



Finding our Place:

Queer Heritage in the United States



The White House on June 26, 2015 after the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage is a constitutional right. Photo by Ted Eytan via Wikimedia Commons.



In many ways, the stories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) Americans have been obscured and erased throughout history. The threat of physical harm and persecution led many to live a closeted lifestyle. Historical references to LGBTQ individuals and their contributions to American heritage are rare and in many examples, the prejudiced attitudes of the author are obvious. However, in recent decades, scholarly work and grass roots efforts have focused on uncovering the hidden history of LGBTQ communities, and expanding our understanding of American heritage.

The term “LGBTQ” is meant to be an inclusive way of referring to those who identify with any of the groups represented, as well as those who simply do not identify as heterosexual. For some, the term “queer” resonates as a hateful slur. Others feel that the term has been successfully reclaimed by those who identify as LGBT, and use the term queer as a broad sort of shorthand. The conversation around these terms is young and evolving. Engaging with some of the sites and stories related to queer heritage is a good way to begin to understand the history and meanings behind these terms.

Through the National Park Service’s LGBTQ Heritage Initiative, we can connect these stories with the landscape. Uncovering these stories gives us a truer understanding of our American heritage, and a new way to see the connections between diverse American experiences. From the Midwest to the Pacific Islands, from New York’s Fire Island to San Francisco’s Castro, LGBTQ heritage takes many shapes. In the following pages, you’ll find the stories of doctors, musicians, painters, soldiers, priests, and potters. Their lives were indelibly affected by their physical and cultural landscapes, and in turn, they helped shape the nation we call home.

Gender and Sexuality: Expressions as Diverse as the Landscape Itself

The Selling Building, Portland, OR



Dr. Alan Hart (nee Alberta Lucille Hart, back right) at Albany College, 1911. Photo in the public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Located at 610 SW Alder Street, the Selling Building was built in 1910 and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1991 for its historic and architectural significance. Early tenants of the building were physicians and dentists including psychologist J. Allen Gilbert who, in 1917, treated Dr. Alan Hart (nee Alberta Lucille Hart) for sexual inversion. Despite categorizing Hart's condition as pathological and abnormal, Dr. Gilbert eventually supported Hart's transition, including their choice to undergo a hysterectomy and adopt male attire.

Dr. Hart's given name was Lucille; he was raised in Albany, Oregon and did not seek medical or psychological treatment until 26 years of age, but it is clear from Dr. Gilbert's notes and Hart's own writings that he rejected the feminine identity from a young age. Although his gender transition and medical career were unique successes for the time period, Hart endured the prejudiced attacks of others while struggling with his own identity. Preferring to dress in men's clothes, Hart was "outed" several times and was forced to move from one location to another. Hart also exhibited fits of anger and bravado; he told Dr. Gilbert of his youthful violence toward animals and bragged of fistfights as an adult. According to Dr. Gilbert, the primary barrier in "curing" Hart's condition was his own negative attitude toward women; despite numerous romantic engagements, including two marriages, he is quoted as "loathing" the female type of mind.



While in treatment with Dr. Gilbert, Hart expressed great concern that he would lose his masculine ambitions and eventually rejected any treatment that would result in a more feminine gender orientation. In his notes, Dr. Gilbert discussed his struggle to find the right course of action, saying “the case presented the most difficult problems of any that have ever entered my office”. Together, they came to the conclusion that acceptance of the “abnormal inversion” would give Hart the best chances for happiness and future success.



The Selling Building. Photo by Another Believer via Wikimedia Commons.

Gilbert recommended that Hart proceed with the hysterectomy; this may have been the first time in U.S. history that a psychologist supported such a procedure based on the patient’s own gender identity. Dr. Hart and Dr. Gilbert were both heavily influenced by concepts of proper gender expression that were typical of the period, making their mutual commitment to Hart’s success in living as a man even more remarkable. Dr. Gilbert’s attitude is exemplified by the following quote: “Destructive criticism is always easy. Let him who finds in himself a tendency to criticize offer some constructive method of dealing with the problem on hand. He will not want for difficulties. The patient and I have done our best with it.” Although Dr. Hart was the victim of rumors and hounding throughout his medical career, he became a leader in the research and treatment of tuberculosis. He later became a successful novelist, writing about prejudice and other social ills in stories that closely mirrored his own life experiences.

The Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, IN



Wylie Hall, Indiana University, where Dr. Alfred Kinsey conducted research. Photo by Nyttend via Wikimedia Commons.

Indiana University zoologist and sex researcher Alfred Kinsey conducted pioneering research to challenge ideas of normativity and discriminatory laws regarding sexual behavior. Kinsey collected as broad and complete a sample of individual American sexual histories as possible through a rigorous interviewing process, sampling the sexual

histories of university students, patrons of gay bars, schools, prisons, private clubs, professional associations, prostitutes, artists and others. The resulting research is arguably the most comprehensive, detailed, and sophisticated sex study ever conducted. These findings were published in two reports on Male and Female sexual behavior in 1948 and 1953 respectively.

In previous sex research, moral or religious prescriptions ensured that even obvious truths regarding aspects of human variation would be denied or dismissed as rare perversions. What Kinsey revealed to the public was that many behaviors, which were illegal or termed indecent, were in fact quite common within every sector of American society. A key contribution of the reports was the introduction of a heterosexual-homosexual rating scale, placing the sexual behavior of individuals along a continuum. He determined that 37 percent of American men had engaged in homosexual behavior and as many as 10 percent of the population has been homosexual for a period of at least three years of their lives.



Collectives, Enclaves, and Gayborhoods

Like other minority groups, LGBTQ Americans have created communities, with professional and social networks, which allow more open queer expression and foster support of one another. Some, like the Furies Collective of Washington, DC, were founded with an overtly political purpose; others, like The Castro in San Francisco or New York's Fire Island, evolved into queer spaces over time. Traditionally, these enclaves have helped to provide safe space for socializing and organizing. However, some critics argue that even in these spaces, those who benefit the most continue to be white, relatively affluent people. The term "gayborhood" has been associated with gentrification and the displacement of lower income people; others see a commodification of gayness. Tourists visiting The Castro can enjoy a brush with the illicit and exotic for the sake of entertainment, without confronting issues that plague the community, like bigotry or health care access.



Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade, Chicago, IL, 1985. Photo by Alan Light via Wikimedia Commons.

Fire Island, Long Island, NY

In the 1930s, Cherry Grove on New York's Fire Island became a popular place for LGBTQ New Yorkers to spend their summer vacations. Away from the social constraints of everyday life, "Grovers" were free to talk intimately or act affectionately with their same-sex partners without fear of violent attack.

Opening of The Pines Resort in 1952 offered a more discreet option for those who worried about the consequences of being "outed". Over time, the increasingly queer population of Fire Island dealt with harassment from locals, police, and bureaucrats. Despite pressure, the community has flourished as one of the most openly queer places in the United States.



Ferry dock at Cherry Grove, New York.
Photo by Dinker022089 via Wikimedia Commons.

The Furies Collective, Washington, DC

In the early 1970s, The Furies Collective began operating from a two-story row house in the Capitol Hill area of Washington, DC. Twelve lesbian feminists lived together in the house, sharing domestic work, and publishing *Motive* magazine and *The Furies*, wherein they explored the role of lesbians in society. The Furies are credited with bringing the existence and needs of lesbians into the women's movement by confronting issues of male supremacy, racism, and economic and social oppression. The collective disbanded after only a few years, but its members remained committed to activism and the arts, founding lesbian record label, Olivia Records, and later the Olivia Cruise Line, which is still in operation. In January 2016, the home of The Furies Collective in Washington, DC was designated as a historic landmark in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites.



Pier 45, New York City, NY

Since the 1970s, the Christopher Street Pier has been a popular meeting place for drag queens, as well as gay and transgendered people. The pier has been a popular social spot for decades, particularly for communities of color, despite pressure from residents and local authorities. With a deep history of oppression and abuse, queer people of color have found space to call their own on the margins of less desirable neighborhoods across the country. In the case of Pier 45, an area that was once ignored and left to the enjoyment of queer social outcasts came to be identified as edgy, trendy, and queer friendly, bringing in wealthier residents and putting pressure on local authorities to remove the “rowdy youths” who disrupt the neighborhood.



Christopher Street Pier. Photo by Joe Mabel via Wikimedia Commons.



The Castro District, San Francisco, CA. Photo by Kenny Louie via Wikimedia Commons.

The Castro, San Francisco, CA

San Francisco's Castro neighborhood is known as the oldest LGBTQ enclave in the country. It began to take shape at the end of World War II when United States detention policies had displaced thousands of Japanese Americans, families were flocking to live in suburban developments, and San Francisco's urban neighborhoods were particularly affordable. The LGBTQ community flourished, opening businesses and creating an entire community area where queer expression was celebrated, instead of being closeted. The camera shop where openly gay City Supervisor Harvey Milk worked and campaigned is located in the Castro. His assassination in 1978, along with the explosion of the AIDS epidemic and related homophobic persecution, galvanized the community, creating a larger sense of pride and urgency for self-expression. Today, the Castro is known for hosting one of the most boisterous LGBTQ Pride celebrations in the world. The neighborhood is home to an incredibly vibrant queer population, many of whom celebrate their identity daily by living openly queer lifestyles. LGBTQ businesses thrive and thanks to San Francisco's unrivaled yearly Pride celebration, the Castro is one of a handful of queer travel destinations in the world.



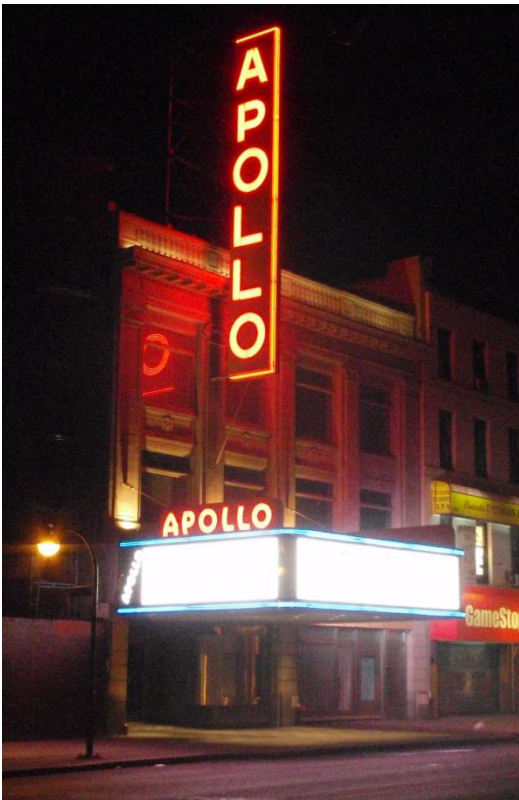
LGBTQ Artists: Working in Private and in the Spotlight

Yaddo, Sarasota Springs, NY

Opened in 1926 and still operating today, Yaddo is an artist's colony offering residency and creative space to working artists. Founders Spencer and Katrina Trask envisioned a haven where artists could escape the pace and pressure of capitalism and increased industrialization. Several LGBTQ artists, including writers Patricia Highsmith and Langston Hughes, composer Aaron Copeland, and Truman Capote spent time in residency at Yaddo. Visitors to the picturesque retreat were hand-picked, which contributed to views of Yaddo as an elitist enclave. Despite the fact that most professional artists of the period were white and affluent, the environment fostered at Yaddo allowed the growth and expression of alternative ideals, which greatly affected American art and identity. Yaddo was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 2013.



The Pergola at Yaddo, Sarasota Springs, NY.



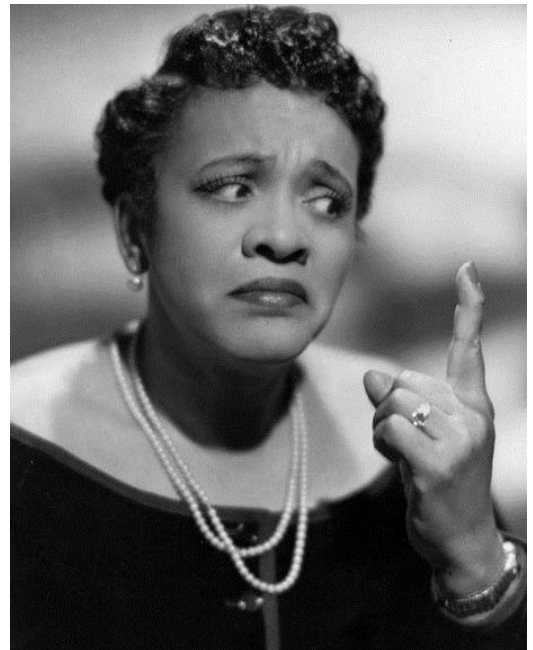
The Apollo Theater in Harlem.

Photo by Hans Joachim Dudeck via
Wikimedia Commons.

The Apollo Theater, Harlem, NY

The Apollo Theater in New York is an icon of the American jazz explosion and the Harlem Renaissance of the early 20th century, a cultural movement, which greatly influenced American arts and literature and has significant ties to various LGBTQ communities. The Apollo became one of the most influential centers of black culture, showcasing some of the country's most popular artists and introducing new talent to the world through their infamous amateur nights. Most people are aware of the significance of the jazz era with respect to American music history, but many do not realize that some of the most prominent poets, writers, and performers of the Harlem Renaissance were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or had an alternative gender identity.

As a central hub of African American music culture, the Apollo Theater hosted many of the greatest black queer performers of the 20th century. Two of the Apollo's earlier iconic acts, Bessie Smith, aka the Empress of the Blues, and Ethel Waters, got their start on the vaudeville circuits, and were relatively open with their bisexuality. Comedian Jackie "Moms" Mabley was known to be a lesbian and joked openly about the "old man" she was married to, a union that was forced upon her at a young age.



Comedian Jackie "Moms" Mabley.
Photo by James Kriegsmann via
Wikimedia Commons.



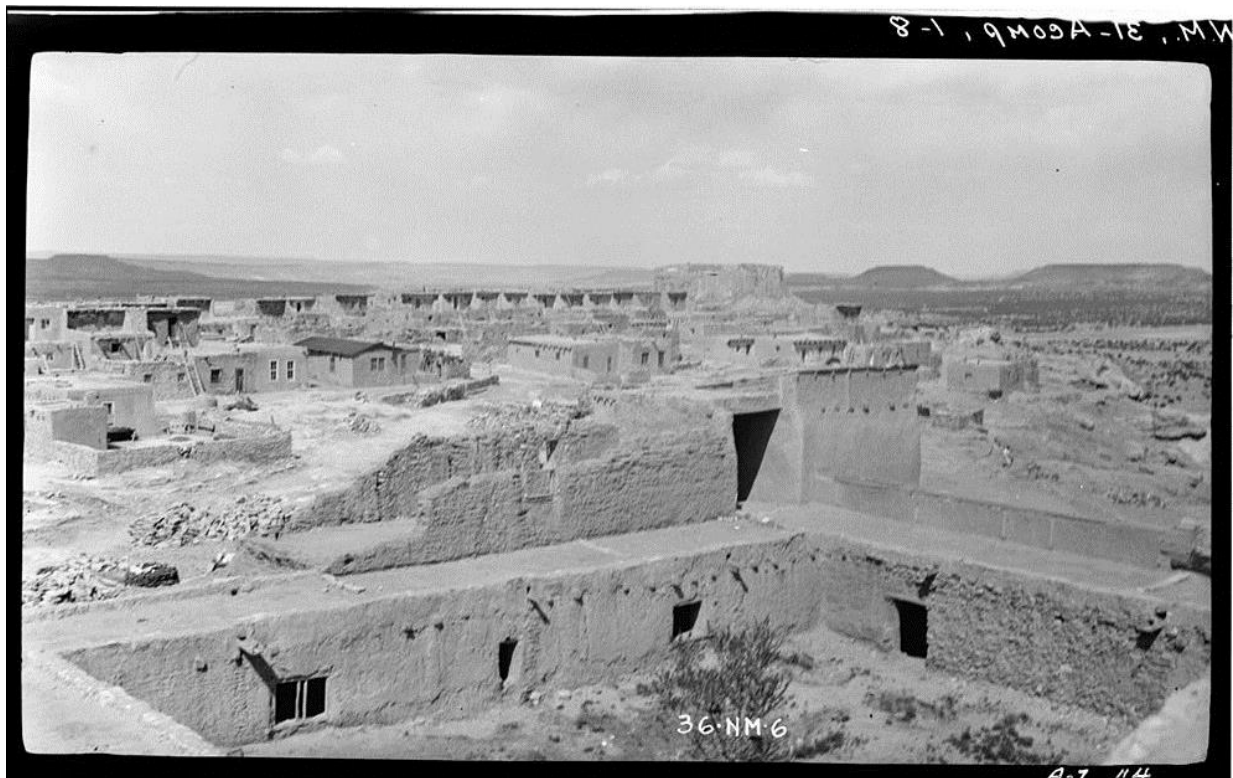
Josephine Baker, who played the Apollo in 1957, was one of many black artists who moved to Europe, where opportunities were more plentiful and racism was less oppressive. Baker was married several times and openly enjoyed relationships with women. Like many other artists of the time, Baker was an outspoken advocate for equal rights; she participated in several of Dr. Martin Luther King's rallies and eventually adopted 12 children from around the world.

Beginning as a traveling act in the 1930's the Jewel Box Revue was America's first racially integrated drag production. They performed at the Apollo Theater throughout the 1960s with a show called "25 Men and 1 Girl", which included some of the most glamorous female impersonators ever seen. Drag king, Storme DeLarverie, was the only female performer in the troupe. She was the most noteworthy male impersonator of the time and a participant in the 1969 riot against police brutality at New York's Stonewall Inn.

Perhaps the most flamboyant individual performer to hit the Apollo stage was Little Richard, who openly identifies with both masculine and feminine gender traits. He has referred to himself as heterosexual, homosexual, and omnisexual, as well as calling himself "The Queen of Rock n Roll". In 2006, he was inducted to the Apollo Legends Hall of Fame, along with Ella Fitzgerald and Gladys Knight and the Pips. In 1983, the Apollo Theater was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and was designated as a New York City Landmark. In addition to launching the careers of countless artists, performances at the Apollo brought LGBTQ people of color together and gave them a one-of-a-kind venue to perform, to see and be seen.

Gender and Sexuality in Native America: Many People, Many Meanings

Research indicates well over 100 instances of diverse gender expression in Native American tribes at the time of early European contact. The cultural legacy of these people was nearly erased by religious indoctrination and the imposition of laws criminalizing varied sexuality and gender expression. This erasure makes discovering and discussing such a diverse heritage difficult; in many cases, the only remaining record is that of the colonizer, making occasional reference to “abominable acts” and assigning European names to behavior based on their particular moral views. The term berdache has often been applied as a catchall term for non-binary gender identities; it has also been criticized for its non-indigenous origin and its inference of similarity across tribes. In recent research and discussion, the terms “two spirit” and “third gender” have been used widely. However, some find these terms inauthentic, and too broad to accurately reflect various tribal understandings of gender and sexuality.



Acoma Pueblo 1943. Photo by James Slack, Historic American Building Survey. Library of Congress. U.S. Government. Web. 15 July 2015.



Pueblo of Acoma, Cibola County, NM

In what is now the mesa top pueblo of Acoma, men with effeminate physical attributes or personal tendencies were known by many names including *mujerado*, *qo-qoy-mo*, and *kokwina*. They dressed and lived as women, had relationships with men, and fulfilled women's roles in the community. Much like today's queer culture, *mujerados* of Acoma appear to have experienced varied levels of cultural acceptance. Composed between 1880 and 1914, the journals of Adolph Bandelier suggest that *qo-qoy-mo* were treated kindly, as any other community member might be. Leslie A. White conducted anthropological research at Acoma in the 1930s; a proponent of the now-defunct concept of cultural evolution, White reported reluctance among informants to discuss the *kokwina*. According to one individual, "They dress, talk, and live like women because they want to, and in their body they are men". However, another informant stated that the practice was "a shame". Other researchers have noted the achievements of *mujerados* as potters, an important and revered art among the tribes of Acoma and Laguna. Traditionally made by women, ceramics from this region are highly prized for their utility and intricate designs; the work requires incredible skill and physical stamina and according to modern potters, each vessel has a unique spirit to which the crafter is connected.



Acoma water jar ca. 1868–1900. Photo courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum via Wikimedia Commons.



The drawing above was created in 1836 by Stanislas Henry-Bendoit Darondeau, and is titled *View of the Place where Captain Cook was Killed* via the Honolulu Museum of Art.

Kealahou Bay District, Kealahou Bay, HI

On their many voyages to the Hawaiian Islands, Captain James Cook and his crew became familiar with the aikane, a select group of men who had sexual relations with the king and other ali'i, or royals. Several journal entries from their extended stays at Kealahou Bay describe the openness of these relationships; the young men were proud to be in such a prestigious position and openly teased the incredulous Europeans with their behavior and innuendoes. At the time of contact, the villages around Kealahou Bay were centers of religious and political power. In 1973, the Kealahou Bay District was added to the National Register of Historic Places.



Alcatraz Island ca. 1920–1960. Photo via the Library of Congress. U.S. Government. Web. 15 July 2015.

Alcatraz Island, San Francisco Bay, CA

West-central California has been home to Native populations for at many thousands of years. Numerous diverse “tribelets” lived around the bay area; two of these, the Miwok and the Ohlone (also referred to as Castanoan) were the primary inhabitants of the bay’s northern and southern peninsulas. Research indicates that both of these tribes recognized gender identities beyond they typical Western conception of male/female. During the decades of Native American suppression and assimilation, alternative gender roles, which existed in tribes across the country, were effectively erased and did not re-emerge until the era of Native activism. Beginning with the revival of the sun dance ritual in 1941, Native peoples became increasingly vocal, asserting their cultural heritage and seizing federal facilities to highlight issues of poverty and promote self-rule and self-determination. One of the most prominent and successful occupations was the 1969 multiribe takeover of Alcatraz Island. This high-profile event marked a turning point in the lives of queer Native Americans who, with a stronger sense of their heritage and community support, felt more empowered to express their sexuality and gender identities to their families, their tribes, and their communities.

DISCHARGED AUG. 6, 1935

Name Hicks, Clyde, F. Number 6 AZ White Color 24 years Age when rec'd here Aug 7, 1931

Sentence 6 Years

Crime Sodomy District Honolulu - Mil.

Received from U.S.A.D.B., Pacific Branch Date June 19, 1934 Good time allowed 488 USA 306 DV 721 Forfeited Restored

Minimum Date August 6, 1935 Maximum Date August 6, 1937


Parole Date August 7, 1933

Detainers:-

Reasons for transfer:
Military prisoner transferred here June 19, 1934.

Number of former institutional violations
None reported

Discharged



At the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, the U.S. Army established a fort on the island, but by the 1860s, Alcatraz had begun housing military prisoners and by 1907, this was its sole function. In 1933 the property transferred from the U.S. Army to the Federal Bureau of Prisons; the first group of prisoners to be incarcerated during this period were transferred from the U.S. military base in Honolulu. According to records kept in the warden's

notebook, approximately one third of these men were imprisoned for sodomy. Prison sentences for these men ranged between five and fifteen years. Perhaps even more damning was the legacy of a dishonorable discharge, which follows a person for their entire life. In addition to losing their veteran status, the general public often considered these men criminals. Many of the records pertaining to Alcatraz's earlier years were thrown into San Francisco Bay when the property transferred to the Bureau of Prisons, so we cannot say how many men were incarcerated for sodomy from the 1850s to 1933. Alcatraz was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

Pages from the Warden's notebook regarding two men convicted of sodomy charges. Courtesy of the National Archives. U.S. Government. Web. 15 July 2015.

TRANSFERRED TO USP McNEIL MAY 10, 1934

Name Bolt, Frank, L. Number 1 AZ White Color 25 years Age when rec'd here Jan. 24, 1933

Sentence 5 Years

Crime Sodomy District Honolulu - Mil.

Received from U.S.A.D.B., Pacific Branch Date June 19, 1934 Good time allowed 108 USA 108 USA 201 DV 242 D.7. 207 Forfeited Restored


Minimum Date August 28, 1934 Maximum Date January 25, 1938

Parole Date September 25, 1934

Detainers:-

Reasons for transfer:
Military prisoner, transferred here June 19, 1934.

Number of former institutional violations
None reported from Army





LGBTQ Activism

Over the years, queer activism has taken many shapes. Private organizations have formed to support community members and take up political causes; artists, writers, and speakers disseminate their ideas on civil justice through every medium imaginable. On some occasions, like the 1969 riots at the Stonewall Inn, oppressive, discriminatory circumstances ferment to a bursting point and acts of unintentional activism become the catalyst for a broader movement for civil rights. The struggle for LGBTQ rights takes place in every diverse community across the country, each situation involving specific cultural experiences and circumstances. Below are just a few examples of queer activism in the U.S., a legacy that began in the early 20th century and continues today.

Henry Gerber House, Chicago, IL

In 1924 Henry Gerber founded the Society for Human Rights, the first gay rights organization in the United States. While in the Army, Gerber was stationed in Coblenz, Germany where a more open homosexual community existed. After his return to the U.S. in 1923, Gerber distanced himself from what he saw as a disorganized, politically unaware gay subculture, choosing instead to live in relative anonymity as a boarder in Chicago, Illinois. In contrast to the more mainstream, community-oriented homosexual movement he experienced in Germany, American gay subculture was largely relegated to saloons, speakeasies, and the realm of prostitution, a marginalized place in society that was often seen as lascivious and criminal. When he founded the Society for Human Rights, Gerber melded his experiences with the German homophile movement with the American ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence, continually referencing the importance of law and order, and a person's right to pursue happiness.



Henry Gerber's Washington, DC townhouse. Photo by Thshriver via Wikimedia Commons.

The Society for Human Rights also published the earliest-documented homosexual periodical *Friendship and Freedom*. Subscription rates were low, a problem that Gerber attributed to the fear of persecution felt by many homosexuals, which kept them from

joining organizations or otherwise publicizing their sexual interests. Gerber himself was a victim of the social and political hostilities of the time; in 1925 he and several other group members were arrested. His belongings were confiscated and after the highly prejudiced legal proceedings and extensive, negative media coverage, the Society for Human Rights withered away. Henry Gerber's enthusiasm for activism was severely dampened following these warrantless arrests. He went back to living a lower-profile life but continued writing about the position and plight of homosexuals and continued networking and building community with gay allies. In 2015, the Henry Gerber House became the nation's second National Historic Landmark nominated for its association with LGBTQ history.

Residence of Dr. Franklin Kameny, Washington, DC

Working from his home in Northwest Washington, DC, Dr. Frank Kameny applied the ideas of the burgeoning civil rights movement to challenge and change negative perceptions of homosexuality and to fight discriminatory public policy. As the leader of the Mattachine Society of Washington, a homophile organization with cells in cities across the country, Kameny rejected the opinions of psychologists and other "experts" who viewed



homosexuality as a mental defect or form of perversion. He insisted that gay men and lesbians were the true experts on homosexuality and encouraged them to publicly share their knowledge and opinions.

Dr. Kameny became an outspoken activist after being discharged from the Army Map Service because of his suspected sexual orientation. He appealed the decision, addressing the House and Senate Civil Service Committees, as well as the courts, all to no avail. Although the Supreme Court declined to hear his case, many consider his well-fought, public battle against injustice a landmark event in gay rights. Although thousands of gay men and women were the victims of

discriminatory policies, few people challenged their expulsion from federal service at all during this time. Continuing to keep a high profile, Kameny led public demonstrations against gay persecution in the U.S. and Cuba; he identified similarities in the oppression of gay people and other minorities. Inspired by the slogan “Black is Beautiful”, Kameny coined the phrase “Gay is Good”, encouraging people to take a more positive view on homosexuality. After years of effort, Kameny and his supporters succeeded in getting the Civil Service Commission to revise their regulations and the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Dr. Frank Kameny’s home in the District of Columbia continued to serve as his office where he worked as an activist into the 1990s. It was designated a DC Historic Landmark in 2009 and was listed to the National Register of Historic places in 2011.



The Dr. Franklin E. Kameny House, Washington, DC. Photo by Farragutful via Wikimedia Commons.

Stonewall Inn, New York City, NY



The Stonewall Inn, New York City. Photo by Johannes Jordan via Wikimedia Commons.

Probably the most well-known event in the struggle for LGBTQ rights, the 1969 riots at the Stonewall Inn in New York City, brought the issue of queer rights into the spotlight. It helped to build solidarity among queer groups were ready to take a stand against police harassment and violence.

The Stonewall Inn was a gay bar located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood. Like most gay bars across the country, staff and patrons at the Stonewall Inn suffered routine harassment from police, enduring regular raids, as well as associated verbal and physical abuse.

When the bar was raided on June 28, 1969, onlookers refused to disperse. The growing group began chanting and throwing objects at the police, forcing them to retreat inside the bar. Reinforcements were called but the crowd persisted and the demonstration ebbed and flowed in the following days. Late on the evening of July 2nd, a crowd began to gather at Stonewall; several thousand people came together to demonstrate in force. Following this peak of activity, several groups began organizing around gay rights, and although these were certainly not the first efforts at activism, the public support and awareness that developed out of these events were unprecedented. In 1999 the Stonewall Inn became the first National Historic Landmark nominated for its association with LGBTQ history.



Memorials

Throughout history, humans have created memorials as a way to celebrate, remember, and perpetuate our most valued stories. They come in all conceivable shapes, sizes, and materials, including buildings, bridges, statues, tattoos, performances, and charitable foundations, just to name a few. This small selection of memorials celebrate the lives and actions of queer Americans and their allies while bringing awareness to issues that threaten queer communities.



AIDS Quilt in Washington, DC. Photo via the National Institutes of Health.

The Names Project and the AIDS Memorial Quilt, Housed by the Names Project, Atlanta, GA

With over 48,000 panels, the AIDS Memorial Quilt is a visual and tactile tribute to the lives lost to HIV and AIDS, illnesses which have disproportionately affected gay communities for many reasons, including inadequate education of a closeted community, stigmatization, and inadequate treatment. Displayed at venues around the world, the Quilt creates a visual landscape, where viewers are surrounded by the names of the thousands lost to this epidemic, as well as the overwhelming sense of love and connectivity inherent in the tradition of quilt making.

Inspiration for the project came in 1985, when activist Cleve Jones asked people to write the names of friends and loved ones who had died of AIDS on placards. He taped them to the wall of the San Francisco Federal Building and the impact of this enormous display, which represented the deaths in just one American community, led to the founding of The Names Project and the beginning of the Quilt. Panels have been contributed from all over the world and the Quilt remains the largest community art project ever created. It is a one-of-a-kind representation of the cost of HIV and AIDS, as well as the universal spirit of remembrance and commitment to finding a cure.

The National AIDS Memorial Grove, San Francisco, CA

This National Memorial also began as a community effort to recognize the devastating loss of life from the AIDS epidemic, and an effort to create space for remembrance and grieving. Located in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, the Grove was restored from a state of disuse through the combined efforts of public and private groups and was designated as our National AIDS Memorial in 1996. A place of beauty, serenity, and local and national prominence, the Memorial Grove gives a sense of honor and a home in our national landscape for the millions of lives touched by AIDS.



Names from the National Aids Memorial Grove. Photo by Saopaulo1 via Wikimedia Commons.



The Matthew Shepard Memorial, Laramie, WY

On the University of Wyoming campus, a memorial bench honors one individual, Matthew Shepard who was targeted and killed for being gay. On October 6, 1998, two men pretended to take an interest in Matthew. They then kidnapped him and beat him brutally, leaving him tied to a fence post in the freezing cold. Once discovered, he lay in a coma for five days before dying from his injuries. Although defendants attempted to use the homophobic argument of experiencing “panic” caused by Shepard’s possible homosexual attraction, the judge and jury rejected this reasoning and convicted both attackers of murder. The site where Matthew died remains unmarked and some critics argue that the memorial bench should be more explicit about who Matthew Shepard was and why he was killed. To many, the Matthew Shepard Memorial is understated, and because it took ten years to erect, long overdue. Controversy aside, this quiet tribute to a single individual connects his story to the landscape, to his community, and to America’s queer cultural legacy.

The Upstairs Lounge Memorial Plaque, New Orleans, LA

On June 24, 1973, thirty-two people were killed when a meeting of Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) members and friends was attacked by arson in this New Orleans lounge. In the aftermath of the horrific event, survivors and church members suffered rejection and homophobic ridicule from police, community members, and neighboring churches. Jokes were made about the deceased and local churches shunned the MCC, refusing to offer public condolences, or provide space for memorial services. Finally, the Methodist Bishop of Louisiana, who was living a closeted life and had been at the Upstairs lounge a half-hour before the fire, convinced Reverend Kennedy of the Unitarian Church, to allow services in his church.

When news cameras converged outside of the church, attendees chose to walk out of the services with pride, rather than succumb to the hateful pressure that they had been put under. The connection forged with Reverend Kennedy, who was a black man, and the refusal to be publicly shamed in the wake of a tragic hate crime galvanized a fierce sense of pride among the LGBTQ community of New Orleans; many call the event the “Stonewall of the South”. Thirty years after the incident, a memorial plaque was placed in the sidewalk below the building’s fire escape.



Exterior of the Upstairs Lounge in New Orleans. Photo courtesy of Clayton Delery.

Butt-Millett Memorial Fountain, Washington, DC

In 1913, a memorial fountain was dedicated at President’s Park in memory of two United States officials who drowned on the RMS Titanic. Francis Millet, who served on the Commission of Fine Arts and took part in the design of the National Mall, and Archibald Butt, a Major in the U.S. Army and a presidential military aide, were popular, well-respected men. The two were close companions; they shared a house for many years and are widely believed to have been romantically involved with one another. Returning to the U.S. after travelling together in Europe, the two were aboard the Titanic when it struck an iceberg and sank into the Atlantic Ocean.

Following the news of the two deaths, the Senate and House passed a joint resolution to construct a memorial in their honor. President Taft also supported the memorial effort. As a colleague and an advisor, he held Archibald Butt in particularly high esteem.



The Butt-Millett Memorial Fountain in Washington, DC. Two figures, representing the arts and military valor, decorate either side of the column. Photo via the DC Public Library Commons.

LGBTQ heritage stories come from every region and every walk of life. There are shared experiences and there are vast differences, based on many factors including religion, ethnic background, and socio-economics. Issues of safety and acceptance can become further complicated when you are part of an ethnic minority and, like the early days of organizing and activism, shared experiences are still bringing people together. LGBTQ Latin@s, Muslims, Asian Americans and others are finding support within their communities, and building networks with one another for increased equality and visibility. As we share information, hundreds of new sites related to queer history are being recognized and remembered, and together, we benefit from a better understanding of ourselves, and our fellow Americans.



Mr. and Miss Academy 2014 (above) wave to the crowd from atop The Academy of Washington float in the Capital Pride parade, June 7, 2014. Photo by Tim Evanson via Wikimedia Commons.



Built in 1915, the Old Norway Hall (above) in Seattle, Washington was a popular, gay-friendly, country/western bar for over 15 years. Photo by Joe Mabel via Wikimedia.

Jiro Onuma (below, center) lived a rather openly gay lifestyle in San Francisco before he and thousands of other Japanese Americans were moved to incarceration centers during WWII. Photo courtesy of the GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.



Hispanic pride (below) at the Capital Pride Parade, June 12, 2010. Photo by Tim Evanson via Wikimedia Commons.





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