

EXPLAINING STONEWALL

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“Stonewall” as a place and an historic event is the single most significant icon of the LGBTQ community. It is also the one bit of gay lore that those not part of the LGBTQ community are likely to have heard of. Its iconic weight was confirmed when President Barack Obama in his 2012 inaugural address named it on a par with Seneca and Selma as representing a pivotal historical moment: President Obama rightly assumed that “Stonewall” would be understood by most of his listeners to stand for a critical salvo in America’s history of the struggle for equal rights.

Necessary Precursors to the Stonewall Uprising

The Stonewall Uprising, spontaneous as it was, can also be said to have been years in the making. “Gay” people (as most LGBTQ people called themselves throughout the 1950s and ‘60s) started organizing seriously with the establishment of homophile groups such as Mattachine in 1950 and Daughters of Bilitis in 1955. The organizing began because gays were victims of unrelenting and ubiquitous prejudice: the law said they were criminals; psychiatric professionals said they were mentally ill; theologians said they were sinners; and employers—governmental as well as private—said they were unfit for employment. Legal persecution of homosexuals was so prevalent that few even dared join a homophile organization: gay people were justifiably scared that authorities would seize membership rosters and that members would be thrown in jail—or at least outed in newspapers, fired from jobs, and shamed in front of neighbors and family. Neither Mattachine nor DOB grew beyond several hundred members.

In 1961, Frank Kameny founded Mattachine Society Washington. He was determined to make the organization more openly confrontational in its fight for the rights of homosexuals. In 1965, he organized pickets—in front of the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon, Independence Hall in Philadelphia—through which he hoped to bring homosexuality out of the

shadows and the demand for homosexual civil rights into the sunlight. While Kameny never succeeded in getting more than a few dozen picketers to join him, his audacity was a harbinger of change for gay people.

Frank Kameny and a few other 1960s activists had been inspired by the drama of other civil-rights struggles. Kameny had actually been at Martin Luther King's 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He'd held aloft a "Mattachine Society" placard at the March—though only the four other Mattachine members who were with him knew what the placard signified. They yearned for a homosexual March on Washington; but they knew that there weren't yet enough gays who would dare march as blacks were marching. The pickets were their compromise.

But Kameny was convinced that gays must learn from black people how to be even more confrontational in demanding their rights. In the summer of 1964, in the midst of six consecutive nights of rioting to protest police behavior in Harlem, Kameny addressed a meeting of New York Mattachine about the slow progress of gay civil rights: "Negroes tried for ninety years to achieve their purposes by 'educating' the public out of its prejudices"; but their achievements during all that time "were nothing compared to those of the past ten years" when "negroes became vigorous [in their] social actions," Kameny pointed out to his audience, who were surely aware of the riots that were going on a few miles away.¹ The gay struggle must take a page from the black struggle, he was implying. However, the "vigor" of a "social action" such as the Harlem riots was unthinkable for Kameny's middle-class, middle-aged listeners at that 1964 Mattachine Society meeting.

But other tactics of the black movement did serve as inspiration for a number of gay protests in the mid-1960s. For instance, Dick Leitsch, president of New York Mattachine, inspired by black sit-ins, staged a "sip-in" in a Greenwich Village bar to begin a legal challenge to the State Liquor Authority's prohibition against serving homosexuals. That same year also saw a mini-riot at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco when police harassed the drag queen clientele as per usual: this time the queens, about fifty of them, many of them black and Latino, fought back.

¹ Frank Kameny, "Civil Liberties: A Progress Report, 1964 speech at Freedom House, NYC: see my book *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), p. 138.

Other militant movements of the 1960s, such as the anti-Vietnam War movement, the feminist movement, the movement for Latino and Native American civil rights—all became inspiration for gay activists. After the Black Cat, a Los Angeles gay bar, was raided in 1967, organizers staged a multi-night mass protest—anti-war-movement style—to rally consciousness about police harassment of gays. After the Patch, another Los Angeles gay bar, was raided in 1968 and a couple of men arrested, the bar’s owner and its patrons were inspired by radical feminist “zaps,” such as the feminists’ invasion of a bridal fair in Madison Square Garden where they released cages of mice: The Patch protestors descended on police headquarters with arms full of floral bouquets and demanded the release of their “sisters.” Yet daring and remarkable as those protests were for homosexuals, they remained small and had seemingly little impact.

The people who rioted after the raid on the Stonewall Inn in June 1969 may or may not have known about the earlier gay protests. But they had surely heard on the nightly news of the March on Washington; the black riots in Harlem, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland, Atlanta; the anti-war demonstrations that attracted tens of thousands; the mass protest by leftist youths at the 1968 Democratic Convention; the feminist zaps on the Miss America Pageant, on Wall Street, on the inauguration of Richard Nixon. The ethos of the times was inescapable. In the repressive and repressed 1950s, the Stonewall Uprising would not have been possible. It would not have been probable if it had not been preceded by almost an entire decade of dramatic protests.

Why Stonewall?

Though the 1960s saw a variety of gay protests, none came close to the Stonewall Uprising in drama, duration, and size. The riots that followed a raid of the Stonewall Inn was a response to a long history of police harassment of the one institution that gay people believed to be theirs: the gay bar. In cities all over America, the gay bar had never been simply a place where you went to get a drink. It was the one place where patrons dared let their homosexuality show in public. It was where they went for a sense of community and camaraderie; it was where they went to meet potential romantic and sexual partners. It was virtually the only institution that gay people had. Yet by raids and entrapment, law enforcement was constantly challenging

gay people's right to congregate in even so paltry an institution as the gay bar. As post-raid protests at bars such as The Black Cat and The Patch had demonstrated, the urge to fight back against persecution of gays on their home base was building throughout the 1960s. But with Stonewall that urge exploded as it never had before. Why?

Topography explains a lot about why Stonewall—and not other places, in other cities where gay people had been just as brutalized by the law—became the critical gay protest. A topographical comparison with Los Angeles makes the point most vividly. Los Angeles was not only the site of some of the first protests against police raids of gay bars; it had also been the first home of the first on-going homophile organization, the Mattachine Society. Los Angeles had long been a leader in homophile activism. Even the first lesbian periodical (*Vice Versa*) and the first homophile periodical (*ONE*) had been founded there. But Los Angeles, spread out over 450 square miles, had no equivalent to Greenwich Village, where droves of bohemians, hippies, and nonconformists strolled its 1 ½ square miles. The density of the Village, crowded with offbeat types, was crucial in expanding the number of rioters and protracting the duration of the Stonewall Uprising.

Compare a 1966 incident in Los Angeles: The National Planning Conference of Homophile Organizations had voted to protest the “less-than-honorable discharge” given to those in the Armed Forces who were discovered to be homosexual. The protests were to bring to the public's attention that a less-than-honorable discharge became a permanent part of a man's record and his life was forever ruined. On Armed Forces Day, May 21, 1966, there were small protests in a handful of cities. In Los Angeles, the founder of Mattachine, Harry Hay, was named chair of the protest, and the group deliberated on how to get its dramatic message to the public. Their plan was quintessentially Los Angeles. In that spread-out city, there was no one place where huge numbers of people walked. Hay's group would have a motorcade. The cars would carry big banners announcing “10% of all GIs are Homosexual” and “Sex Belongs to Private Conscience.” Thousands of Angelenos may indeed have seen the passing motorcade and been sympathetic. But there was no opportunity for them to congregate in large numbers, to feel the group outrage, to express that outrage on the streets. An Uprising such as the one that took place in Greenwich Village three years later could only have happened there or some other place with similar topography—and in the 1960s there were few such place in America.

Topography alone cannot, of course, account for why Stonewall became the most salient icon of the struggle for LGBTQ rights. The passion that triggered the riots had to be redirected before it burnt itself out. And in Greenwich Village it was, because radical activists who throughout the 1960s had cut their teeth on various militant movements understood how to focus that passion. In the wake of the riots, they founded groups such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance, they staged Stonewall commemorations such as Christopher Street Liberation Day, and they made Stonewall the long-lived symbol of the gay revolution.

Stonewall's meaning to the various segments of the LGBTQ community

Throughout the almost-half-century since the Uprising that followed the June 28, 1969 raid on the Stonewall Inn, the iconic importance of Stonewall has never stopped growing. Stonewall has had such deep significance for virtually every demographic of the diverse LGBTQ community that legends still keep proliferating about who was there, who started the resistance to the police harassment, whose actions were the most inspiring, the most dramatic, the most effective. The tremendous furor over Roland Emmerich's 2015 film *Stonewall* demonstrates how zealously communities within the LGBTQ community view their place in what has become the legend of Stonewall. Emmerich presented a hunky blonde Indiana boy as the one who hurled the rock that started the riots. Even before the film was released, its trailer sparked a huge boycott because, protestors complained, Emmerich had "whitewashed history"; he'd failed to show that Stonewall was "driven by transwomen of color, drag queens, [and] butch lesbians."² Reviewers such as African American lesbian Irene Monroe went so far as to observe that the film was a prime example of why there was a gulf between LGBTQ people of color and LGBTQ whites: it was because "the dominant [i.e., white and cisgendered] queer community rewrote and continues to control the narrative of Stonewall."³

Inarguably, it is the historian's job to ignore the heat of factions and to be coolly scrupulous in recounting historical fact. David Carter—who interviewed more participants of the

² Ebiri Bilge, "Stonewall Fails Across the Board, *Vulture*, September 25, 2015.

³ Irene Monroe, "The Stonewall I Remembered Just Wasn't White," *The Advocate*, August 11, 2015.

Uprising than any other scholar—suggests in his book *Stonewall* that according to his informants it would be a huge exaggeration, even misrepresentation, to say that the Uprising was “driven by” transwomen of color, drag queens, and butch lesbians. Yet, for better or worse, the legends that take root in the aftermath of historical events often have emotional resonance for many people that is far greater than historical facts. Regardless of the racial and gender makeup of the rioters, regardless of who did what on those four nights of early summer in 1969, Stonewall has become for LGBTQ communities of color and for transgender people a major point of pride. Though there were few women who actually played a role in Stonewall, the Uprising has even become a great point of pride for queer women through the legend of the butch lesbian who is said to have set off the rioting when she escaped from a police car and yelled to the crowd, “Why don’t you guys do something?”

Mainstream gays too recognize the importance of the Stonewall Uprising and even lay some claim to it. Though they were not among the rioters, they understand Stonewall as the prime activator—much more effective than anything that had preceded it—in the movement for LGBTQ civil-rights. As early as July 1969, the newsletter of the moderate New York Mattachine described the Uprising in “gayspeak” as “the hairpin drop heard round the world.”⁴ The Uprising also had impact on previously cautious and conservative gay individuals. Dr. Howard Brown who’d resigned as New York City health commissioner in 1967 because he feared columnist Drew Pearson would out him in the pages of the *New York Times*, lived up the street from the Stonewall Inn. When he ran out to see what the commotion was about that night of June 28, he understood immediately, as he later wrote, that he was seeing a civil-rights struggle—and it eventually “broke the spell of [his] fears.”⁵ Dr. Brown went on to co-found the National Gay Task Force in 1973, an organization whose first members were middle-class professionals who finally dared to come out of their closets, determined to fight for gay rights on a national level.

That same year, 1973, the boldness that had been sparked by the Uprising also saw the founding of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, a mainstreaming organization which went on to fight in the courts for the rights of gay and lesbian parents, the right of LGBTQ

⁴ Dick Leitsch, “The Hairpin Drop Heard Round the World,” *New York Mattachine Newsletter*, July 1969.

⁵ Howard Brown, *Familiar Faces, Hidden Lives: The Story of Homosexual Men in America Today* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 20.

students to organize, and eventually the right of same-sex couples to marry. Though the Stonewall Uprising was carried out by the young and disenfranchised, there is no question that what they did helped emboldened a much broader segment of the community. The line that leads from the Stonewall Uprising to the establishment of the mainstreaming organizations which have been in the forefront of the most successful battles for LGBTQ equality—including the right to marry and the right to serve in the military—is easy to discern.

The Steady Growth of the “Stonewall” Legend and Its Effect on LGBTQ People Everywhere

Not many non-gay newspapers recognized the significance of the Stonewall Uprising immediately after the fact. The *New York Times*, for instance, reported the events of June 28 in a short article on page 33 with the title “Four Policemen Hurt in ‘Village’ Raid.”⁶ The *New York Daily News* covered the riots only to mock them in an article titled “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad.”⁷ But the gay people who had spent the previous years as activists in various militant movements recognized that Stonewall could become the emblem for a new gay movement that was no less militant and dramatic than the other movements of the 1960s, whose workings they knew well. Within a week of the Stonewall riots these seasoned activists formed the radical Gay Liberation Front and organized a march to commemorate the one month anniversary of the riots. Two thousand people showed up to march. Never before in the history of the world had there been so many out homosexuals in one public place.⁸

A new mood of gay anger and gay pride, inspired by the Stonewall Uprising, very soon caught fire. Gay Liberation Fronts sprang up not only in big coastal cities but in places such as Iowa City, Louisville, Atlanta, Tallahassee—as well as in England, Germany, Denmark, New Zealand. Before the Stonewall Uprising, there had been no more than two or three dozen homophile organizations. One year after, there were approximately a thousand gay organizations. Two years after, there were 2500.

⁶ “Four Policemen Hurt in ‘Village’ Raid,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1969.

⁷ Jerry Lisker, “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad,” *Daily News*, July 6, 1969.

⁸ See my discussion of gay organizing in the wake of the riots in *The Gay Revolution*, chapters 12 and 13.

The spirit of Stonewall was also spread through gay pride parades which began as an anniversary celebration of the Stonewall Uprising. In New York, the first parade, held one year after the events at Stonewall, was called “Christopher Street Liberation Day.” The Los Angeles Gay Liberation Front’s parade, held on the same day, was named “Christopher Street West.” Now, into the 21st century, pride parades sparked in the memory of Stonewall have grown to attract millions around the globe, including countries such as Uganda, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

Indeed “Stonewall” has become virtually synonymous with the movement for LGBTQ equality everywhere. In the U.K, for instance, the organization “Stonewall Equality” was started in 1989 to fight internationally for gay rights; it continues to this day, as does “Stonewall Japan,” which was started in 1995. In America, “Stonewall Democrats” is a national caucus within the Democratic Party, with chapters in thirty states, including Alabama, Georgia, and Arkansas. The University of Massachusetts funds a “Stonewall Center” for LGBTQ students. The American Bar Association gives a “Stonewall Award” to lawyers and judges who have successfully fought against LGBTQ discrimination. Though the participants in the Stonewall riots were almost all marginalized and disenfranchised young people, “Stonewall” has morphed into a meaningful international emblem to all segments and socio-economic classes of LGBTQ people: it signifies the refusal be passive in the face of persecution, the mass exodus from the closet, the assertion of pride in being oneself, and the demand for equal protection under the law.