

DEFINING MOMENTS THE STONEWALL RIOTS



Laurie Collier Hillstrom



OMNIGRAPHICS

155 W. Congress, Suite 200
Detroit, MI 48226

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Chapter Two

THE LGBT EXPERIENCE IN NEW YORK CITY



It was the police practice to back a ... wagon up to the door of a bar and herd all the gays into it. The next day, their names and addresses would appear in the daily paper, jobs would be lost, and families would be notified in the worst possible way.

—Frank Fitch, *Vector* magazine, February 1973

LGBT residents of New York City faced persecution from private anti-vice societies, city officials, and law enforcement authorities who viewed homosexuality as immoral. New York City police confiscated gay literature, closed down theaters that showed plays with gay themes, enforced laws that prohibited cross-dressing, and conducted countless raids of gay bars. For many years, LGBT people felt powerless to fight back because they were not willing to risk having their sexual orientation exposed publicly. During the turbulent 1960s, however, a number of protest movements arose that challenged the conservative values of earlier generations and demanded social change. The homophile movement began promoting LGBT rights at this time. Although most early protests were smaller and less confrontational than those organized by antiwar, civil rights, and feminist groups, some activists felt they only needed a spark to ignite the smoldering anger and frustration in New York City's LGBT community.

The Gay Metropolis

Throughout the decades when LGBT people experienced widespread discrimination, New York City—and especially the Lower Manhattan neighborhood

of Greenwich Village—emerged as a place where they could gather and socialize somewhat openly. New York was large and bustling enough that LGBT people could remain anonymous, yet its sizeable gay population meant that they could also find camaraderie and safety in numbers. As a major cultural center, New York attracted actors, artists, poets, musicians, radicals, and other individuals who took pride in their eccentricities. Many of these people settled in Greenwich Village, which gained a reputation as particularly tolerant and wel-



The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice was committed to ridding the city of what its members viewed as immoral and obscene.

coming of people who were different. Edna St. Vincent Millay, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet who was openly bisexual, was a famous resident of the Village.

New York City had been recognized as a hub of LGBT life in America since the early twentieth century. Author Charles Kaiser described it as the “gay metropolis,” where LGBT people figured out ways to live openly, honestly, and without shame. In the 1920s, for instance, the city had dozens of bars and bathhouses that catered to a gay clientele. There were also elaborate masquerade balls held annually at the Hamilton Lodge in Harlem. Most people who attended went in “drag,” or clothing typically associated with the opposite gender. Men dressed in fancy evening gowns, wigs, and make-up, while women dressed in tuxedos, trousers, and top hats. Popular drag balls were also held at Webster Hall, the Savoy, and Madison Square Garden.

Thanks to the authors and playwrights who migrated to New York City in the early twentieth century, gay and lesbian culture began to reach larger audiences. Novels, artistic works, and Broadway plays featured gay characters and explored their efforts to establish a place in American society. One of the first shows to include these themes was *The God of Vengeance*, which appeared on Broadway in 1922–23. The plot revolved around a Yiddish immigrant who lives with his wife and teenage daughter above a brothel that he owns. Despite the father’s efforts to keep his daughter innocent and pure, she falls in love with one of the prostitutes and runs away with her.

The play’s depiction of a lesbian relationship between the daughter and the prostitute generated a great deal of controversy. A group called the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, which was dedicated to cleaning up all forms of what it viewed as immorality, filed a complaint claiming that the lesbian relationship made the play obscene. Police halted one performance to arrest the producer and a dozen cast members on obscenity charges. A jury found the theater group guilty of putting on an immoral performance.

Three years later, the New York State Legislature responded to another play with a lesbian theme, *The Captive*, by enacting what became known as the “padlock bill.” This legislation gave law enforcement officials the authority to shut down any theater that staged a performance deemed to be obscene. Rather than risking the closure of their theater, producers of *The Captive* ended the show voluntarily.

In the 1950s, New York City police “would arrest [lesbians] if they could not prove that they were wearing at least three pieces of women’s clothing,” according to scholar Katherine Franke.

The obscenity restrictions also applied to literary works. In 1928 a British author named Radclyffe Hall published *The Well of Loneliness*, a novel about a young woman who falls in love with another woman while serving in the British ambulance corps during World War I. Because of its lesbian theme, the novel was banned in England. British medical experts claimed that the novel would corrupt the nation's youth and encourage them to pursue same-sex relationships. One newspaper editor proclaimed that he would rather give healthy teenagers poison than allow them to read the book. When the novel made its way across the Atlantic Ocean to New York City, the Society for the Suppression of Vice seized 865 copies from a publisher's office. Although a New York judge ruled it obscene, a higher court disagreed and allowed the book to be published. It went on to sell 80,000 copies in the United States.

Crackdown on Gay Bars

As New York City's population grew rapidly in the first half of the twentieth century, city officials and residents became increasingly concerned about crime, prostitution, and other urban problems. In addition to the Society for the Suppression of Vice, several other private organizations formed with the goal of cleaning up the city and preventing what they viewed as immoral behavior. Such groups as the Society for the Prevention of Crime and the Committee of Fourteen took legal action against books, magazines, photographs, plays, and works of art that they found obscene. They also tried to prevent the distribution of birth control, which they believed encouraged women to be promiscuous, and the consumption of alcohol.

With the influx of LGBT people to the "gay metropolis," the anti-vice societies turned their attention to shutting down the city's underground gay culture. They viewed homosexuality as a form of sexual perversion that violated their moral code. They were also offended by drag queens, cross-dressers, and butch (masculine) lesbians whose style of dress and mannerisms did not fit their gender norms. "Greenwich Village, which was once a happy, carefree abode of struggling young writers and artists, inhabited by many of America's literati, is now a roped-off section of what showmen would call 'Freak Exhibits,'"¹ complained a 1936 article in *Current Psychology and Psychoanalysis* (see "A Medical Journal Exhibits Homophobia," p. 141).

The anti-vice societies pressured New York City police to enforce laws that required individuals to wear at least three articles of clothing that were typically

Frank Kameny (1925–2011)
Father of the LGBT Rights Movement

Franklin Edward Kameny was born on May 21, 1925, in New York City, to Emil and Rae Beck Kameny. Frank was studying astronomy at Queens College in New York City when the United States entered World War II. He left college in 1941 in order to join the army.

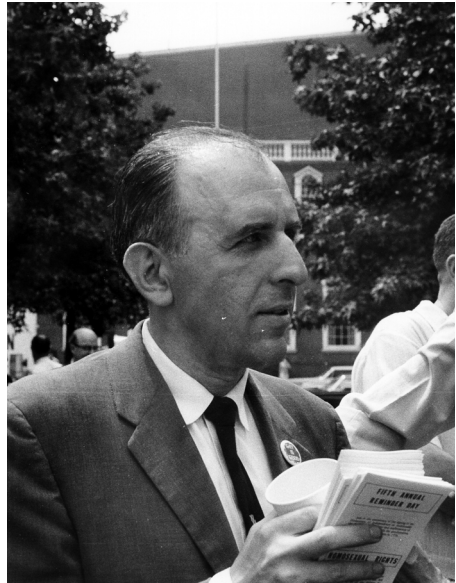
At this time, many people viewed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people with fear and loathing. The U.S. government passed laws that criminalized homosexuality and restricted the rights of LGBT people. Since it was widely believed that LGBT people were unfit for service, the U.S. military developed psychological screening tests to root out homosexuals and exclude them from the armed forces. Kameny resented the fact that he had to lie in order to pass these tests and serve his country.

When the war ended, Kameny returned to Queens College to finish his studies. After earning his undergraduate degree in 1948, he decided to continue his education. In 1956 Kameny was awarded his doctorate in astronomy from Harvard University. At this point he moved to Washington, D.C., to become a professor at Georgetown University. A year later, Kameny accepted a position as an astronomer with the U.S. Army Map Service, which was a precursor to America's space program.

Becoming an Activist

Kameny was only employed by the Army Map Service for a few months before he was fired. He had previously been arrested for “sexual perversion” in a public park, and the federal government had uncovered his arrest records. In 1953 President Dwight Eisenhower had issued an executive order that made homosexuality grounds for dismissal from federal employment.

Investigators asked Kameny whether he had homosexual tendencies. Kameny replied, “Well, I can't respond, and in any case I don't see how it's relevant to any rational concern or business of the government.”¹ Although he con-



Harvey Milk Inspires Hope in LGBT People

One of the pioneering LGBT voices in politics was Harvey Milk, who became the first openly gay person elected to public office in California when he won a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977. In his famous “Hope Speech,” which appears below, Milk explains why he feels it is important for LGBT people to enter politics. He discusses Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children campaign, which overturned an anti-discrimination ordinance in Dade County, Florida; the Briggs Initiative, which asked California voters to prohibit LGBT people from teaching in the state’s schools; and other examples of efforts to curtail gay rights. He argues that LGBT people must run for public office in order to serve as role models and provide hope for others who are struggling to understand and accept their sexuality.

My name is Harvey Milk and I’m here to recruit you.

I’ve been saying this one for years. It’s a political joke. I can’t help it—I’ve got to tell it. I’ve never been able to talk to this many political people before, so if I tell you nothing else you may be able to go home laughing a bit.

This ocean liner was going across the ocean and it sank. And there was one little piece of wood floating and three people swam to it and they realized only one person could hold on to it. So they had a little debate about which was the person. It so happened that the three people were the Pope, the President, and Mayor [Richard M.] Daley [of Chicago]. The Pope said he was titular head of one of the greatest religions of the world and he was spiritual adviser to many, many millions and he went on and pontificated and they thought it was a good argument. Then the President said he was leader of the largest and most powerful nation of the world. What takes place in this country affects the whole world and they thought that was a good argument. And Mayor Daley said he was mayor of the backbone of the United States and what took place in Chicago affected the world, and what took place in the archdiocese of Chicago affected Catholicism. And they thought that was a good argument. So they did it the democratic way and voted. And Daley won, seven to two.

About six months ago, Anita Bryant in her speaking to God said that the drought in California was because of the gay people. On November 9, the day after I got elected, it started to rain. On the day I got sworn in, we walked to City Hall and it was kinda nice, and as soon as I said the word “I do,” it start-

IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

A serious disease of the immune system caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that makes the body susceptible to opportunistic infections.

ACT UP

See AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP)

AIDS

See Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP)

A militant direct-action AIDS advocacy group founded by Larry Kramer in 1987.

Ally

A heterosexual person who supports LGBT rights; also known as “straight allies.”

American Psychological Association (APA)

An organization of medical professionals that provides guidance to doctors in diagnosing and treating mental health conditions.

APA

See American Psychological Association (APA)

Aversion therapy

A form of treatment that was intended to cure homosexuality. It involved training people to associate same-sex attraction with unpleasant consequences, such as electrical shocks.

Bisexual

An individual who is attracted to people of the same sex as well as people of the opposite sex.

CHRONOLOGY

1869

Karoly-Maria Kertbeny coins the term “homosexual,” from the Greek word for “same” (*homos*). *See p. 18.*

1896

Havelock Ellis publishes *Sexual Inversion*, a textbook that calls for greater understanding and acceptance of LGBT people. *See p. 12.*

1923

The New York Society for the Prevention of Vice shuts down a Broadway play called *The God of Vengeance*, describing it as obscene because it featured a lesbian relationship. *See p. 25.*

1924

On December 10, Henry Gerber founds the Society for Human Rights, which is the first LGBT rights organization in the United States. *See p. 20.*

1926

The New York State Legislature enacts the “padlock bill,” which allows law enforcement to close down any theater that stages a performance deemed to be obscene. *See p. 25.*

1928

Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* is seized from a publisher’s office in New York because of its lesbian theme. *See p. 26.*

1936

An article in *Current Psychology and Psychoanalysis* describes the Greenwich Village gay community as “degenerates.” *See p. 26.*

1948

Alfred C. Kinsey publishes *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, which reports the results of his research indicating that homosexuality is much more common than previously believed. *See p. 12.*

1950

The U.S. Senate releases a report arguing that homosexuals are unsuitable for employment in the federal government. *See p. 16.*

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Alsenas, Linas. *Gay America: Struggle for Equality*. New York: Amulet Books, 2008.

This heavily illustrated volume describes important episodes in the LGBT rights struggle in a breezy fashion that will appeal to teen readers.

Bausum, Ann. *Stonewall: Breaking Out in the Fight for Gay Rights*. New York: Viking, 2015.

This detailed history of the Stonewall Riots and the activism they generated is geared toward young adults.

Carter, David. *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004.

Carter's account of the uprising, based on extensive research and interviews with participants, is widely considered to be the most definitive history of the event.

Duberman, Martin. *Stonewall*. New York: Plume, 1994.

Duberman's book tells the story of the riots from the perspective of several different participants and LGBT activists.

Eaklor, Vicki L. *Queer America: A GLBT History of the Twentieth Century*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008.

This detailed book covers the history of LGBT rights in America from colonial times to the present day.

Kuhn, Betsy. *Gay Power! The Stonewall Riots and the Gay Rights Movement, 1969*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner, 2011.

This book provides a readable overview of the LGBT rights movement with an emphasis on Stonewall's place in it.

Scagliotti, John, Greta Schiller, and Robert Rosenberg. *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community*. First Run Features, 1984.

Scagliotti, John, Janet Baus, and Dan Hunt. *After Stonewall: A Quarter-Century of Lesbian and Gay Activism*. First Run Features, 1999.

These two documentary films provide an overview of LGBT life throughout the twentieth century and explore why the Stonewall rebellion was such a transformative event.

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