150 Years of LGBT History

For over a century and a half, New York City has been a major center for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) life.

Although the rebellion at New York City’s Stonewall Inn in 1969 was a turning point in the modern gay rights movement, numerous other sites that played a role in LGBT history before and after Stonewall are designated landmarks or located in historic districts. This slideshow, in honor of LGBT Pride Month, presents a decade-by-decade sampling of some of these buildings and sites.

Names highlighted in pink denote individuals where scholarship has indicated them as LGBT. Many of the sites included in this slideshow are privately-owned and not open to the public. LPC asks that readers please respect the privacy of the current owners and occupants.

For further information about the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission visit our website at nyc.gov/landmarks

This presentation was prepared by LPC staff Christopher D. Brazee, Gale Harris, and Jay Shockley.
Pfaff’s was a Rathskeller-like beer and wine cellar restaurant, extending into the sidewalk vaults of the Coleman House Hotel (1858-59), 645-647 Broadway, which was operated at this location in 1859-64 by the German-born proprietor Charles Ignatius Pfaff. It became a favorite haunt of the Bohemians of the 1850s, including artists, writers, and actors, who congregated around Henry Clapp, Jr., founder and editor of the *New-York Saturday Press*, and Ada Clare, who became one of his writers. Walt Whitman, a journalist for some 15 years in Brooklyn and Manhattan, was a central figure among the Pfaff Bohemians from 1859 to 1862. He had begun writing poetry, which he first collected into *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Considered by many at the time to be controversial and “offensive,” his sensual poetry was promoted by Clapp. Around 1859, Whitman wrote 12 famously homoerotic “Calamus” poems, celebrating the manly love of comrades, that were included in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. This poetry made Whitman iconic in the U.S. and Europe as one of the first people to openly express the concept of men loving men. He left for Washington, D.C., in 1862 to attend to Civil War soldiers. In an unfinished poem, Whitman remembered the “vault at Pfaff’s where the drinkers and laughers meet to eat and drink and carouse, while on the walk immediately overhead pass the myriad feet of Broadway…” Although the sidewalk vault space of Pfaff’s has been destroyed, the basement, along with the rest of the Coleman House Hotel, survives. This is the only known New York City location associated with Whitman, other than his (altered) Wallabout house, that is extant.
Sculptor Emma Stebbins (1815-1882) designed her masterpiece, the Bethesda Fountain, during the 1860s while she was living in Rome with her lover, the American actress Charlotte Cushman. Stebbins was one of a number of lesbian artists, including novelist-journalist Matilda Hays and sculptors Harriet Hosmer and Edmonia Lewis, who formed a circle of “female jolly bachelors” around Cushman, a leading star of the American and British stages. They were among the first generation of women to forge a career in the arts and to form same-sex relationships. Stebbins’ friend, Louisa May Alcott took up these themes in her books and included a portrait of Cushman (Miss Cameron) in Jo’s Boys.

Entitled the Angel of the Waters, Stebbins’ sculptural group depicts the biblical “Angel of Bethesda” resting on a base surrounded by four cherubs representing “health,” “purity,” “peace,” and “temperance.” This theme was considered a particularly appropriate symbol of the healthful benefits provided by the Croton Aqueduct water stored in Central Park reservoirs. The Bethesda Fountain is the earliest public artwork by a woman in New York City.
An apartment on the upper floors of this building, erected by Aaron D. Patchin in 1852, was the last home and office of Murray H. Hall (1840-1901), a Tammany politico, who lived as a man for over 30 years, but after death was revealed to have been a woman, creating an international press furor and attracting the attention of pioneering sexologist Havelock Ellis. According to one source, Hall (nee Mary Anderson) was born in Scotland and about age 16 began dressing as a man, taking the name John Anderson. Anderson married young, but had a roving eye and an angry wife who disclosed Anderson’s gender to the police. Fearing arrest, Anderson fled to America in 1870 and assumed the name Murray H. Hall. In December 1872, Hall married Cecilia (Celia) Florence Lowe, a former medical student later school teacher, at the Church of the Strangers in Manhattan. By 1874 Hall had established an employment agency chiefly representing domestics. The couple moved several times but remained close to the Jefferson Market police court, since Hall had also become a bail bondsman. A member of the Iroquois political club and the General Committee of Tammany, Hall played poker and pool with city and state officials and other political leaders and was often able to secure appointments for friends. According to the New York Times, they regarded Hall as a “‘man about town,’ a bon vivant, all-round ‘good fellow’… never exciting the remotest suspicion as to her real sex.”
Alice Austen (1866-1952), a photography pioneer, lived for much of her life in this early 18th century farmhouse, which was purchased in 1844 by her grandfather, who renamed it Clear Comfort and remodeled it in the Gothic Revival style (additions 1846, c. 1852, 1860-78). Most active as a photographer between the 1880s and the 1920s, Austen produced about 8,000 images, primarily of friends, family, and neighbors engaged in such activities as playing tennis, bicycling, and picnicking. Among the photographs are images of Austen and friends dancing together, embracing in bed, and cross-dressing, which were unique for their time and have become iconic for the LGBT community. In 1899, Austen formed an intimate relationship with Gertrude Amelia Tate (1871-1962), who came to live at Clear Comfort in 1917. After losing most of their money in the stock market crash, Alice and Trude ran a teashop at Clear Comfort. Alice lost the property to foreclosure in 1935 and the women were forced to separate, Alice living at various nursing homes, Trude with disapproving relatives. The house became a public museum in 1975. To visit view: http://aliceausten.org/visit/
Historian George Chauncey, in his pioneering book *Gay New York* (1994), identified the 1890s as one of the earliest periods when one very specific aspect of the emerging gay male community -- the subculture of flamboyantly effeminate “fairies”-- became noticed by a wider public. By 1890, **The Slide, 157 Bleecker Street**, was popularly identified as “New York’s ‘worst dive’” because of the fairies gathered there. A “slide,” in prostitutes’ jargon, was “an establishment where male homosexuals dressed as women and solicited men.” Fairies were often entertainers who joined well-paying customers in their booths. The Slide was attacked by local newspapers. The conservative *New York Press* in 1890 called it “the wickedest place in New York.” The *New York Herald*, urging the D.A. to close it in 1892, noted that its business was so popular that adjacent buildings were made into adjuncts. The **Black Rabbit, 183 Bleecker Street**, was personally raided in 1900 by Anthony Comstock of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, who fumed that he had “never before raided a place so wicked, and that ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’ would blush for shame at hearing to what depths of vice its habitués had descended.” “Dives” such as these offered a rare haven for so-called “fairies” and men who frequented such spots.

All-male housing accommodations created by 19th-century New York reformers to provide low-cost housing for working men were also, according to Chauncey, “major centers for the gay world and served to introduce men to gay life.” That **Mills House No. 1** (1896, Ernest Flagg), **156 Bleecker Street**, with its hundreds of clean small rooms, restaurant, and lounges became a favored abode for working-class gay men is suggested by the frequency in which men arrested on homosexual charges listed it as their residence at the magistrate’s courts. It continued as a men’s hotel, known after 1949 as the Greenwich Hotel, until the 1970s.
One of New York City’s most historically and culturally significant large 19th-century assembly halls, Webster Hall (1886-87, 1892, Charles Rentz, Jr.) became famous in the 1910s and 20s for its masquerade balls that attracted the Village’s bohemian population, which nicknamed it the “Devil’s Playhouse.” The hall was significant as a gathering place for the city’s early 20th-century lesbian and gay community, who felt welcome to attend the balls in drag, and then sponsored their own events by the 1920s. Among the many notables who attended events here at this time were artist Charles Demuth and writer Djuna Barnes.
By the 1920s, the South Village emerged as one of the first neighborhoods in New York that allowed, and gradually accepted, an open gay and lesbian presence. Eve Addams’ Tearoom at 129 MacDougal Street was a popular after-theater club run in 1925-26 by Polish-Jewish lesbian emigre Eva Kotchever (Czlotcheber), with a sign that read “Men are admitted but not welcome.” Convicted of “obscenity” (for Lesbian Love, a collection of her short stories) and disorderly conduct, she was deported. Later popular lesbian bars were: Louis’ Luncheon (1930s-40s), 116 MacDougal Street; Tony Pastor’s Downtown (1939-67), 130 West 3rd Street, which was raided on morals charges in 1944 for permitting lesbians to “loiter” on the premises, but survived with mob backing until the State Liquor Authority revoked its license in 1967; jazz club Swing Rendevous (c. 1940-65), 117 MacDougal Street; Ernie’s Restaurant/ Three Ring Circus (c. 1940-62), 76 West 3rd Street; Mona’s (c. late 1940s-early 1950s), 135 West 3rd Street, later The Purple Onion (c. 1965-72); Pony Stable Inn (c. late 1940s-1968), 150 West 4th Street, remembered by African-American lesbian poet Audre Lorde in Zami; and Bonnie & Clyde’s (c. 1972-81), 82 West 3rd Street.

Portofino (c. 1959-75), 206 Thompson Street, an Italian restaurant that was a discreet Friday meeting place for lesbians, was where Edith S. Windsor met Thea Clara Spyer in 1963. Married in Canada in 2007, they were together until Thea’s death in 2009, after which Edie received a large inheritance tax bill. She sued, challenging the federal Defense of Marriage Act, which was overturned by the Supreme Court in a path-breaking decision in 2013.
The Society for Human Rights, founded in 1924 in Chicago by the Bavarian-born Henry Gerber (1892-1972), was the first American homosexual rights organization. Gerber had been an American soldier occupying Germany following World War I, and had come in contact with the rights movement there. Within a year of its creation, the Society for Human Rights disbanded due to Gerber’s arrest, and although he was acquitted, he lost his post office job. Gerber re-enlisted and spent much of the 1930s on Governor’s Island, where he wrote essays on homosexuality and published several newsletters. He continued the fight for gay rights for the rest of his life.
Nearly every important African-American entertainer played the Apollo Theater (1913-14, George Keister) during its heyday as a showcase for black performers from the 1930s into the 1970s, including such gay, lesbian, and bisexual luminaries as Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, Little Richard, Johnny Mathis, Alex Bradford, and James Cleveland. During the 1960s, the drag Jewel Box Revue, America’s first traveling troupe of gender impersonators featuring a racially integrated cast of 25 men and one woman, was a popular attraction. The revue’s sole woman, MC Stormé DeLarverié, took part in the Stonewall rebellion (some credit her with throwing the first punch) and rose through the ranks to become vice president of the Stonewall Veterans’ Association.
The Moorish Revival style, cast-stone-clad Louis N. Jaffe Art Theater Building (1925-26, Harrison G. Wiseman) is one of the most tangible reminders of the heyday of 20th-century Yiddish theater in New York. It was constructed and named for a Brooklyn lawyer/Jewish civic leader who intended it as a permanent home for Maurice Schwartz’s eminent Yiddish Art Theater. Although this troupe performed here for only four seasons, this theater remained a Yiddish playhouse nearly the entire time between its opening and 1945.

After its Yiddish heyday, the theater (under a variety of names) continued to have an incredibly rich theater, and LGBT, history. From 1945 to 1953, the downstairs portion of the building was the Mafia-controlled 181 Club, called “the homosexual Copacabana,” one of the most luxurious gay and lesbian clubs in the U.S., featuring lavish shows of female impersonators. It was particularly renowned as the off-Broadway Phoenix Theater from 1953 to 1961, featuring the work of directors including Tony Richardson and such performers as Montgomery Clift, Will Geer, Farley Granger, Eva LeGallienne, and Roddy McDowell. After the front offices were converted into apartments, three notable gay residents were Jackie Curtis, drag “superstar” in Andy Warhol films, photographer Peter Hujar, and artist David Wojnarowicz.
Jazz great **Billy Strayhorn** (1915-1967) lived in three designated Landmarks over the course of his life in New York. As a young musician and composer, newly hired to work for the Duke Ellington orchestra in 1938, Strayhorn moved into the Ellington family apartment at **409 Edgecombe Avenue**. It was there that Strayhorn met his lover, jazz pianist **Aaron Bridgers** (1918-2003). In 1939 Strayhorn and Bridgers moved to an apartment in the bottom floor of **315 Convent Avenue**, where Strayhorn resided until 1950 (Bridgers having moved to Paris in 1947). During these years, Strayhorn wrote “Take the A Train” (1941), “Lotus Blossom” (1946), and “Lush Life” (1949), as well as most of the music for the musicals *Beggars Holiday* and *Jump for Joy*.” Late in his career, in 1961, Strayhorn moved to an apartment in the **Master Building** overlooking Riverside Drive. There, Strayhorn continued his long collaboration with Ellington and began a new relationship with graphic designer **Bill Grove**.

One of Strayhorn’s friends recalled “the most amazing thing about Billy Strayhorn to me was that he had the strength to make an extraordinary decision—that is, the decision not to hide the fact that he was a homosexual. And he did this in the 1940s, when nobody but nobody did that.”
In the 1950s and ‘60s, Greenwich Village was home to celebrated authors, Civil Rights activists, friends, and early Gay-Rights pioneers James Baldwin (1924-1987) and Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965). Baldwin was openly gay and many of his works—notably Giovanni’s Room (1956, his second novel), Another Country (1962), and Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone (1968)—centered on gay or bisexual characters and frankly explored issues of identity, race, and homosexuality. Hansberry, meanwhile, joined the Daughters of Bilitis homophile organization in 1957 and penned several essay-length letters about such topics as sexual identity, feminism, and homophobia to its publication, The Ladder.

Baldwin called himself a “transatlantic commuter,” living much of his life abroad while maintaining a series of residences in New York City. From around 1957-63 he rented an apartment in the Greenwich Village tenement at 81 Horatio Street (1870, William Graul). He later purchased a remodeled row house at 137 West 71st Street (1961, H. Russell Kenyon) in 1965 on the Upper West Side, which he owned until his death in 1987.

Hansberry moved into an apartment in the row house at 337 Bleecker Street (1861) in 1953 shortly after she married Robert B. Nemiroff. In 1960, using a portion of the profits from her wildly successful play A Raisin in the Sun (1959), Hansberry and Nemiroff—who later divorced amicably—purchased the updated row house at 112 Waverly Place (1826; 1916, Adolph E. Nast). Hansberry became involved with one of the tenants in the building, Dorothy Secules, and the two remained partners until Hansberry’s premature death from cancer in 1965.
Julius’s Bar
159 West 10th Street, Manhattan
Greenwich Village Historic District

Julius’s occupies the ground floor of what had originally been a private residence, built in 1845 and later altered. By the late 19th century a bar had opened on the premises, and by the 1950s it began attracting a gay clientele, despite how they were treated. Concerned about the New York State Liquor Authority’s prohibition against serving liquor to “disorderly” patrons, and the SLA’s assumption that homosexuals were *per se* in that category, the bar’s management actively pursued a policy of harassing and evicting gay men.

On April 21, 1966 members of the New York Mattachine Society staged a “Sip-In” at Julius’s to challenge the SLA regulations. The Mattachine members’ tactic was to enter the bar, declare their sexual orientation, and order a drink—knowing they would be turned away. The group then sued; their case prompted an investigation by the New York City Human Rights Commission and eventually they won a favorable court decision stating that gay people had the right to peacefully assemble. The Sip-In was therefore a significant pre-Stonewall assertion of LGBT rights and paved the way for the legalization of gay bars, as well as later political action.

The Greenwich Village Historic District was designated in April 1969, three years after the Sip-In. Julius’s remains in operation.
The Stonewall Inn is one of the most significant sites associated with LGBT history in New York City and the entire country. In June 1969, a routine police raid on this gay bar in Greenwich Village resulted in active resistance, setting off five days of rioting and demonstrations, with unprecedented cries for “gay pride” and “gay power.” The Stonewall uprising sparked the next phase of the Gay Liberation Movement, which involved more radical political action during the 1970s. Groups such as the Gay Liberation Front, the Gay Activists Alliance, Radicalesbians, and the Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries were organized within months of the uprising.

The events at Stonewall also inspired the LGBT pride movement. The first anniversary of the uprising was commemorated in June 1970 as Christopher Street Liberation Day; the main event was a march from Greenwich Village to Central Park, now widely considered the first ever Gay Pride Parade. The celebration has since evolved into the internationally-recognized Gay Pride Month, which this slideshow honors.

The two buildings that comprised the Stonewall Inn were originally built in the 1840s as stables. They are within the Greenwich Village Historic District, which was designated on April 29, 1969—just months before the uprising that catalyzed the LGBT rights movement. The Stonewall was the first site listed on the National Register of Historic Places (1999) for its LGBT history, and is currently the only LGBT National Historic Landmark in the U.S.
Gay Activists Alliance Firehouse
99 Wooster Street, Manhattan
SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District

The former firehouse at 99 Wooster Street in SoHo served as the headquarters of the Gay Activists Alliance in 1971-74. The GAA was formed in 1969 when a number of members broke away from the more radical Gay Liberation Front. The GAA was primarily a political activist organization whose exclusive purpose was to advance LGBT civil and social rights. It lobbied for the passage of local civil rights laws, banning police entrapment and harassment, the creation of fair employment and housing legislation, and the repeal of sodomy and solicitation laws.

Many of the group's activities were planned at the Firehouse, including sit-ins and picket lines; perhaps their most famous tactic was the "zap," a direct, public confrontation with a political figure regarding LGBT rights designed to gain media attention. The Firehouse also served as an important community center and hosted numerous social events, particularly the Saturday night dance parties and Firehouse Flicks, a movie series selected by activist and film buff Vito Russo.

The architectural appearance of the Firehouse dates from 1881 when Napoleon LeBrun designed a new facade for an existing firehouse. It was designated as part of the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District on August 14, 1973, while the Gay Activists Alliance occupied the building, and their lower-case lambda symbol can be seen in this photo from the LPC archives.
Audre Lorde Residence
207 St. Paul’s Avenue, Staten Island
St. Paul’s Avenue/Stapleton Heights Historic District

Audre Lorde (1934-92), the acclaimed black lesbian feminist writer activist, resided with her partner psychology professor Frances Clayton and Lorde’s two children in this neo-Colonial style house at 207 St. Paul’s Avenue (1898, Otto P. Loeffler) in the St. Paul’s Avenue-Stapleton Historic District from 1972 to 1987. During her years here, Lorde held professorships at Hunter College and John Jay College and wrote several books of poetry and essays as well as her renowned autobiographical works, The Cancer Journals (1980) and Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982). In addition to her writing and teaching, Lorde, with Barbara Smith and Cherrie Moraga, co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Lorde was internationally renowned lecturer and activist for people of color and women’s rights as well as the LGBT community. She made numerous appearances on TV and in documentaries, including Before Stonewall. She was named New York State poet laureate in 1991 and has been the subject of three biographical films.
Westbeth Artists’ Housing
West, Bethune, Bank, and Washington Streets, Manhattan

The Western Electric Co. built an office/factory building in the Far West Village for telephone-related equipment in 1896-1903; it ceased use as a manufacturing plant after 1913 and was largely the headquarters of Western Electric’s Engineering Department. In 1925, it became Bell Telephone Laboratories, for research and development for both the American Telegraph & Telephone Co. and Western Electric, and the complex was expanded in 1924-29. Research work that resulted in many significant innovations and inventions was conducted here. After Bell Labs vacated the property in 1966, it was converted in 1968-70, through the National Endowment for the Arts and J.M. Kaplan Fund, into Westbeth Artists’ Housing, with subsidized, affordable studio living quarters for artists. This was the first and largest publicly and privately-funded artists’ housing project in the U.S. and the first major work by architect Richard Meier.

Aside from the large number of artist-residents at Westbeth over the last four decades, many of them notable, the complex has housed a number of significant organizations. The most famous of these has been the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio, located in the former penthouse auditorium of 55 Bethune Street (1924-26, McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin) from 1971 until 2010 (the company disbanded after Cunningham’s death in 2009). Since 1975, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, New York City’s first lesbian and gay synagogue (established 1973), has worshiped at 57 Bethune Street (1896-99, Cyrus L.W. Eidlitz). Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum has led the congregation since 1992.
The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center was organized in 1983 and took title to this 19th century school building in December 1984. A focal point for LGBT activities in the New York Metropolitan area, each year The Center welcomes more than 300,000 visitors and is used by over 400 community groups to host meetings, social and cultural events, and wellness and health-based programs. Over its almost 40-year history, The Center has witnessed the founding of GLAAD (formerly Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 1985), and ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, 1987), which continues to meet there. The important community service group SAGE (Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Elders) also met at The Center for over 20 years. In 1988 it housed the Quilt Workshop to create panels for the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. In 1989, for the 20th Anniversary of Stonewall, the Center presented Imaging Stonewall, a site specific installation of 50 artworks that included a mural by iconic gay artist Keith Haring in the second floor men’s room (restored 2012). In 1990 The LGBT Community Center Archive was established under the curatorship of Rich Wandel and now houses 1000s of papers, periodicals, correspondence and photographs donated by individuals and organizations. Today The Center remains a major forum for politicians and gathering place for political groups, an important center for cultural events, and a gathering place for the LGBT community in times of trouble and celebration.
Celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, the Lesbian Herstory Archives houses “the world’s largest collection of materials by and about lesbians and their communities.” Established in the Upper West Side apartment of Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel, the Archives moved in 1993 to its present location, a handsome French Renaissance style dwelling (1908, Axel Hedman) in the Park Slope Historic District. Part research facility, part museum, part community center, the Archives houses a vast library of books and journals, subject and organizational files, unpublished papers, conference proceedings, reference tools, audio-visual materials, art, and ephemera, including button and banner collections. The special collections include papers and other materials relating to such important figures as Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Barbara Gittings, Kate Clinton, and Jewel Gomez, as well as organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis, Amazon Autumn, Salsa Soul Sisters, ACT UP-NY, and the March on Washington, 1993.