

Where Pride Began: The Spark of the Gay Liberation Movement

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Historical Paper

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Note: For the purposes of this project, the terms “gay,” “lesbian,” bisexual,” and “transgender,” among other gender and sexual identities, are abbreviated as “LGBT+.” Additionally, the term “gay rights” refers to the entire LGBT+ community because the phrase “gay rights” is historically accurate for the events at the Stonewall Inn in New York City in 1969. Other terms, such as “drag queen” and various descriptors could potentially be perceived as derogatory or insensitive are utilized when they describe show how the individual self-identifies.

Gay rights have arguably been one of the most contentious, controversial movements in the 20th and 21st century. Society’s ideologies of heteronormativity, or the belief that heterosexuality is the so-called normal human condition, and homophobia, or the fear of gender or sexual identities outside of the heteronormative status quo, have prompted various violent attacks toward the homosexual community, repeatedly shaking the nation. The events at the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969, ignited the parched wood of the gay movement. Many viewed this riot as a conflict, but it was an awakening for the justice homosexuals deserved. The people will not compromise their equality, leading to uprisings that will continue until the community receives what they deserve: love.

The image of gay men before Stonewall was a true nightmare. In the public service announcement, broadcasted in 1966, *Boys Beware*, members of the gay community were described as "... sick. (Having) a sickness not visible... but no less dangerous and contagious. A sickness of the mind." In the pre-Stonewall era, identifying as gay was seen as a mental illness that caused people to lure others, especially children, into being gay. In another public service

announcement, *The Homosexuals*, broadcasted in 1967, Dr. Charles Socarides, a New York psychoanalyst at the Albert Einstein School of Medicine, teaches, "The average homosexual, if there be such, is promiscuous. He is not interested in nor capable of a lasting relationship like that of a heterosexual marriage... the whole idea of saying the "happy homosexual" is to create a mythology about the nature of homosexuality."

Doctors and psychiatrists went to great lengths to *cure* homosexuality. The documentary, *Stonewall Uprising*, portrayed the various types of therapy given to homosexuals for supposed *disability*. In many mental institutions, methods of *curing* included aversive conditioning. For example, a person would view photographs of nude men and simultaneously receive a strong electronic jolt meant to form an association between the visual stimulus and the pain. This technique, supposedly preventing gay men from feeling sexually aroused, was infamously used at Atascadero Mental Institution in California. And if this tactic was ineffective, gay men "...were subjected sometimes to sterilization, occasionally to castration, sometimes to medical procedures, such as lobotomies, which were felt by some doctors to cure homosexuality..." (Eskridge in *Stonewall Uprising*). Atascadero was known by many as "the Dachau for Queers" because of the surgeries they would have to endure: "... they go up and damage the frontal part of the brain. The last time I saw him, he was a walking vegetable. Because he was homosexual." (Wilson in *Stonewall Uprising*)

The idea of activism for gay rights before Stonewall had reached people's minds, but hadn't quite taken hold, making frustration swell. "Before Stonewall, the homophile movement was essentially the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis and all of these other little gay organizations, some of which were just two people and a mimeograph machine." (Shelley in

Stonewall Uprising) "The Mattachine Society was the first gay rights organization, and they literally met in a space with the blinds drawn. They were afraid that the FBI was following them." (Marcus in *Stonewall Uprising*) The few who accepted homosexuality at the time were not given any drive to act upon it. If one fought for gay rights, they were automatically overlooked. The only people who were proactive were the ones who had nothing to lose.

The Stonewall Inn, although popular, was not very charming. The floor was always cluttered with dirt and dancing feet. The glasses, so willingly given to underage patrons, were not even cleaned before being refilled with alcohol. The windows were always broken or boarded shut. Even though the Inn was grimy and unkept, the patrons didn't care. The groups that wandered into the Stonewall Inn did not have the same high standards for the bar that society had for them. As long as they could be free from judgment, they were at their happiest.

In the year 1969, only the state of Illinois repealed their sodomy laws, or laws against same-sex intercourse, making LGBT+ relationships continually difficult. Anywhere else in the country, it was illegal and highly shameful if a gay individual were to drink, dress as they please, be romantically involved with, who the public thought of as, the "opposite sex"; or even dance together in public as a same-sex couple. In the documentary, *Stonewall Uprising*, Fred Sargeant explains, "Three articles of clothing had to be of your gender," but various individuals who described themselves as "drag queens" expressed that the clothing of their biological gender ruined the outfit, meaning many would not obey this expectation.

The owner of the Stonewall Inn used various tactics to circumvent the laws limiting LGBT+ people. The Inn's owner, during 1969, was an infamous Mafia don known as "Fat Tony," had no interest in encouraging socialization between homosexuals. "Fat Tony and his

associates operated the Stonewall as a private club. They opened the Stonewall to make money, plain and simple." (Kuhn 66). For the party goers, it was obligatory to write their names in a book to prove to the authorities that the Inn was a "private bottle club", but the visitors who wrote their legal names were few and far between. Bar owners like Fat Tony were able to conceal the activities transpiring within the Stonewall Inn. Fat Tony bribed New York's Sixth Police Precinct monthly with approximately \$1,200 to ensure that the authorities would disregard the "goings on" in the bar. The Mafia used gay bars as fronts for their questionable work, the kind of work that put Stonewall under fire. Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine and his unit, the Division of the Public Morals, had their hands full with a case of international bond theft, a disgusting financial crime. The police decided to raid the bar because the theft was linked to the Inn, not because of the LGBT+ activity within it. Little did the patrons know that the bar would be stormed, but the police knew it was important to put an end to the illegal business, once and for all.

The dark hours of June 28th did not start differently than any other. The popular tunes were dancing out of the jukebox. Patrons were flailing about with each other, drinking in the moment, wanting to preserve these drips of freedom forever. Many people at the Stonewall Inn understood that when the bar's bright lights washed over them, the police were entering the bar. In these cases, they knew to either run for their dignity, or be arrested. LGBT+ individuals faced indescribable experiences with police officers who mistreated them as they arrested them and placed them in custody. Furthermore, newspapers reported on police records, thereby publishing patrons' names and home addresses, which identified individuals as gay and could prove disastrous for them. Every aspect of a gay person's life was attached to a

When the stinging lights flooded their eyes, they knew their safe haven was being invaded by the most stubborn blockade of freedom; the police. "But tonight, the patrons of the Stonewall Inn were angry and would not be taking any flack." (Poehlmann 11-12) "This was not the way gays were supposed to behave when they were arrested, and the officers started shoving them with their nightsticks." described Franklin Tenn, an eyewitness to the riot. The handcuffed party goers blew kisses at the growing crowd, started dancing, and even grabbed or slapped the officer's rear ends. One policeman became so irritated that he began repeatedly cracking a woman over the head with his nightstick. As his lashes continued, the mass' voice started to build. "People in the crowd yelled at the police to stop. The officers responded by telling them to get off the street. Someone started throwing pocket change at the officers, and others began rocking the (police) wagon. Then, from the back of the crowd, beer cans and bottles flew through the air," continues eyewitness, Franklin Tenn.

By now, the police had realised that there was something happening at the Stonewall Inn, something powered by anger and justice stored inside the people's heads, now breaking open and erupting into the air. The police on the scene called in backup, unable to control the crowd. The community now knew their true strength and the hold they had upon the police. The tension between the authorities and citizens finally clashed, making something long overdue unravel (Poehlmann).

At some point, the crowd snapped and broke free of its semi-civilized demeanor. Somewhere in the overflowing Christopher Street, a cluster of people had set fire to trash cans, throwing them about, giving the night a luminous hue. At this point, the crowd started to steam,

spilling out around the entire block. Seymour Pine, one of the police officers at the riots describes his emotions during the event: "Well, I had to act like I wasn't nervous. That this was normal stuff. But everybody knew it wasn't normal stuff and everyone was on edge and that was the worst part of it because you knew they were on edge..." Pine later states, "The moment you stepped out that door there would be hundreds facing you. It was terrifying. It was as bad as any situation that I had met in during the army, had just as much to worry about." John O'Brien, a gay community member who participated in the Stonewall riots says, " This was the first time I could actually sense, not only see them fearful, I could sense them fearful... Our goal was to hurt those police. I wanted to kill those cops for the anger I had in me. And the cops got that..." (*Stonewall Uprising*).

Even with all of the chaos in the street surrounding the bar, the inside was just as confusing and full of energy. People attempted to give authorities their identification, but both the patron and the officers knew they were not authentic. Many people scoured the Inn for possible exits that avoided the wall of nightsticks, handcuffs, and shunning. Some slipped out of windows, reaching the safety of the shadows of Greenwich Village, while others were trapped in the walls of their hideaway.

Throughout the arrests, the police wielding the handcuffs did not treat the bar patrons with respect. An overwhelming factor in how the patrons were treated was how the individual was dressed or how they identified versus what mattered to the authorities, their biological gender. "The police liked to separate patrons: women to one side, men to another, and gender-nonconforming people to the back near the bathrooms. It was a common scare tactic aimed at cross-dressing patrons. Officers threatened to examine their clothing and bodies if they

would not confess to the crime of cross-dressing. If they resisted, women officers took them into the bathroom for a strip search. It was a humiliating ritual" (Poehlmann 10-11).

Although the nonviolent approach the LGBT+ people had used in the beginning of the night had faded, the people continued to taunted the police. "... I remember moving into the open space and grabbing onto two of my friends and we started singing and doing a kick line. And we were singing: 'We are the Village girls, we wear our hair in curls, we wear our dungarees, above our nellie knees.' This was in front of the police." Martin Boyce, a participant in the uprising, remembers from the event. The entire street shouted, fists jolting in the air, spit hot with a revolution. And through the singing, shouting, and crowd of revolutionaries, the police continued to beat anyone they could reach bloody with their nightsticks: "The police...(were) handling their nightsticks like swords, cracking bystanders over the head and beating rioters bloody" (Poehlmann 63).

Eventually, the raid had become too violent, too vicious, causing many of the heterosexual and homosexual participants to escape with their bodies intact. As the night faded into its latest hours, the crowd that had started as a gaggle of drag queens, that had then multiplied into thousands of bodies, had now dwindled into a lonesome street, still warm from the disorganized revolt. The Stonewall Riots proved that the LGBT+ community would not compromise their rights nor their equality: "... Christopher Street had belonged to the LGBT crowd, and although they could not keep it, a seed had been planted in their minds" (Poehlmann 63).

The impact of the Stonewall Riots were undeniable. People could finally live freely, feel as though their expression could ring out for all to hear. It was truly a sudden and impending

explosion of social activism in favor of the minority. Countless people started to march with and in support of the gay movement and pressed the nation for equality. People could be unbound and let their inner self through. Many of the homosexuals in the Greenwich Village had taken part in the Stonewall Riots, so now they could enjoy the fruit of that night. The gay population could finally see the years of hatred and hiding burn into ash all around them, and be recognized as human. "But for ... those who simply felt they had been waiting their whole lives for the revolution, this moment was not to be wasted" (Poehlmann 74).

After years of resilience, marches, and sobering setbacks, the nation started to melt it's rigid icy shoulder that it held against homosexuality. State by state, case by case, America was warming to the idea that love is love, and that love is blind. Though the mass' complete heart is still very closed, it is slowly hinging open. The gay movement has crossed many bridges, yet few bridges crumbled under their feet. There have been numerous, blood boiling attacks against gay communities. Probably the most infamous of these, The Pulse Club shooting, the shooter killed 49 people and wounded 58 others, making it the largest and most devastating shooting at the time. The sole reason that the club was targeted with such hatred was the fact that it was a bar for gay men: "...(our) community was changed forever. We grieve with the victims, their families... and we thank you all for the outpouring of support and love that is helping us through this tragic time" (The Pulse Club official website). The repulsive truth is that until everyone realizes that homosexuality is not a disease, it is not something to be ashamed of, it is not something to be compromised, it is not something to be threatened by, many people will be deprived of what it really is: love

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Green, Lucy. "Stonewall and Its Impact on the Gay Liberation Movement." *Digital Library of America*, dp.la.

This page on the Digital Library of America has links to various primary sources on the riots and people involved. I found this useful because it gave me valuable and reliable information on the event. The sources include photographs and letters from the era and the post Stonewall time period.

History.com Staff. "Stonewall Riots." *History*, A+E Networks, 2017, www.history.com. Accessed 8 Jan. 2018.

This website gives a description of the bar prior to the police raid, also including the riots in the article. I thought this website to be particularly trustworthy because History is an official and very reliable resource. I used this mainly as a reference, but also to further understand the truth about the event because due to the sensitivity of the topic, the facts are often clouded.

Huffington Post. Oath Ink, 29 Sept. 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com.

This is a website post that I used for a photograph of the crowd during these riots; for that reason, I have this listed as a primary source. I also include a fragment of text from the post, yet I would site this daily for the photograph. I felt as though the photograph was very impactful and would leave the reader with a nagging inside, remembering the photograph.

Pbs. WGBH Educational Foundation, www.pbs.org.

This article on the official PBS website includes a surplus of interviews from people either included or who witnessed the Stonewall riots. Even though the article itself is not a primary source, I used the quotes in the article that are classified as primary quotes. I found this resource important because of the impact the quotes can hold on readers.

Secondary Sources

Ambrosini, Joseph. "An Amazing 1969 Account of the Stonewall Uprising." *The Atlantic*, www.theatlantic.com.

This news article is another source where the writer covers the events at Stonewall during the riots. I used this as a resource because it is a news article, implying that there is strict authenticity required for public news.

D'Emelio, John, et al. *Creating Change*.

This book includes topics like sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights of the LGBT+ community. It helped me understand both sides of the gay movement and the specific goings on during the summer nights at Stonewall.

Kuhn, Betsy. *Gay Power!: The Stonewall Riots and the Gay Rights Movement, 1969*. Minneapolis, Twenty-First Century Books, 2011.

GAY POWER is a book that describes the gay power riots and movements, centered around Stonewall. This source is not a primary source but is helpful for getting to know what happened on that warm New York night.

Orlando Gay Bars. www.pulseorlandoclub.com.

The notation is so sparse because on this webpage for the attacked Pulse Club in Orlando, there is no article, just a brief word on the subject of the shooting, which, at the time, was the largest mass shooting. I used this text as a quote because the sentence stuck with me and I feel as though it would make the same connection with another reader.

Poehlmann, Tristan, and Chris Freeman. *The Stonewall Riots: The Fight for LGBT Rights*.

Minneapolis, Essential Library, an imprint of Adbo Publishing, 2017. This book is one of the few books about Stonewall that is written at an easier level. These pages take the reader through the Riots prior to the Stonewall Inn, the Stonewall event and the immediate and long term legacy.

Rede, George. "The Stonewall Riots." *Oregon Live*, Oregon Live LLC, 27 June 2009, www.oregonlive.com.

This source is an article in the Oregonian news service. I used this publication as a reference for my knowledge about the events at Stonewall.

The Stonewall Inn. thestonewallinnnyc.com.

The official website for the Stonewall Inn has little historical information on the riots, but I am using the first words on the website as my paper's title. I am doing this to show that one should not get caught up in the controversy of the movement, but remember where it hits hardest: home.

"Stonewall in Project to Preserve Stories Behind a Gay Rights Monument." *New York Times*, New York Times Company, 17 June 2017, www.nytimes.com.

I used this reliable news article as a reference and quote source. I find it reliable because The New York Times is very well known and very popular, meaning many people trust it.

Stonewall Uprising. PBS, 25 Apr. 2011. *PBS*, WGBH, www.pbs.org. Accessed 14 Jan. 2018.

I watched this documentary/television broadcast not only to have an understanding on the event itself, but because of its extensive section on the way americans viewed homosexuals and homosexuality. After watching this video, I can describe the horrors of the treatment towards homosexuals during the years before the riots in 1969 and disturbing teachings and practices against homosexuality.

Urofsky, Melvin I. "Bowers V. Hardwick." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2 Sept. 2014, www.britannica.com. Accessed 11 Jan. 2018.

I used this webpage to further understand the laws against homosexuality and the specific cases that were held against gays. This also helped me understand how the legal system "dealt" with cases regarding homosexuals.