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# LGBTQ AMERICA

A THEME STUDY OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL,  
TRANSGENDER, and QUEER HISTORY

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# LEGACY

*People engage with history in many ways, not just through reading books and reports. The chapters in this section are designed as resources for NPS interpreters, museum staff, teachers, professors, parents, and others who do applied history work and who wish to incorporate LGBTQ history and heritage into their programs, lessons, exhibits, and courses.*

# 31 INTERPRETING LGBTQ HISTORIC SITES

Susan Ferentinos

The National Park Service's LGBTQ heritage initiative promises to raise awareness of LGBTQ history and preserve the sites related to this history. Hopefully, many of these sites will be not only designated but also interpreted to the public. In addition to these properties with their primary significance in LGBTQ history, many other historic sites, designated for primary reasons other than their LGBTQ connections, still have stories to tell on this topic. Still others may have been working with LGBTQ interpretation for some time, but seek new approaches for reaching wider audiences. With this chapter, I offer some suggestions for sharing LGBTQ stories with a public audience, while also respecting the nuances and diversity of these experiences. I begin by discussing the importance of this work, move on to exploring some conceptual issues, and conclude by providing some concrete first steps to interpretive planning.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail, see Susan Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

## Why Interpret LGBTQ History?

Evidence of same-sex love and desire, and of gender crossing, exists throughout the recorded history of North America (and elsewhere), and yet these topics are rarely included in discussions of US history, whether in classrooms, in mainstream media, or at museums and historic sites. This leaves a hole in our national narrative and erases part of the story. The most obvious reason for historic sites to share their LGBTQ stories is because doing so creates a more inclusive and accurate telling of the national past.

At the same time, the process of uncovering LGBTQ history is more than simply an exercise in inclusivity. Studying cultural outsiders not only reveals insight into their experiences, but sheds light too on the experiences of the mainstream. The question of what behavior is and is not considered normal in a particular historical era, the explanations given for those delineations, and the punishments meted out to those who violate these cultural boundaries, all reveal information to help us understand the unspoken assumptions and anxieties of a given age.

For example, historian John Murrin—observing that in the New England colonies, charges of sexual deviance were brought disproportionately against adolescent males, while charges of witchcraft were brought disproportionately against older, unmarried women—concluded that these accusations reveal an abiding Puritan anxiety about community members who lived outside of the control of the patriarchal family. Historian Siobhan Somerville has noted that a medical definition of homosexuality developed in an era—the turn of the twentieth century—when science and medicine were also actively seeking scientific proof of white superiority, and she has explored how these various delineations provided a sense of order for native-born white elites amid a rapidly changing society. More recently, in the 1970s, Anita Bryant’s anti-gay “Save Our Children” campaign coincided with the growing independence of American women as a result of second-wave feminism and a skyrocketing divorce rate. As

these examples illustrate, when we add LGBTQ experiences to our historical narrative, we gain a richer understanding, both by considering a greater range of experiences and by glimpsing new information about stories we thought we already knew.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, as historic sites expand their interpretation, they will likely expand their audiences. An inclusive approach to the past will draw attention. It sends a welcoming message to potential visitors who are accustomed to being spurned and who, in turn, may be less likely to venture to new places until they are clearly welcomed. Interpretation that includes LGBTQ stories also offers something new for all visitors; curiosity and the desire to learn new things will draw many to investigate your site.

LGBTQ historical interpretation may also improve your site's fulfillment of its mission. Over the past three decades, the role of cultural organizations in US society has changed. Whereas previously these institutions positioned themselves as some of the main conveyers of knowledge, they now more often envision their missions to be about the facilitation of meaning making. This more democratic approach has repositioned historic sites and museums as places of community dialogue, where visitors can explore new topics and draw their own conclusions, as their comfort level allows.<sup>3</sup> Given the current preponderance of LGBTQ issues in the news, sites can offer some historic context to current events and a forum for exploring these connections—by introducing the idea that different eras have understood love between same-sex individuals in different ways, for example. In the process of providing this historical

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<sup>2</sup> John M. Murrin, "‘Things Fearful to Name’: Bestiality in Colonial America," *Pennsylvania History* 65 (January 1, 1998): 8-43; Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Series Q (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2000); and Ian Lekus, "Up They Come Again: The Rise of Family Values Politics," *The Ultimate History Project*, accessed November 5, 2015, <http://ultimatehistoryproject.com/marriage-lgbt.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, eds., *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), distributed by Left Coast Press; Graham Black, *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 202-240; and Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010).

context, these organizations prove their relevance and fulfill their role as sites of public exploration.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, interpreting LGBTQ history can serve as an act of reparation to a group who, until quite recently, has been slandered, ignored, and erased. Beyond a simple concern about visitor statistics, historic sites can perform a public service by restoring a past to people who quite often have been cut off from their historical identities.<sup>5</sup> Often, as part of claiming an LGBTQ identity, people lose historic connections—to their families of origin, their hometowns, and their religious or ethnic communities. And while LGBTQ subcultures can replace some of these community connections, a desire to relate to the past may still be lacking. As Paula Martinac wrote in the late 1990s, “one thing that historic sites and travel guides never taught me was about a most important part of myself—my heritage as a gay person in this country.”<sup>6</sup> Given these circumstances, to actually encounter “their” history included in an official historical narrative can be a profound and moving experience for LGBTQ visitors.

## Conceptualizing the Story

While there are compelling reasons to engage with LGBTQ history, before beginning concrete interpretive planning, sites must lay some initial conceptual groundwork. As with any historical subfield, LGBTQ history carries its own peculiar circumstances that interpreters should be aware of before moving into this territory. Below are some considerations to reflect on in initial efforts to understand LGBTQ stories.

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<sup>4</sup> Guidance for navigating the relevance of past experiences to current events can be found through the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, [www.sitesofconscience.org](http://www.sitesofconscience.org).

<sup>5</sup> This process has similarities to previous efforts by historic sites to respectfully interpret the histories of other underrepresented groups, such as Native Americans and African Americans. As with LGBTQ history, these earlier efforts were aided by National Park Service theme studies.

<sup>6</sup> Paula Martinac, *The Queerest Places: A National Guide to Gay and Lesbian Historic Sites* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1997), ix. See also David W. Dunlap, “Library’s Gay Show Is an Eye-Opener, Even for Its Subjects,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1994, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/06/arts/library-s-gay-show-is-an-eye-opener-even-for-its-subjects.html>; Kelly Farrell, “Exposing the Soul: An Unexpected Encounter with Community-Based Interpretation,” *Legacy: The Journal of the National Association of Interpretation*, February 2010, 20–23; and Alison Oram, “Going on an Outing: The Historic House and Queer Public History,” *Rethinking History* 15, no. 2 (June 2011): 193.

## Changing Understandings of Sexuality

Although the topic was hotly debated in the 1990s, scholars now generally agree that sexual identity is socially constructed—that is, it is influenced by time, place, and culture, rather than being immutable. This is an extremely important consideration when approaching same-sex desire and sexual activity in the past. The historical agents being studied may have understood their feelings, identities, and behavior quite differently than we would understand those same circumstances in our own era. Thus, historians need to evaluate source material within the context of the time in which it was created, rather than relying on their own (historically specific) assumptions of meaning.<sup>7</sup>

To take but the most obvious example: The concept of sexual orientation as a personal characteristic did not become firmly entrenched until the turn of the twentieth century. Same-sex sexual activity certainly existed before this, but in earlier eras the emphasis was on behavior, not psychology. Someone might engage in the *sin* or *crime* of sodomy, but that action did not indicate a particular *type* of person as it would beginning in the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 30–31; Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 27–35; and Kenneth Turino and Susan Ferentinos, “Entering the Mainstream: Interpreting GLBT History,” *AASLH History News*, Autumn 2012. Staff at historic sites should understand, however, that although historians now agree that sexuality is socially constructed, the wider public—including interpretive guides—may find this to be a challenging notion. The concept warrants explanation, both in staff training and in interpretation. Indeed, establishing that different historical time periods understood sexual identity and expression differently may end up being one of your site’s main interpretive goals.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas A. Foster, ed., *Long before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 8–9; and Molly McGarry and Fred Wasserman, *Becoming Visible: An Illustrated History of Lesbian and Gay Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Studio, 1998), 39. The emphasis before this shift most definitely was on sodomy—most often defined as male sexual penetration of another male. Women’s sexual activity with other women was largely off the radar of social commentators until the development of the medical model known as homosexuality.





Figure 1: Jane Addams, ca. 1914. Photo by Moffatt, from the collections of the Library of Congress.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of these changing understandings, the historical record offers many tantalizing hints of activity that, if created in our own time, would seem to be evidence of gay, lesbian, or bisexual desire, behavior, identity, or relationships. The analysis is not that easy, however. These are contemporary labels, and we cannot facilely apply them retrospectively to a time period in which such concepts did not exist. For instance, intense, exclusive bonds between members of the same sex—mostly women but also sometimes men—were quite common in the nineteenth century.

Known as “romantic friendships,” these relationships involved avowals of loyalty and love, pet names, and quite often physical affection. And yet, such bonds carried no stigma and did not preclude their adherents from also entering into marriages with members of the opposite sex.<sup>10</sup> How are we to understand these relationships today? To call them “gay” or “lesbian” assumes a sexual consciousness that quite likely was not present. Such a label also seems somehow to disrespect those who have struggled with or proudly claimed that label in later times. As Victoria Bissell Brown notes when discussing the sexuality of reformer Jane Addams (Figure 1):

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<sup>9</sup> License: Public domain. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004671949/>

<sup>10</sup> Leila Rupp, “Romantic Friendships,” in Allida Mae Black, ed., *Modern American Queer History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 13–23; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1–29; Anthony Rotundo, “Romantic Friendship: Male Intimacy and Middle-Class Youth in the Northern United States, 1800–1900,” *Journal of Social History* 23 (Fall 1989): 1–26; and D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 125–129.

...I cannot use a word that has purposely erotic meaning in our era to describe the intimate experience of a woman who lived in a very different time. Too many people have fought too hard for modern lesbians' claim to a lusty, erotic life for me to daintily retreat to an ahistorical definition of "lesbian" that skirts the blood, sweat, and tears of erotic expression.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, to completely deny the relevance of romantic friendships to LGBTQ history would also be misleading. Surely, these bonds lie somewhere on the spectrum of same-sex love and desire; it is the easy use of modern labels that strips these historical trends of their nuance and context.

Shifting the topic from "LGBTQ" to same-sex love and desire addresses some of these issues. This broader category moves away from contemporary labels as well as the modern emphasis on sexual practice and self-identification. Likewise, we can take a similar approach to conceptualizing transgender identity, by instead considering the topic of "variant gender expression." Like its companion identities in the label of LGBTQ, transgender identity is a modern concept, with a relatively recent history as an identity distinct from sexual orientation.<sup>12</sup> The past abounds with people who chose to live as a gender opposite to their biological sex. We can certainly speak to that fact, but it is more difficult to presume their motivation for doing so, unless they specifically addressed that question. Once again, it is the modern label, not the topic itself that is problematic.

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<sup>11</sup> Victoria Bissell Brown, "Queer or Not: What Jane Addams Teaches Us about Not Knowing," in Jill Austin and Jennifer Brier, eds., *Out in Chicago: LGBT History at the Crossroads* (Chicago: Chicago History Museum, 2011), 67.

<sup>12</sup> Originally, the medical model of homosexuality conflated sexual desire for the same sex with the gender identification of the opposite sex (known at the time as "inversion"). See Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 40–73; Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton and Company, 1995), 51–55; and Vern L. Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 35–40.

## Vocabulary

Terminology is another issue to keep in mind when beginning to conceptualize the LGBTQ stories related to your site. In addition to the interpretive issues involved in using contemporary labels to describe historical circumstances, sites that interpret the twentieth century—after our modern labels had come into use—face decisions concerning appropriate vocabulary. There is no one universally agreed upon lexicon to describe variant sexuality and gender expression, with preferences varying by generation, subculture, geographic region, and personal inclination. Because of this, some sites choose to devote interpretive space to explaining the connotations and changing meanings of specific words. For instance, *Revealing Queer*, a temporary exhibit at the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) in Seattle, dedicated a corner of its 1,000-square-foot exhibit space to offering definitions of various labels and providing a space where visitors could record the words they use to identify themselves. Regardless of the vocabulary your site chooses to employ, sites should make this decision carefully and in consultation with local LGBTQ communities.<sup>13</sup>

## Intersectionality

The idea of intersectionality argues that different aspects of one's identity—such as race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, geographic region, religion, etc.—intersect to create a particular worldview and thus we must approach historical agents as multifaceted beings whose experience of one condition—sexual orientation, for instance—is informed by all others. The concept is dealt with more fully in another chapter of this theme study. However, I mention it here because it is most certainly a factor in conceptualizing LGBTQ stories. There is not one LGBTQ community, one LGBTQ experience, one LGBTQ past—though we sometimes speak of all of these. To do true justice to the stories

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<sup>13</sup> Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History*, 5–7, 153-154.

contained in a historic place, interpreters must consider the intersectionality of identities.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Underrepresented Nature of Bisexual and Transgender Identities*

Although the terms GLBT, LGBT, and LGBTQ have been in use for decades, they do not always deliver equal representation of the identities listed. Gay and lesbian experiences have received far more consideration, generally speaking, than bisexual and transgender experiences. While one could argue that this is a consequence of greater numbers and more surviving documentation in the historical record, the neglect of bisexual and transgender experiences is at least in part an oversight that warrants redress.

Western culture tends toward the binary. Most of us are quite accustomed to the heterosexual-homosexual binary, or the male-female binary, and significantly less comfortable with those who blur those borders, as do both bisexuals and transgender folk. Rather than grapple with the in-between, many choose simply to ignore those experiences that complicate the cultural framework. And yet, exploring the lives of those who destabilize cultural categories has the potential to provide new insight; by shifting perspective, we see assumptions that we did not necessarily know existed.

For instance, what are we to make of a heterosexually married person who also left evidence of same-sex desire and behavior?<sup>15</sup> Traditionally,

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<sup>14</sup> Mieke Verloo, "Intersectional and Cross-Movement Politics and Policies: Reflections on Current Practices and Debates," *Signs* 38, no. 4 (June 1, 2013): 893–915; Cornelia H. Dayton and Lisa Levenstein, "The Big Tent of U.S. Women's and Gender History: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (December 1, 2012): 793–817; and Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Same-Sex Sexuality in Western Women's History," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 3 (September 2001): 13.

<sup>15</sup> One such person is Ogden Codman Jr., associated with the Codman House (The Grange), 34 Codman Road, Lincoln, Massachusetts, <http://www.historicnewengland.org/historic-properties/homes/codman-estate>. However, in the discussion that follows, I am not talking specifically about Codman, but hypothetically. For more on Codman, see Kenneth C. Turino, "Case Study: The Varied Telling of Queer History at Historic New England Sites," in Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History*, 135–136. The Grange was listed on the NRHP on April 18, 1974.

sites may have been inclined to use the fact of a marriage as a badge of heterosexual acceptability and simply ignore any evidence that suggested a broader range of interest. Now, I fear the pendulum may have swung too far the other way and sites might be too quick to assume this hypothetical historical agent was a closeted homosexual, using a socially acceptable marriage as nothing more than a shield against accusations of impropriety. But there is, of course, another possibility. Such a person may have sincerely felt desire for both men and women. In a similar vein, bisexuals have historically shared many of the same experiences as gays and lesbians—fighting for broader protection under the law, being arrested in gay bars, and losing jobs because of perceived “sexual perversion.” It might take a second look to find them, even when they are hiding in plain sight.



Figure 2: Clear Comfort, the Alice Austen House Museum, 2011. Photo by Blindowlphotography.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> License: CC BY-SA 3.0. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Clear\\_Comfort\\_01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Clear_Comfort_01.jpg)

Along similar lines, transgender identities and same-sex love and desire exist in complicated relation with each other. Today, we understand sexual orientation and gender identity to be two distinct categories, but this has not always been the case. Traditionally, the categories have been conflated in societal understandings. As a result, when delving into the past, interpreters can find opportunities to talk about *both* same-sex love and desire *and* gender transgression.<sup>17</sup> For instance, Alice Austen, a turn-of-the-twentieth-century photographer, challenged gender conventions in much of her work. She also spent fifty years partnered to another woman, Gertrude Tate. Both of these aspects are interpreted at her home, Clear Comfort, which is now a museum (Figure 2).<sup>18</sup> In 2010, the Alice Austen House and its parent organization, the Historic House Trust of New York City, invited photographer Steven Rosen, working with the drag performance troupe Switch 'n' Play, to create contemporary interpretations of some of Austen's more provocative works and thus explore changing attitudes about gender expression and sexual identity. The results were later displayed in an exhibit at the site. While this program was not strictly historical in nature, it does provide an example of museums incorporating innovative programming, highlighting the interrelationship of gender and sexual identity, and encouraging visitors to engage with the past by exploring parallels with (and differences from) their own era.<sup>19</sup>

Considering the ways variant gender expression has overlapped with variant sexuality in different ways in different eras opens exciting interpretive avenues. But if we unconsciously favor gay and lesbian stories—those that fall neatly into the binary—we run the risk of neglecting other stories also present in historical sources. Staying consciously

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Gabriel, "Why Grapple with Queer When You Can Fondle It? Embracing Our Erotic Intelligence," in Amy K. Levin, ed., *Gender, Sexuality and Museums: A Routledge Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 71–79; Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press: Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008), 150–153.

<sup>18</sup> Clear Comfort (The Alice Austen House) at 2 Hylan Boulevard, Staten Island, New York, was listed on the NRHP on July 29, 1970 and designated an NHL on April 19, 1993, [www.aliceausten.org](http://www.aliceausten.org)

<sup>19</sup> Frank D. Vagnone, "A Note from Franklin D. Vagnone," executive director, *Historic House Trust Newsletter*, Fall 2010; and Lillian Faderman and Phyllis Irwin, "Alice Austen and Gertrude Tate: A Boston Marriage on Staten Island," *Historic House Trust Newsletter*, Fall 2010.



committed to finding bisexual and transgender stories, as well as gay and lesbian ones, can result in a fuller discussion of the range of ideas and experiences present.

## *Artifacts*

What objects represent the LGBTQ elements of your site's story? The answer will vary with each site, of course, as well as with the period of significance. When interpreting the mid- to late twentieth century, objects may more obviously represent queer experience—mementos from marches or gay bars, for example. Earlier eras may present more of a challenge and may require reviewing your site's collection with new eyes—and possibly engaging the help of a specialist—to discover coded meanings not readily apparent.<sup>20</sup>

## *Moving Away from Standard Tropes*

One could argue that recent efforts to obtain legal recognition for same-sex marriage have fed into a “Queer people are just like us!” mentality. Such thinking obscures the distinct subcultures LGBTQ people have forged. The most successful interpretive efforts will approach LGBTQ experiences on their own terms, as revealed in the surviving sources, rather than crafting a narrative that mimics heterosexual patterns. Indeed, in their role as sex and gender outsiders, many LGBTQ people have worked tirelessly to challenge cultural assumptions about what is and is not “normal,” “proper,” and “natural.” This societal critique—whether it occurred with words or deeds—deserves to be remembered.

A relevant example comes from the *Out in Chicago* exhibit at the Chicago History Museum.<sup>21</sup> The museum convened two separate advisory panels, one comprised of people who identified as LGBTQ and the other comprised of people who identified as straight. Interestingly, when asked

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<sup>20</sup> Jill Austin et al., “When the Erotic Becomes Illicit: Struggles over Displaying Queer History at a Mainstream Museum,” *Radical History Review*, no. 113 (Spring 2012): 187–97; and Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History*, 110–115.

<sup>21</sup> The Chicago History Museum is located at 1601 North Clark Street, Chicago, Illinois.

what they hoped to get out of an exhibit on Chicago's LGBTQ past, the straight committee said they sought to learn about the ways queer lives were similar to their own, while the LGBTQ committee hoped that their distinct experiences and subcultures would be documented, preserved, and presented to a wider audience. After grappling with the question of how to address the legitimate desires of both groups, the exhibit team decided in the end to privilege the wishes of the LGBTQ stakeholders, who had not had as great an opportunity as the straight stakeholders to see their experiences represented in museum settings.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to moving beyond heterosexual tropes, interpreters should also challenge the "progress narrative." Most likely visitors are accustomed to historical trajectories that move unerringly toward "progress," however defined—expanding democratic freedoms, growing economic strength, lives continually made better by technological innovation and increased access to consumer goods. This device seems particularly prevalent when discussing LGBTQ history, especially when those presentations focus on the question of civil rights.<sup>23</sup>

Historians now understand that, over time, the dangers and freedoms afforded to LGBTQ people expanded and contracted in ways that do not fit neatly into the idea of a steady march toward acceptance and freedom from fear. Examples abound. To take but one, in the revolutionary period and early nineteenth century, emotional and physical affection between men was seen as a sign of "sensibility," a desired trait in the democratic ideal where empathy, compassion, and thoughtfulness were seen as necessary for exercising the rights of citizenry (at this time restricted to white men). By the twentieth century, however, the emotional range considered acceptable for men was greatly constricted, and male-male bonds of affection were derided and strictly policed for fear that they

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<sup>22</sup> Jill Austin and Jennifer Brier, "Case Study: Displaying Queer History at the Chicago History Museum," in Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History*, 119-129.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Mills, "Queer Is Here? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 62 (October 1, 2006): 253-263; Robert Mills, "Theorizing the Queer Museum," *Museums & Social Issues* 3, no. 1 (April 1, 2008): 41-52; and Stuart Frost, "Are Museums Doing Enough to Address LGBT History?" *Museums Journal* 111, no. 1 (January 2011): 19.



would receive the taint of the then-common taboo of male love for another male (regardless of sexual component).<sup>24</sup>

When conceptualizing the LGBTQ stories to be told, the issue of sexual content is likely to arise, and here, too, I encourage interpreters to challenge their assumptions about what is and is not appropriate. Many authors have written about the role of museums in enforcing heteronormativity—the assumptions that heterosexuality and the nuclear family are the societal “norm,” and hence do not need to be analyzed, while all other desires and social arrangements are “abnormal” and thus troubled.<sup>25</sup> Heteronormativity can often slip into historical interpretation when LGBTQ experiences are deemed to be too “sexual” to discuss, while analogous heterosexual experiences are present. For instance, think how ubiquitous erotic female nudes (generally created by male artists) are in Western art. These pieces fill art galleries and historic homes and seldom receive any critical comments for being there. Would it be more challenging for staff and visitors if erotic depictions of men were displayed in the historic home of a lifelong bachelor? Likewise, the fact that Paul Revere fathered sixteen children with two wives is a regular part of the tour at the Paul Revere House. Yet this information is certainly no more or less sexual than the fact that author Willa Cather shared numerous

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<sup>24</sup> Rotundo, *Romantic Friendship*; Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill, NC: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 123–127; Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); and William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Mills, *Theorizing the Queer Museum*; Joshua G. Adair, “House Museums or Walk-In Closets? The (Non) Representation of Gay Men in the Museums They Called Home,” in Amy K. Levin, ed., *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, 269; Kevin Coffee, “Cultural Inclusion, Exclusion and the Formative Roles of Museums,” *Museum Management & Curatorship* 23, no. 3 (September 2008): 261–279; John Fraser and Joe E. Heimlich, “Where Are We?,” *Museums & Social Issues* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 5–14; Stuart Frost, “Secret Museums: Hidden Histories of Sex and Sexuality,” *Museums & Social Issues* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 29–40; James H. Sanders III, “The Museum’s Silent Sexual Performance,” *Museums & Social Issues* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 15–25; Patrik Steorn, “Curating Queer Heritage: Queer Knowledge and Museum Practice,” *Curator* 55, no. 3 (July 2012): 355–365; and Jennifer Tyburczy, “All Museums Are Sex Museums,” *Radical History Review*, no. 113 (Spring 2012): 199–211.

residences and thirty-eight years with her female companion, Edith Lewis.<sup>26</sup>

All of the tendencies described in this section are reasonable assumptions to make, given larger societal forces. Nevertheless, truly nuanced historical interpretation needs to push beyond societal assumptions in order to get ever closer to accurately documenting the realities of past experiences.

### *Accept that You Won't Have All the Answers*

Thus far, I have discussed numerous conceptual gray areas—the use of contemporary labels to describe historical experiences; the subtle connotations of language; the intersectionality of identity; the potentially nonbinary nature of bisexual and transgender identities; and historical nuance that doesn't fit neatly into standard cultural tropes. It would be understandable if readers began to feel that uncovering the LGBTQ past were a moving target, one that eludes clear conclusions. And to some extent, such feelings would be correct. Historical inquiry quite often reveals more questions than answers. This is the core of its power. We don't have to have all the answers in order to engage in a conversation about the past with visitors; the very fact that we *don't* know everything we wish we knew invites the visitor to interact with the past as opposed to merely consuming a historical product. Yet, admitting uncertainty may be new territory for seasoned interpreters accustomed to taking a more definitive stance when sharing the past with visitors. While it may require a change of thinking, or perhaps additional training, this challenge once again points to the potential of this type of interpretation, revealing more clearly to a wide audience that history is not just a collection of known facts. It involves piecing together shards of evidence, grappling with conflicting points of view, and drawing conclusions as best we can. And in

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<sup>26</sup> Isabella Caruso, "Willa Cather North by Northeast: Cather Related Site-Seeing North of New York City and East of Ohio," ed. Andrew Jewell, Willa Cather Archive, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003, [http://cather.unl.edu/community.tours.new\\_york.html](http://cather.unl.edu/community.tours.new_york.html). Possibly the only surviving residence of this couple, which they lived in from 1908-1913, is an apartment in Greenwich Village, New York City, New York.

particular, with regard to the queer past: ideas about sexuality change over time; previous prejudice against LGBTQ identities result in a dearth of surviving objects and documents in our own time; past eras were as complicated as our own, with competing interpretations and so very much that went unspoken.

In fact, within the field of public history, there is a growing trend to “pull back the curtain” and reveal historians’ work to visitors. Rather than presenting interpretation of established fact, this line of thinking encourages sites to reveal the historical process by presenting evidence and context to visitors and asking them to draw their own conclusions. Uncertainty itself can be an interpretive tool.<sup>27</sup> The Jane Addams Hull-House Museum puts these ideas into practice in interpreting Addams’s sexuality. Although historians know that the reformer had an intense bond with her friend Mary Rozet Smith that spanned over thirty years, the couple’s correspondence was destroyed (at Addams’s request), so questions remain about the specific nature of their relationship. The museum interprets Addams’s personal life—including her bond with Smith—in the reformer’s bedroom, and is quite open about the fact that the evidence is unclear about Addams’s sexual identity. Visitors encounter the evidence that survives and a description of the relevant historical context—that the late nineteenth century saw many life-long pairings between educated, professional women and the historical circumstances that supported such behavior. However, the museum does not draw conclusions from the evidence, instead providing visitors the opportunity to perform their own analyses.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Ferentinos, “Lifting Our Skirts: Sharing the Sexual Past with Visitors,” Digital Content, May 2014 Issue, *Public History Commons: The Public Historian*, July 1, 2014, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/lifting-our-skirts>; Robert R. Weyeneth, “What I’ve Learned Along the Way: A Public Historian’s Intellectual Odyssey,” *The Public Historian* 36, no. 2 (May 1, 2014): 9–25. The *Public History Commons* website ran a series of articles on this idea of “pulling back the curtain.” The series is located at <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/tag/pulling-back-the-curtain>.

<sup>28</sup> Ferentinos, *Lifting Our Skirts*. The Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, located at 800 South Halsted, Chicago, Illinois, was listed on the NRHP on October 15, 1966 and designated an NHL on June 23, 1965.

## Interpretive Planning

At some point in the process of uncovering LGBTQ stories, it will be time to move from the conceptual to the concrete, to the specific steps of interpretive planning. While such steps are likely quite familiar to those who work in this area, below, I mention a few issues that either are particularly important when beginning LGBTQ interpretation or carry specific implications when approaching these populations.

### *Buy-In from Stakeholders*

As is true of all interpretive efforts, buy-in from stakeholders—including funders—early in the planning process will help ensure that the effort goes smoothly. You might be surprised at how easy this is to achieve. Regardless of individual opinions about LGBTQ current events and legal protections, it would be difficult to find many people in the United States today who deny that LGBTQ people exist and have been productive members of society. As a result of this cultural shift, resistance to LGBTQ historical interpretation is becoming increasingly rare, when the information is based on historic evidence and avoids using modern labels to describe past circumstances. What's more, in the last few years, there has been a sea change within corporate America. Many major companies in the United States have moved to the forefront of advocating for LGBTQ acceptance, a trend witnessed in the 2015 controversy in Indiana over the state's Religious Freedom Restoration Act, where corporations such as Eli Lilly and Company, Angie's List, Anthem, and Salesforce played a significant role in pressuring lawmakers to amend the law.<sup>29</sup> These events suggest that many corporate funders would welcome the opportunity to support LGBTQ historical interpretation. Nevertheless, it is best to build donor, board, and staff support early in the planning process, rather than face unpleasant surprises later on.

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<sup>29</sup> Jeff Swiatek and Tim Evans, "Nine CEOs Call on Pence, Legislature to Modify 'Religious Freedom' Law," *Indianapolis Star*, March 31, 2015, <http://www.indystar.com/story/money/2015/03/30/nine-ceos-call-pence-legislature-modify-religious-freedom-law/70689924>.

### *Solicit Input from Community Partners and Explore Partnerships*

Seeking input on interpretive development from a wide range of community advisors will assist in creating programming that is relevant and respectful. Advisors can include straight stakeholders as well as representatives of LGBTQ communities, but in selecting advisors, sites should keep in mind that there is not one single cohesive LGBTQ “community.” Care must be taken to ensure gender, class, racial, and generational diversity, as well as representation of all the different categories within the LGBTQ label.

When cultivating relationships among LGBTQ advisors, site personnel should be prepared to encounter some distrust and resistance. Mainstream institutions have historically served as agents of oppression for LGBTQ people in this country. Laws criminalized their self-expression; police harassed them; doctors told them they were sick; popular culture portrayed them as depraved; educational materials denied their existence; the military gave them dishonorable discharges; and the federal government’s glacial response to the AIDS epidemic led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of gay and bisexual men and transgender women. These historical realities are fading, but they have created scars that lead many LGBTQ people to assume the worst about the powers that be. Within the museum world, this is most often seen as a reluctance to grant oral history interviews, share lived experiences, or donate material. Community advisors from relevant populations can serve as bridge builders, communicating the organization’s goals and objectives and serving as watchdogs against unintended gaffes in interpretation. Historic sites should be prepared, however, to exercise patience when building trust and legitimacy within this area.

In addition to specific individuals serving as community advisors, organizational partnerships can address similar issues, providing content expertise and advice on outreach. The Minnesota Historical Society had an established Summer History Immersion Program (SHIP) teaching first-generation college-bound high school students the skills of college-level

historical research. However, the organization partnered with the University of Minnesota's Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies when looking to expand its program into the field of LGBTQ history. Similarly, the National Constitution Center and the William Way LGBT Community Center co-sponsored a special exhibit in summer 2015 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the "Annual Reminder" protests for gay and lesbian rights that were held each Independence Day from 1965 to 1969 at the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia.<sup>30</sup> The key to creating solid partnerships is mutual assistance. Seek ways to support these organizations as a means of building trust and strengthening relationships.<sup>31</sup>

To assist with these outreach efforts, the American Alliance of Museums is in the process of developing LGBTQ welcoming standards for museums, which it plans to unveil at its annual meeting in spring 2016. This document intentionally aligns with the organization's *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums* and draws widely from resources on supporting LGBTQ individuals at work, school, and in community.

### *Staffing and Sustainability*

Although familiarity with local LGBTQ realities provides an important perspective to LGBTQ site interpretation, historical and interpretive expertise is also important. Thus, choices about what staff to assign to the development of new interpretation should be made with an eye toward expertise rather than personal identification with the subject. While LGBTQ staff members will likely support the organization's efforts in this area,

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<sup>30</sup> Kyle Parsons and Stewart Van Cleve, "Case Study: Interpreting for the Next Generation," in Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History*, 141-149; and *Speaking Out for Equality: The Constitution, Gay Rights, and the Supreme Court*, National Constitution Center exhibit, <http://constitutioncenter.org/experience/exhibitions/feature-exhibitions/speaking-out-for-equality-the-constitution-gay-rights-and-the-supreme-court>. Independence Hall, where these protests took place, is at 520 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was designated as part of the Independence National Historical Park NHL District on October 15, 1966 and became part of the NPS on June 27, 1948.

<sup>31</sup> Brian O'Neill, "Twenty-One Partnership Success Factors," *AASLH History News* 69, no. 4 (Autumn 2014): 17-21.



Figure 3: Beauport, the Sleeper-McCann House, Gloucester, Massachusetts. Photo by J. David Bohl, 1979, from the NHL nomination.

effective interpretation requires the engagement of all staff with relevant skills.

In addition, the issue of sustainability is important to consider from the outset. Will the interpretative changes become part of permanent programming? Or will they be temporary (special events or occasional themed tours, for instance)? If the latter, how will you maintain the new visitors and audience enthusiasm your efforts are likely to produce? LGBTQ interpretation can send a message of welcome and inclusion; but this message will be met with expectations. How will the organization continue to create a welcoming environment for diverse audiences? How will it avoid tokenism?

Furthermore, Stacia Kuceyeski, director of outreach at the Ohio History Connection (which serves as an institutional partner to the Gay Ohio History Initiative) urges organizations to make LGBTQ projects and outreach a designated part of someone's job, rather than an unevaluated

labor of love for a particular staff member, performed above and beyond their assigned job duties. With responsibilities clearly assigned and part of articulated performance goals, Kuceyeski argues, LGBTQ interpretive efforts are protected from the vagaries of staff turnover or loss of momentum.<sup>32</sup>

### *Choosing Specific Interpretive Methods*

Historic sites have introduced LGBTQ stories to visitors in a variety of ways. Beauport, the home of early-twentieth-century designer Henry Davis Sleeper, discusses Sleeper's sexual identity in their standard visitor tour (Figure 3). They have also hosted lectures on queer-related topics and an evening reception and private tour specifically for a gay meet-up group.<sup>33</sup> Staff at Rosie the Riveter/ World War II Home Front National Historical Park, realizing that they needed more documentation before beginning to interpret LGBTQ stories, launched an oral history project complete with a confidential phone line where people interested in learning more about the project could do so while still preserving their anonymity.<sup>34</sup> The John Q Ideas Collective stages "discursive memorials"—which might also be described as historically informed site-specific theater—at sites throughout Atlanta that hold relevance to the LGBTQ past.<sup>35</sup> The Gay Ohio History Initiative, in partnership with the Ohio History Connection, erected a

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<sup>32</sup> Joe Heimlich and Judy Koke, "Gay and Lesbian Visitors and Cultural Institutions: Do They Come? Do They Care? A Pilot Study," *Museums & Social Issues* 3, no. 1 (April 1, 2008): 93–104; Donna Mertens, John Fraser, and Joe Heimlich, "M or F?: Gender, Identity, and the Transformative Research Paradigm," *Museums & Social Issues* 3, no. 1 (April 1, 2008): 81–92; Stacia Kuceyeski, "The Gay Ohio History Initiative as a Model for Collecting Institutions," *Museums & Social Issues* 3, no. 1 (April 1, 2008): 125–132; and Stacia Kuceyeski, director of outreach at the Ohio History Connection and liaison to the Gay Ohio History Initiative, in phone interview with the author, April 3, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Turino, Case Study, 132–135. Beauport was listed on the NRHP and designated an NHL on May 27, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> "Seeking LGBT Stories from WWII Home Front," Rosie the Riveter/ World War II Home Front National Historical Park, <http://www.nps.gov/rori/planyourvisit/seeking-lgbt-stories-from-wwii-home-front.htm>; and Elizabeth Tucker, lead park ranger at Rosie the Riveter/ World War II Home Front National Historical Park, in phone interview with the author, April 29, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Julia Brock, "Embodying the Archive (Part 1): Art Practice, Queer Politics, Public History," *History@Work* (blog), April 5, 2013, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/brock-johnq-intro>; Julia Brock, "Embodying the Archive (Part 2): Lineages, Longings, Migrations," *History@Work* (blog), April 12, 2013, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/crichton-brock-intro>; and Wesley Chenault, Andy Ditzler, and Joey Orr, "Discursive Memorials: Queer Histories in Atlanta's Public Spaces," *Southern Spaces*, February 26, 2010, <http://www.southernspaces.org/2010/discursive-memorials-queer-histories-atlantas-public-spaces>.



historical marker to author Natalie Clifford Barney, who was partnered with a woman (painter Romaine Brooks) for fifty years (Figure 4).<sup>36</sup> Indianapolis and Minneapolis have each taken a city-wide approach to interpreting LGBTQ history, developing mobile phone apps that map and interpret relevant sites throughout their cities.<sup>37</sup> And the California Historical Society is currently sponsoring a crowd-sourced Historypin project where the public can upload their memories and photos of LGBTQ-related sites throughout the state.<sup>38</sup>

The relative newness of LGBTQ historical interpretation means that the field remains particularly open to new ideas and methods. Sites have engaged with this history using both established and experimental

interpretive methods, and many sites

unfolded their LGBTQ interpretation in stages, beginning with lectures or other one-time programming and eventually moving into more detailed interpretation. A combination of creative thinking and respectful consultation with stakeholders holds the possibility of producing meaningful and engaging content.

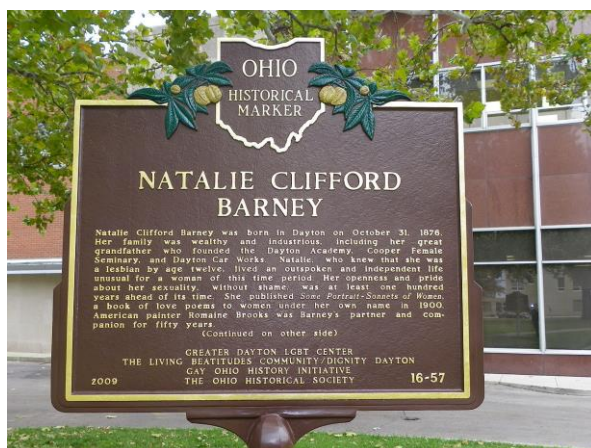


Figure 4: Historical marker to Natalie Clifford Barney, Dayton, Ohio, 2009. Photo by Zeist85.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> "What is the Gay Ohio History Initiative?" *Ohio History Connection Collections* (blog), June 14, 2014, <https://ohiohistory.wordpress.com/2014/06/13/what-is-the-gay-ohio-history-initiative>. The historical marker dedicated to Barney is located on East Second Street in Dayton, Ohio, in Cooper Park.

<sup>37</sup> *Discover Indiana*, <http://www.indyhistorical.org>, LGBTQ tour in development as of November 1, 2015; Kirsten Deleard, "YesterQueer," *The Historyapolis Project* (blog), June 25, 2014, <http://historyapolis.com/yesterqueer>.

<sup>38</sup> "California Pride: Mapping LGBTQ Histories," *Historypin*, <https://www.historypin.org/project/469-california-pride/>.

<sup>39</sup> License: Public domain. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ncbarneyhistoricalmarker.jpg>

*Prepare for a Range of Reactions*

LGBTQ historical interpretation is still a rare enough phenomenon that many visitors likely will be encountering this subject matter for the first time. Some will be thrilled to find it; others will be challenged. As with any new interpretive effort, it is wise to prepare for a range of reactions. The literature on this subject contains numerous mentions of visitors crying; this can be a hard history to bear witness to. Visitors who have experienced violence, discrimination, and loss because of their LGBTQ identities may have such traumatic memories triggered by this interpretation. People may need a place to reflect and process what they've encountered. They may want to share stories. Some may be angry at encountering this topic; others may be frustrated that the interpretation does not go further. Consider a range of possibilities and prepare for them.

As part of planning for visitor reactions, sites may want to add participatory elements to their interpretation. Providing these kinds of opportunities—video booths or reaction boards, for example—gives visitors a chance to reflect on what they have encountered in an environment where they feel they will be heard. Another approach would be to invite audience members to take on the role of historian, “pulling back the curtain” and analyzing the evidence for themselves.

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Ensuring that the nation's historic sites represent a full and inclusive past is an ongoing challenge. As LGBTQ history permeates the national consciousness and becomes increasingly evident in official historical narratives, examples of LGBTQ interpretation at historic sites will increase. And, as with all historical topics, our understanding and interpretation will become more nuanced over time. The key at this moment is to begin.