GREENWICH VILLAGE AND PRE-STONEWALL LGBTQ+ LIFE

As early as the 1850s, gay men congregated in Greenwich Village. Pfaff’s, 647 Broadway at Bleeker Street, was a haunt for “bohemians” such as Walt Whitman and for men seeking men. Bleeker Street in the 1890s had a number of “fairy” bars, often subject to raids, where cross-dressing young men solicited male customers. The picturesque Village prior to World War I became popular for the artistic and socially and politically progressive. Middle-class gay men and lesbians appropriated their own spaces despite some opposition from fellow Villagers.

The Village emerged as the first neighborhood with a significant LGBTQ+ population in New York City and one of the first nationally. Through the 1960s, the area south of Washington Square was the location of many bars and clubs that welcomed or merely tolerated LGBTQ+ patrons. Gay bars were crucial to creating a sense of community and cultivating political action in an era of discrimination.

STONENWALL: THE SHOT HEARD ROUND THE WORLD

The 1969 Stonewall Uprising was a key turning point in the history of the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement in the U.S. The uprising dramatically changed the nearly two-decade-old movement by inspiring LGBTQ+ people throughout the country to assertively organize on a broader scale. In the years that followed, hundreds of new organizations were formed on campuses and in cities across the country as a younger generation of activists came out of the closet and demanded full and equal rights. As historian Lillian Faderman wrote, Stonewall was “the shot heard round the world...crucial because it sounded the rally for the movement.”

In the early hours of Saturday, June 28, 1969, police raided the “private” Mafia-run Stonewall Inn. The bar, one of the few that allowed dancing, was popular with a younger, diverse crowd. Instead of dispersing, the expected result of a routine raid, a crowd consisting of bar patrons, street youth, and neighborhood residents became increasingly angry and began chanting, throwing objects as the police made arrests. Police called in reinforcements but were barricaded inside the bar. For hours the police tried to clear the neighboring streets while the crowd fought back. The rebellion lasted over the course of six days to July 3. In the immediate aftermath of Stonewall, the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance were formed in NYC in 1969. STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), an early transgender group, was founded in 1970 by Martha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. Within two years, LGBTQ+ rights groups had been started in nearly every major city in the U.S.

LGBTQ+ DISCRIMINATION AND ACTIVISM

The LGBTQ+ community historically suffered harassment, discrimination, and oppression from their faith, organized religion, psychiatric professionals, and government. After Prohibition the New York State Liquor Authority (SLA) in 1934 was granted the power to revoke the license of bar owners who “permit [their] premises to become disorderly” and the mere presence of gay people was considered disorderly. LGBTQ+ people could not touch, dance together, make direct eye contact, or wear clothes of the opposite gender without fearing arrest. For women, people of color, youth, and those who were gender nonconforming it was even more challenging. The Mafia opened bars as members-only “bottle clubs.” No license was needed and a vicious cycle began of Mafia-police payoffs. Police harassment of gay bars and establishments were top concerns of the LGBTQ+ community in the 1960s. The Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis were two of the nation’s first gay rights groups whose early political activism helped lead to the Stonewall Uprising and changes immediately after.

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DIVERSITY OF THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

The LGBTQ+ community broadly encompasses all ages, races, ethnicities, nationalities, class levels, and gender identities in the five boroughs of New York City. The events leading to Stonewall, the uprising itself, and the political organizing afterward were due to a diverse range of participants and activists. This tour represents a selection of sites associated with LGBTQ+ history that are crucial because it sounded the rally for the movement. —Lillian Faderman, historian, The Gay Revolution

RELEVANCE OF STONEWALL TODAY

Stonewall has taken on shifting meanings. When it was in operation in 1967-69, it was a Mafia-run bar, and representative of the societal harassment against the LGBTQ+ community. It has evolved into a National Historic Landmark and National Monument with worldwide symbolic resonance. It is a shrine, symbol, rallying place for civil rights and solidarity. It is a place for mourning and remembrance. It was the site for the rally after the Snake Pit arrests and the fist Pride March in 1970. The Anita Bryant protests in 1977, and demonstrations for LGBTQ+ civil rights in the 1980s. More recently, people celebrated here for the legalization of same-sex marriage in New York State in 2011, the overturning of the federal Defense of Marriage Act by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2013, and after the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage nationally in 2015. People commemorated here the victims of the 2016 mass shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida.

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3. NYC AIDS MEMORIAL AT ST. VINCENT’S TRIANGLE AND ENVIRONS, 1920S TO PRESENT

Since the early 20th century, this neighborhood has been home to many LGBTQ+ people, establishments, and organizations, and is closely associated with the AIDS epidemic. By the 1980s, Greenwich Village was the epicenter of the disease in the City. Since 1983, New York’s LGBTQ Community Center (208 West 13th Street) has served hundreds of thousands of people—this is where ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and other groups were organized and met. The former St. Vincent’s Hospital had the first and largest AIDS ward on the East Coast. The New York City AIDS Memorial, at the intersection of 7th and Greenwich Avenues and 12th Street, honors the more than 100,000 New Yorkers who have died of AIDS and recognizes the contributions of caregivers and activists.


THE THREE LGBTQ+ HISTORIC AREAS OF INTEREST

1. WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK AND ENVIRONS, 1890s TO 1960s

By the 1890s, Bleeker Street was known for its various “dives” attracting men. The block of MacDougal Street just south of Washington Square emerged as the cultural and social center of Greenwich Village’s bohemian set, with an openly gay and lesbian presence in the 1910s. Through the 1960s, the South Village was the location of many LGBTQ+ bars and commercial establishments. Numerous LGBTQ+ writers and artists made the Village their home. Meetings at several area churches in the 1960s fostered LGBTQ+ rights activism.

129 MacDougal Street, c. 1939. Photo credit: NYC Dept. of Taxes, Municipal Archives.

2. HUDSON RIVER WATERFRONT AND PIERS, 1890s TO PRESENT

For over a century, the Greenwich Village waterfront along the Hudson River, including the Christopher Street Pier at West 10th and West Streets, has been a destination for the LGBTQ+ community. It evolved from a place of maritime commerce and waterfront saloons, to a popular locale for cruising and sex for gay men by the 1960s, to an important refuge for marginalized queer youth of color today.

The Grease Line pier located at Christopher Street in an undated photo. Photo credit: Milstein Division, New York Public Library.

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1. **CHRISTOPHER PARK**

The park, designated the Stonewall National Monument by President Obama in 2016, played a key role during the Stonewall Uprising and remains an important site for the LGBTQ+ community. During the 1960s it was a popular hangout for LGBTQ+ youth. In the 1980s, landscape architect Philip Winn, who later died of AIDS, created the park design. George Segal’s sculpture “Gay Liberation” (1980), placed here in 1992, is a focal point of the park. Activist Bruce Voeller (1944-1994) proposed the idea to place a statue in the park commemorating LGBT+ liberation.

2. **CHRISTOPHER STREET**

For decades, gay men had gone to the west end of Christopher Street at the Hudson River. Christopher Street became one of the best-identified LGBTQ+ spaces by 1963. Its popularity was sustained in the 1980s by many LGBTQ+ owned-and -friendly bars and businesses. Today, the Christopher Street pier and waterfront has become an important area for LGBT+ youth of color.

3. **STONEWALL**

(51-53 Christopher Street, future location of the Stonewall National Monument Visitor Center, opening June 2024, at No. 51, and Stonewall Inn at No. 53)

The Stonewall Inn, at the time of the 1969 uprising, consisted of two former horse stable buildings that were combined in 1930 with one facade, now mostly intact from its 1969 appearance. The bar closed immediately after the Stonewall Uprising and was replaced by a number of eating establishments in 1967-68, a bar named Stonewall operated out of No. 51. The current Stonewall bar opened in 1993 and has operated under the current management since 2006. It is open to the public.

4. **MATTACHINE SOCIETY**

(59 Christopher Street, currently Kettle of Fish)

Founded in Los Angeles in 1951, with a New York chapter in 1955, the Mattachine Society was a leading American “homophile” (gay and lesbian) group. At the time it was considered radical. Mattachine challenged the State Liquor Authority’s ban on serving gay people at the famous “Stonewall Inn” in 1966, and worked to stop police entrapment of gay man. This was Mattachine’s last offices, from 1972 until it dissolved in 1976. This location is poignant, as Mattachine was replaced in influence by younger and more radical activist LGBTQ+ groups after Stonewall.

5. **THE DUCHESS**

(101 7th Avenue South, currently Two Boots Pizza)

This space held several popular lesbian bars from 1972 to the 1990s. The Duchess was the first and was closed in 1982 when the city revoked its liquor license under Mayor Edward Koch.

6. **RIDICULOUS THEATRICAL CO.**

(1 Sheridan Square, currently the Axis Theatre Company)

The basement Café Society (1938-50) was downtown’s first racially open to the public. In 1942, the lesbian novelists Patricia Highsmith was a regular here. It is open to the public.

9. **STEWART’S CAFETERIA**

(7th Avenue South & Christopher Street, currently Bank of America)

Opened in 1933, Stewart’s Cafeteria became a popular bohemian gay and lesbian haunt. The large windows put gay life on full display to the late-night crowds who frequented this busy intersection at the Christopher Street subway stop. In 1935, the manager was convicted of “openly outraging public decency” here. Stewart’s was nascently depicted by famous gay artist Paul Cadmus in his painting Greenwich Village Cafeteria (1934).

10. **FEDORA**

(239 West 4th Street, vacant)

Henry and Fedora Dorato opened the restaurant Fedora in 1919 and then a basement bar the Snake Pit. Fearing police raids, Fedora operated long term) in an apartment building storefront at 291 West Street in 1967. He named it after the most prominent gay person he could think of. Oscar Wilde, the playwright. Rodwell had been a participant in the Julius “Sip-In” in 1966. In 1973, Rodwell moved the bookshop, which also operated as a vital community center, to this location. He sold it in 1993, just before his death, and the store remained in business until 2009.

11. **SNAKE PIT**

(231-235 West 10th Street)

In March 1970, less than a year after Stonewall, police raided the after-hours basement bar the Snake Pit. Fearing another crowd confrontation, they detained over 160 people at the local police station at 135 Charles Street, west of the bar. Immigrant Diego Villalon, fearing deportation, attempted to escape by jumping out of a window. He was impaled on an iron fence below. Appalled at his possible death (he actually survived), the recently formed Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance quickly assembled a protest march from Christopher Park to the police station, as well as a candlelight vigil at St. Vincent’s Hospital where he was taken. Flyers read “Any way you look at it – that boy was PUSHED. We are ALL being pushed.”

12. **ELMER EPHRAIM ELLSWORTH FLAGPOLE**

At the eastern tip of Christopher Park is a flagpole dedicated in 1969 to Union Army Col. Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth (1837-1861). Born in New York State, he was the leader of the first American Zouave unit when he met and went to work for Abraham Lincoln in 1860. In his book, The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln (2005), sex researcher C.A. Tripp posited that Lincoln became personally attached to the young man. Ellsworth accompanied him to Washington and was the first officer killed in the Civil War, while roaming a Confederate flag from atop a Virginia hotel that Lincoln could see from Washington. The plaque on the flagpole has the incorrect order of his name.

13. **OSCAR WILDE MEMORIAL BOOKSHOP**

(159 West 19th Street, currently the Greenwhich Lettermen)

Gay rights activist Craig Rodwell established Americas first gay and lesbian bookstore on the East Coast (and the first in the nation to operate long term) in an apartment building storefront on 23r Marcer Street in 1967. He named it after the most prominent gay person he could think of. Oscar Wilde, the playwright. Rodwell had been a participant in the Julius “Sip-In” in 1966. In 1973, Rodwell moved the bookshop, which also operated as a vital community center, to this location. He sold it in 1993, just before his death, and the store remained in business until 2009.

15. **GREENWICH AVENUE**

In the 1960s, pre-dating the Stonewall Rebellion, the stretch of Greenwich Avenue from Christopher Street to Seventh Avenue, was called “the cruisiest street in the Village.” Anything farther west of here was what novelist Falicia Piconi called “homosexual no-man’s-land.”

16. **WOMEN’S HOUSE OF DETENTION**

(Sixth and Greenwhich Avenues)

From 1931 to 1974, the large prison on this site housed poor, working-class, and lesbian women, many of them of color. It became infamous for shouted exchanges between women inside and on the street, many of them lovers. This was one factor that resulted in a campaign to demolish the building and replace it with the current garden. On August 29, 1970, a crowd of about 1,000 LGBTQ+ activists and local bar-goers protested at the site due to its known deplorable conditions, with shouts of “Gay Power” and “End Police Harassment.”

17. **MURRAY HALL APARTMENT**

(457 Sixth Avenue, upper floor of vacant commercial spaces)

This was the last residence of Murray Hall (c. 1840-1900), a local politician, who would today be considered gender variant. Hall lived as a man for decades without his gender being questioned. Married twice to women, Hall remained close to the Jefferson Market Courthouse as a bail bondsman. Following Hall’s death, the New York Times reported that Hall’s “true sex” was revealed by the doctor. This attracted worldwide attention, including that of pioneering sexual psychologist Havelock Ellis.

**ABOUT YOUR VISIT**

The sites on this map are located within and outside the Stonewall National Monument boundary. The numbering of the sites follows a suggested route that begins at the site of present day Christopher Park, the starting point at Christopher Park. Many of the sites featured in this brochure are privately owned and not open to the public. Please respect people’s privacy and do not trespass.

**DIRECTIONS TO CHRISTOPHER PARK**

Christopher Park is located in Greenwich Village at 7th Avenue South and Christopher Street. By subway: train to Christopher Street - Sheridan Square or to 8th Avenue - 14th Street then you can walk to 7th Avenue South and Christopher Street.

**LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY**

Language and terminology for sexual orientation and gender identification have continually evolved since the late 19th century. For example, “lesbian” and “gay” became more commonly used in the post-World War II era, whereas “bisexual” and "transgender" were not as frequent until the 1980s. The text uses LGBT+ although that usage did not exist in earlier time periods. “Queer” has historically been used as a derogatory term and not in the text.

**MORE INFORMATION**

Please visit the National Parks Conservation Association’s website at www.nps.gov for an online guide to the Stonewall National Monument. For any use of text or information, the user is directed to the National Parks Conservation Association, September 2017.

**EPA Postcard, June 2023**

Text by Jay Shockey and Ken Littledike for the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project. For use of text or information, the user is directed to the National Parks Conservation Association, September 2017.