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

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INTRODUCTION

The chapters in the Introduction section give context to the rest of the theme study. This is the context for the contexts, as it were. This section gives background on the LGBTQ Heritage Initiative and provides a broad social history of LGBTQ in America. The ideas in this introductory section will resonate throughout the rest of the theme study.

01 WHY LGBTQ HISTORIC SITES MATTER

Mark Meinke

Start here. We exist.

We, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer people (LGBTQ), all the subdivisions of the sexual and gender minority community, exist in America. The places we remember and hold dear, those places that have become part of our identity, also exist. Still. Many of them.

In the 1960s no lesbian, gay man, bisexual, transgender person, or queer gave a thought to their sites and actions being historic. They were struggling for their basic rights, explicitly denied them by their government and the larger society around them. As Dr. Franklin E. Kameny, often called the “father” of LGBTQ civil rights, asserted with some asperity in his 1960 petition for a *writ of certiorari* to the Supreme Court “Probably [homosexuals] most dominant characteristic is their utter heterogeneity. Despite [the] common popular stereotype of a homosexual which would have him discernible at once by appearance, mannerisms and other

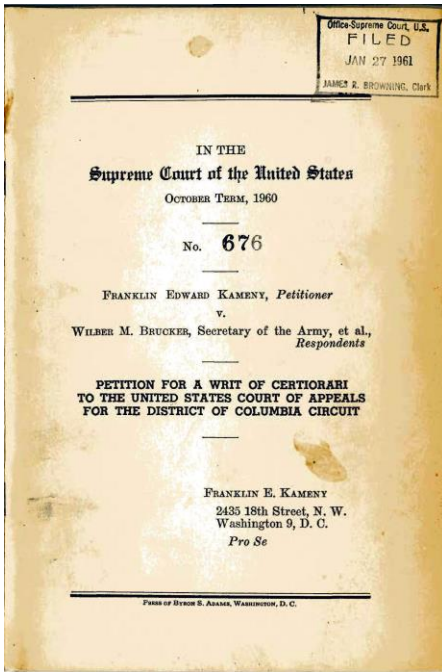


Figure 1: Dr. Franklin E. Kameny's 1960 petition for a writ of certiorari to overturn his exclusion from federal employment on the basis of homosexuality. Publication of the United States Supreme Court, 1960.

characteristics, these people run the gamut of physical type, of intellectual ability and inclination and of emotional make-up ... ”¹ (Figure 1).

In making his case for tolerance and an end to restrictions on homosexuals' rights, Kameny was in this instance most focused on discrimination in employment, though in addressing his own particular case, he noted that those rights were the equal of every American's rights and should not be legally, logically, constitutionally, or on any other basis diminished (Figure 2). The depth of Kameny's asperity was plumbed in his outraged summary of the

government's case for oppressing homosexuals' employment in a resonant indictment of federal oppression:

“Respondents' [US Civil Service Commission, Army Mapping Service, the US Army] case is rotten to the core. Respondents' case had been shown to fail factually and to be defective procedurally; the regulations upon which they base their case have been shown to be legally faulty, invalid, and unconstitutional; their policies have been shown to be improperly discriminatory,

¹ Franklin Edward Kameny v. Wilber M. Brucker, Secretary of the Army et al., Petition for a Writ of Certiorari, no. 676, US Supreme Court, 1960, 36. Kameny's writ was intended to win him a Supreme Court review of his appeal against dismissal from the Army Mapping Service on grounds of homosexuality in 1957. It did not. However, in articulating his arguments against US government repression of homosexuals and its ban on employment of homosexuals, Kameny set forth clearly many of the arguments and goals that would characterize his activism over the next fifty-one years. The Dr. Franklin E. Kameny Residence is located in the northwestern quadrant of Washington, DC. It was listed on the NRHP on November 2, 2011.

irrational and unreasonable, inconsistent and against the general welfare, and unconstitutional. ...

The government's regulations, policies, practices and procedures, as applied in the instant case to petitioner specifically, and as applied to homosexuals generally, are a stench in the nostrils of decent people, an offense against morality, an abandonment of reason, an affront to human dignity, an improper restraint upon proper freedom and liberty, a disgrace to any civilized society, and a violation of all that this nation stands for. These policies, practices, procedures, and regulation have gone too long unquestioned, and too long unexamined by the courts."²

A community of people, identical to other American citizens except for the objects of their affections, was united by its shared oppression and came together in the 1960s and the 1970s not to "fit in" but to build their own community for themselves within the enveloping context of American society. Absorbed in asserting and demanding recognition not merely of their existence but of their rights as citizens under the law and the constitution, LGBTQ people created, and continue to create, communities



Figure 2: Dr. Franklin E. Kameny at the door to his Washington, DC, home and office, 2007. Photo by and courtesy of Patsy Lynch, 2007.

² Ibid., 58-59.

across the nation to provide for their needs, provide support when needed, and more recently to celebrate their shared past and historic sites.

Many of those sites have historically been in economically marginal urban areas because such locations were less likely to attract negative attention from neighboring businesses and because they were cheaper for LGBTQ persons and organizations not particularly blessed with affluence. Also unique to LGBTQ communities is the predominance for much of the twentieth century of bars and taverns as significant sites for which community members feel affection and pride. Because of the difficulty in finding and meeting others like themselves, as well as because of society's restriction of places for LGBTQ persons to freely associate, bars across the country became sites of first acquaintance.

It was often at these bars that community organizations started, held fundraisers, held meetings and special events, and connected with their LGBTQ public. In the 1960s, it was at social spaces such as bars that some of the most egregiously violent encounters between LGBTQ people and American society's enforcers occurred. The now iconic Stonewall riots of June 1969 were preceded by similar occurrences at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966 and the Black Cat Tavern riot in Los Angeles in 1967.³

The years immediately following the events at Stonewall saw a nationwide eruption of social spaces and places across the country. In the exuberance of the early post-Stonewall activism, LGBTQ community centers, health centers, churches, bookstores, collectives, and communes sprouted across the nation's urban centers and were joined by service and support organizations that used these spaces for meeting and

³ The Stonewall Inn is located at 51-53 Christopher Street, New York City, New York. The riots spilled out into the adjacent streets and Christopher Park. Stonewall was listed on the NRHP on June 28, 1999, designated an NHL on February 16, 2000, and designated the Stonewall National Monument (an NPS unit) on June 24, 2016. Compton's Cafeteria was located at 101 Taylor Street, San Francisco, California. The Black Cat Tavern was at 3909 West Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, California.

socializing. As Dr. Kameny noted in his petition to the Supreme Court, LGBTQ communities reflected the heterogeneity of heterosexual society.

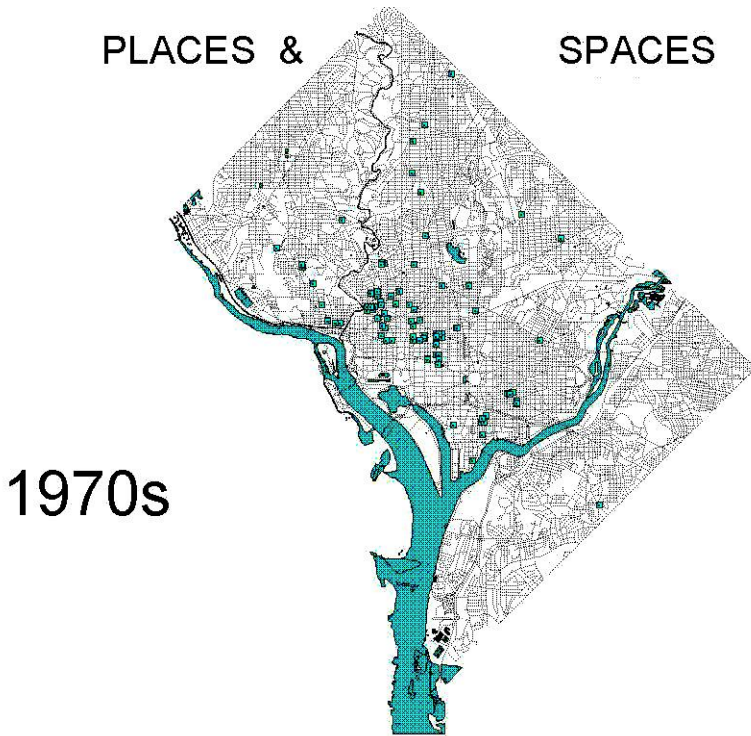


Figure 3: From *The Social Geography of Washington, DC's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Community*, paper delivered at the 2001 Conference on Washington DC Historical Studies. Image courtesy of Mark Meinke.

In Washington, DC, the 1970s saw the number of social spaces, places in which LGBTQ persons could meet and socialize, quadruple over the previous decade to 130 places, predominantly bars and restaurants but also including service organizations and stores (Figure 3). Many were notably short-lived but others became integral to the community, providing meeting space and social services. Guides to gay tolerant and gay friendly bars, restaurants, and hotels appeared in the 1950s. In the 50s and 60s they carried explicit warnings about entrapment and potential violence.

By the 1970s, guides such as John Francis Hunter's *The Gay Insider USA* (1972) offered ratings of the ambience of social spaces as well as

directories of activist organizations and publications on a state-by-state basis.

Washington DC's Washington Area Gay Community Council published a directory for the LGBTQ community in 1975 that identified the places and organizations that had appeared over the past half-decade. In the case of DC, *Just Us* listed three political organizations, four religious organizations, three women's organizations, six gay support services, six publications, two student groups, two Levi and leather organizations, seven drag organizations, eighteen bars, two cinemas, four shops, and two bathhouses (Figure 4). Of these sixty some organizations, just under twenty had existed before 1970 and only four of them had existed before 1960. Like Topsy, the LGBTQ communities just grew and grew in the 1970s.

This is the corpus from which the LGBTQ communities across the nation are now beginning to identify the sites that to them are historic, iconic, and deserving of preservation.

Our Sites Matter

In the fifty years since the National Historic Preservation Act was enacted, a number of communities have been underrepresented in the National Park Service's list of National Historic Landmarks (NHL) and

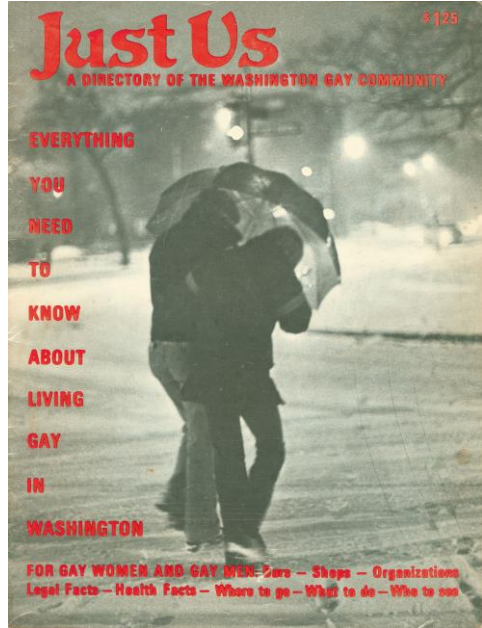


Figure 4: The Washington Area Gay Community Council's (WAGDC) 1975 *Just Us*, a directory to businesses, organizations, and places of entertainment. Cover image courtesy of the last president of the WAGDC, Deacon Maccubbin.

National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Among these are the Latina/Latino, African American, Women's, Asian and Pacific Islander, Native American, and LGBTQ communities. As of this writing, LGBTQ sites make up .08 percent of the 2,500 NHLs and .005 percent of the more than 90,000 places on the NRHP.

For most of the fifty years since the preservation act was enacted, the LGBTQ community itself was still emerging from hiding and learning to value itself so it is little surprise that it was not actively identifying and preserving the places it loved. But members of the communities across the United States knew and remembered the places that were significant in their emerging history.

The National Park Service (NPS) at the end of May 2014 launched an LGBTQ Heritage Initiative to underscore the value and increase the representation of LGBTQ sites on both the NHL and the NRHP lists. That initiative is one of the spurs to historic preservation of queer sites. Among the most immediate results of the NPS initiative is the creation of a national map of LGBTQ places across the country.⁴

The Queer Value of LGBTQ Historic Preservation and Landmarks

Place and identity are inextricably linked. Tom Mayes, of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and recipient of the Rome Prize in historic preservation and conservation, in a series of insightful blogs for the Preservation Leadership Forum notes that "... the continued presence of old places helps us know who we are, and who we may become in the

⁴ See Google Maps website, "Places with LGBTQ Heritage," <https://www.google.com/maps/@41.6232728,-112.8587991,3z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!6m1!1szUo4VdCIQURM.kpJJD0fu37MU>



future.”⁵ In the LGBTQ community, where discovering who one is and accepting that identity is often challenged by the surrounding society, discovering tangible physical echoes of that identity can underpin queer youth’s self-acceptance and reinforce a sense of belonging.

There is much evidence that preserving historic sites brings intangible benefits of identity, continuity, and community.⁶ Most people enjoy old places. We usually visit those historic places that connect with our own identity or sense of self in some way. We see ourselves in them and feel our identity reinforced. Those in the LGBTQ community haven’t been able to do that.

If you’re lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or any of the other iterations of the gender and sexual minorities, you have probably spent your youth trying to understand yourself, to accept your same sex affections or your gender identity, in the face of a society that is only just beginning to accept that such affections and identities exist and are acceptable. Youth today have many more options for support than I did. Fifty years ago, in my youth in a small midwestern town, there was no support and there were no sources of information. There were no queer-identified places that would reassure me that I was not a hateful anomaly.

There are an admittedly tiny number of LGBTQ-identified sites across the United States—so far. But the NPS LGBTQ Heritage Initiative and state and local historic landmark programs are growing the inventory. The LGBTQ press is increasingly covering the issue of disappearing sites and celebrating those that are being recognized and preserved. Media coverage helps to spread the news that there are queer historic sites that are considered worth saving.

⁵ Tom Mayes, “Why Do Old Places Matter? Individual Identity,” *Preservation Leadership Forum Blog*, January 8, 2014, <http://blog.preservationleadershipforum.org/2014/01/08/old-places-matter-identity-1/>.

⁶ Ibid. Mayes offers fourteen answers to the query “Why do old places matter?” – continuity; memory; individual identity; civic, state, national, and universal identity; beauty; history; architecture; sacred; creativity; learning; sustainability; ancestors; community; and economics.

What difference does it make to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer person if the Bayard Rustin home is recognized as a landmark? Or the Kameny home, or the Furies Collective, or the Gerber house? Why would it make a difference if Harvey Milk's camera shop was a national landmark or that docents at Walt Whitman's Camden, New Jersey home mention that he was homosexual and had a long-running relationship with Peter Doyle in Washington, DC?⁷

As Mayes points out, places become symbols of and rallying points for identity—both personal and community. These historic sites help LGBTQ people find a context for themselves. They become points for remembering our past and for staging celebrations within our community and which also educate those who aren't part of our community. They provide a perspective peopled with ancestors whose existence re-affirms our existence and whose recognition underpins a feeling that if they matter, we matter.

A young member of the LGBTQ community can find an echo of self in the Stonewall Inn or the Bayard Rustin home in New York City, the Gerber house in Chicago, the Franklin E. Kameny home or the lesbian Furies Collective in Washington, DC, the National AIDS Memorial Grove in San Francisco, or the James Merrill home in Connecticut. These are just the beginning. To a young African American working through a discovery that their affections and gender identity may not be those of the social majority, knowing that an African American as prominent and central to the social justice and civil rights movements as Bayard Rustin was a gay man can be very reassuring. To a young woman, the knowledge that the lesbian Furies Collective had been declared a landmark offers a similar feeling of affirmation (Figure 5). Unfortunately, there are not yet sites to recognize

⁷ The Bayard Rustin Residence is located in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City. It was listed on the NRHP on March 8, 2016. The Furies Collective in the southeastern quadrant of DC was listed on the NRHP on May 2, 2016. Walt Whitman's Home at 330 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (formerly Mickle Street), Camden, New Jersey was listed on the NRHP on October 15, 1966 and designated an NHL on December 29, 1962.



Figure 5: Site of the lesbian Furies Collective, Washington, DC. Photo by and courtesy of Patsy Lynch, 2015.

transgender, bisexual, or all of the heterogeneity of the LGBTQ community. They will come.

With an epidemic of suicide among bullied LGBTQ youth, every celebration of queer history can be counted an instance of asserting the normality and acceptability of who they are. A 2004 study of Minnesota ninth and twelfth graders showed that 50 percent of those with gay, lesbian, or bisexual orientations had contemplated suicide and 37.4 percent had attempted suicide.⁸ Groups responding to this epidemic include The Trevor Project which focuses on prevention of suicide and History

UnErased which develops curricula and provides training for bringing LGBTQ history to K-12 classrooms nationwide.⁹ Preservation and landmarking of queer historic sites underpin projects to improve self-esteem and self-confidence among queer youth. If knowing about a historic queer site keeps one queer youth alive, landmarking and preservation is a victory.

Since the burden and the expense of identifying and landmarking LGBTQ historic sites, and the expense of preservation, falls locally, there is necessarily a lag between identifying and landmarking. The process of landmarking, whether at the local, state, or federal level, is a lengthy one

⁸ Marla E. Eisenberg and Michael D. Resnick, "Suicidality among Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth: The Role of Protective Factors," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 39, no. 5 (November 2006): 662-668.

⁹ The Trevor Project is online at <http://www.trevorproject.org>; History UnErased is online at <http://www.historyunerased.com>.

and one not given to quick results. But the rewards of achieving landmark status or of preventing another beloved community site from disappearing under the developer's wrecking ball are great. The more that local LGBTQ community members develop the prosaic skills of writing landmark nominations, the more they will create visible memories of LGBTQ struggles and achievements.

LGBTQ historic preservation and landmarking appear poised to slowly build achievements. Regional and local preservation groups are drawing communities' attention to their built heritage. A preservation movement which has seemed largely bicoastal is beginning to fill in as more archival and historical groups emerge in LGBTQ towns and cities of the heartland. A national LGBTQ forum for landmarking and preservation, the Rainbow Heritage Network, has appeared within the last two years to provide resources and a forum for discussion.¹⁰

Benefits Beyond the LGBTQ Community

Several attempts have been made by non-LGBTQ preservation groups to spark preservation projects in the queer community over the past couple of decades from a clear sense that the LGBTQ community can be a successful partner with these groups and within the national preservation community.

In launching its LGBTQ Heritage Initiative, the NPS demonstrated its commitment to including the story of the LGBTQ civil rights struggle and the creation of LGBTQ communities as part of the national story. The NPS is working to ensure the inclusion of the underrepresented communities' landmarks within the ninety thousand plus sites on the NRHP and the twenty-five hundred NHLs.

¹⁰ The Rainbow Heritage Network is online at <http://rainbowheritagenetwork.org>.

As these sites become part of the national fabric of historic structures, the wider community will be exposed to the LGBTQ heritage and will learn of its celebrated persons and events. Since Stonewall was first landmarked by New York State and initially placed on the NRHP and later designated an NHL, the site has become iconic not just to those whose experiences it tells but to a national community increasingly aware of those experiences.

In this writer's experience, while developing Washington DC's Rainbow History Project, the wider community responded with interest and alacrity to opportunities to see, understand, and question the history and heritage of the local LGBTQ community. Eight walking tours developed to give an overview of LGBTQ heritage and presence in local neighborhoods and within special communities (e.g. African American, drag, women) proved particularly popular with non-LGBTQ walkers. On most of the tours, at least 60 percent of the walkers were not members of the LGBTQ community.¹¹

Landmarking and preserving LGBTQ sites gives the nation as a whole a chance to celebrate a community that has historically been vilified and repressed.

The LGBTQ Heritage Initiative Theme Study

In 2016, as part of its LGBTQ Heritage Initiative, the NPS published this multi-chapter theme study of the national LGBTQ experience, the first federal government account of this community. This theme study aspires to tell enough of the story of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) experience in the United States to be an accurate and useful framework for assessing the significance of historic sites in that experience.

¹¹ The Rainbow History Project is online at <http://rainbowhistory.org>.

It is, in its essence, a snapshot of where the LGBTQ community is now, how it has gotten to now, and what the important considerations are in understanding that evolution. As with snapshots in general, the image may omit some surrounding detail. It provides the best available guidance to the significant events, institutions, persons, and narrative of the LGBTQ communities within the LGBTQ community in general. It provides invaluable guidance to the NPS as it evaluates nominations for the NRHP and for the list of NHLs. The theme study is also intended to be a reference for state, tribal, and local historic preservation offices as they consider LGBTQ site nominations. It can be used to “provide opportunities for the public to learn about the nation’s heritage through interpretive and educational programs.” Although extensive, there are aspects of LGBTQ history that are not individually addressed, such as the experience of women, or of the drag and leather communities. But they are included within the other chapters of the theme study.

This is after all, a snapshot of a community’s heritage. The test is whether we recognize ourselves in it. And whether others recognize us as well.