Memories into a Memoir

abstracted from an interview with Denis Ledoux by Kathleen Flaherty, *Down East Magazine*, Nov. 2009

1. Start by writing down a list of everything that you can remember about yourself or the person that you're writing about. This list should all the relationships and events in your life and might have hundreds of items: births, deaths, illnesses, friends, failures, successes,
(Memory list aids available in the HS museum and at the Museum & Resources page at whatelyhistorical.org)
2. Using the memory list, write one story at a time — even one part of one story at a time. Don't sit down to write your memoirs. Sit down to write a vignette today and another one tomorrow. Start with what most interests you. Don't worry about the order, the stories will come together in the end. The beginning part of the book isn't necessarily where you start writing.
3. Also, write stories about the ten most important items on your list — items without which your life could not have been what it was. Set the realistic goal of writing three-to-five-page stories around each core memory list item. Later on, short pieces can be expanded.
4. Always write in detail — the more the better. Replace vague words with precise setting, dialogue, or action. "She was poor" is vague but "Her living room had a linoleum rug, tattered at the edges, that barely reached from the vinyl couch to the folding chairs" shows a setting that gives a strong sense of "poor."
5. Be precise. Cut out vague adverbs, too, words like "angrily" and "beautifully." They mean different things to different readers. Imprecise words don't convey much meaning! A useful exercise is to replace half — yes, half! — of your adjectives and adverbs with setting, dialogue, or action. This almost always makes your text more forceful and informative.