

40 Years After Stonewall: New York's Role in the Movement

by {ga=ahumm}

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Right photo by Diana Davies from the New York Public Library Stonewall before and after the riots. In the right photo, the message in the window reads: "We homosexuals plead with our people to please help maintain peaceful and quiet conduct on the streets of the Village."

The [Stonewall Rebellion](#) , when lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people fought back against police repression at a Greenwich Village bar with a six-day riot in June 1969 is considered the birth of the modern "gay rights" movement. President Barack Obama just [declared](#)

June LGBT Pride Month in the United States, following an example set by President Bill Clinton during his second term. (This year, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued her own proclamation at the State Department.)

Obama then switched his position and let his Justice Department [file briefs](#) supporting both the [Defense of Marriage Act](#)

prohibiting federal recognition of legal same-sex marriages, and the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy excluding open gays from the military -- even though he campaigned against both laws.

The 40th anniversary will be marked by the usual [LGBT Pride Parade](#) down Fifth Avenue and by pride marches all around the world from Youngstown, Ohio, which is having its first this year, to Moscow, Russia, where activists get beaten every year by skinheads and police. There now are separate African American pride parades across the U.S. as well.

Stonewall gives New York a certain preeminence in the LGBT movement, but the clash was neither the first public display of gay resistance, nor has the city and state maintained their claim to be the world leader in progress since then. Five states -- from Massachusetts to Iowa -- have already beat us to opening up marriage to gay couples.

Maybe it is New York arrogance, but it was not until this year that New York City launched an ad campaign, euphemistically called ["Rainbow Pilgrimage,"](#) seeking gay tourism -- something that cities such as London and Amsterdam have been doing for years. (Maybe the rainbow theme is

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meant to pick up on the 40th anniversary of the death of Judy Garland, whose signature song was "Over the Rainbow.")

With gay issues so much in the forefront this year, it's a good time to look at some examples of where New York has led and where it has followed -- despite its reputation as the birthplace of the modern movement.

Pre-Stonewall History

While the religious right likes to speak about homosexuality as something that was always condemned, plenty of cultures have celebrated it -- the evidence appears on some of the Greek urns in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There is even evidence of same-sex union ceremonies in early Christianity, not to mention the Bible's celebration of the love of such pairs as Ruth and Naomi as well as David and Jonathan. These couples may or may not have been gay in the modern sense, but their ardency for each other certainly goes beyond friendship. Indeed, Ruth's words to Naomi ("whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" -- Ruth 1:16) are often used in wedding ceremonies.

In the modern Western world, German physician [Magnus Hirshfeld](#) founded the [Scientific Humanitarian Committee](#) to fight for gay rights and overturn Germany's anti-sodomy laws in 1897. He enlisted such supporters as Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke, Martin Buber, Herman Hesse and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. His Institute for Sexual Research was housed in a villa near the Reichstag from 1919 until the Nazis drove him out in the 1930s, famously burning the group's library in 1933.

New York's first gay center was a space the post-Stonewall [Gay Liberation Front](#) rented above what was then Gerde's Folk City on West Third Street in 1969. The [Gay Activists Alliance](#) worked and played in a space called The Firehouse at 99 Wooster from 1971 until it was destroyed in a suspicious fire in 1974. The current [LGBT Community Center](#) opened in 1980.

The first significant American gay group was the [Mattachine Society](#), founded in Los Angeles by Harry Hay and Rudy Gernreich in 1950 -- and now being dramatized in a new play called [The Temperamentals at the Barrow Group Theatre](#)

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through July 5 with Thomas Jay Ryan as Hay and "Ugly Betty" star Michael Urie as Gernreich, who became a famous designer. New York got a Mattachine chapter in 1951, and it lasted until 1976.

What may well have been the first public gay demonstration in the United States took place here in 1964 when Randy Wicker led the Homosexual League of New York and the League for Sexual Freedom in a protest against the exclusion of gays from the military on Whitehall Street in lower Manhattan at the U.S. Army Induction Center.

Two years later, New York Mattachine leader Dick Leitsch, John Timmons and Craig Rodwell, who went on to establish the recently departed [Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop](#) in the Village, successfully challenged the law banning bars from serving gay people with a 1966 "sip in" [at Julius' bar](#), which is still operating on the corner of Waverly and West 10th Street.

Post-Stonewall History



Photo from Wiki Commons [Herstory Archives](#) Photographer Kay Lahusen marching at the first Annual Reminder in 1969

Stonewall had immediate repercussions in the movement. Soon after, a group of gay activists formed the Gay Liberation Front, which was of a piece with the radical liberation activism of the day and made alliances with other left movements, including the Black Panthers and the Young Lords. Its members were confrontational and unapologetic, and their intense group splintered and ultimately burned out in April 1971. (Some veterans of the group are having a reunion panel on June 25 at 6 p.m. at the LGBT Community Center, which I'll be moderating.)

The Gay Activists Alliance broke with the front to focus on single-issue gay activism in 1970. The alliance lasted about 10 years, spawning splinters of its own such as Lesbian Feminist Liberation, part of a lesbian separatist movement.

On the first anniversary of Stonewall -- in June 1970 -- New York City saw the world's first big gay march. Craig Rodwell played a key role just by posting a sign in the window of his gay bookstore calling on people to mark the first anniversary of the rebellion, but he was aided by

both Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activist Alliance.

The Legislative Battles

During the 1960s, states around the country began repealing anti-sodomy laws as part of the effort to rid legal codes of archaic laws. New York's legislature, however, would not act on repeal despite the urgings of a young member of the State Assembly named Ed Koch. The New York Court of Appeals ruled the state law was unconstitutional in 1980. It took until 2003 for the U.S. Supreme Court to [overturn](#) the nation's 13 remaining state sodomy laws.

New York City was the first municipality in the world to propose amending its human rights law to ban discrimination on the basis of "sexual orientation," a legal phrase coined by the Gay Activists Alliance in 1971. The City Council, though, refused to pass the law for years, while many other major U.S. cities moved ahead and passed gay rights bills. New York did not join them until 1986.

Village Assemblymember Bill Passanante introduced New York State's gay rights bill -- the first such state bill in the nation -- in 1971, but that didn't pass until 2002, long after states such as Wisconsin led the way in offering statewide protections in 1985. New York State still has not added protections on the basis of gender identity and expression covering people of transgender experience, but the city did in 2002.

New York State's [hate crimes](#) law was held up by a Republican-controlled Senate until 2000 -- more than 13 years after it was first proposed following the [Howard Beach](#) racial killing in 1986. The sticking point was including "sexual orientation." Most states had passed hate crimes laws in some form by the time New York did.

A school anti-bullying bill, the [Dignity for All Students Act](#), has also been held up in the State Senate for more than a decade despite almost unanimous support in the Democrat-led Assembly. The barrier is, again, the category of "sexual orientation," as well as "gender identity and expression."

Two members of Congress from New York, [Bella Abzug](#) and [Ed Koch](#), introduced the first federal gay and lesbian rights bill in 1973, then an amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1965.

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The bill was eventually watered down to just provide some job protections through the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and passed the House last year but not the Senate.

Gays in Office

In the 1970s, out gays began running for -- and getting elected to -- public office. Here, too, New York lagged.

The first out gay officials anywhere in the U.S. were such pioneers as Kathy Kozachenko in January 1974 to the Ann Arbor City Council, [Allan Spear](#), a state senator in Minnesota who came out in 1974, and [Elaine Noble](#), elected that same year to the Massachusetts legislature as an out lesbian.

[Harvey Milk](#) wasn't elected a supervisor in San Francisco until 1977, only to be murdered by former Supervisor

[Dan White](#) the following year -- and immortalized by Oscar-winning Sean Penn in the movie "[Milk](#)" just last year.

In 1991, Passanante was succeeded in the Assembly by [Deborah Glick](#), the first out gay or lesbian person ever to be elected to a legislative office in New York.

Significantly, New York now has an out lesbian City Council speaker in [Christine Quinn](#), one of the highest ranking out gay or lesbian officials in the United States.

Marriage Matters

The big gay news these days concerns the fate of same-sex marriage in New York. With the Republicans taking over the State Senate in a coup with dissident Democrats, the prospects for the bill letting gay couples marry here is up in the air, even though new Majority Leader [Dean Skelos](#)

, a Long Island Republican and opponent of same-sex marriage, has said his members can vote their consciences on the bill. The dissidents Democratic senators,

[Pedro Espada Jr.](#) and [Hiram Monserrate](#)

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, are for the marriage equality bill. However, it apparently had nothing to do with their coup, which observers have attributed to billionaire Tom Golisano's desire for lower taxes and the landlord lobby's fear the Senate Democrat majority would strengthen rent regulations.

Assemblymember [Daniel O'Donnell](#) , a Democrat from Manhattan's West Side, who got the marriage bill passed in his house, remains hopeful it will pass the Senate. Prior to the coup, Sen. [Tom Duane](#) , also a Manhattan Democrat was insisting it had the votes to pass.

While the Republican-led majority can block action on the bill, it does not now nor has it ever had the votes to block New York State from recognizing same-sex marriages performed in other place. Legislation that would have denied legal recognition to those marriages was introduced in the 1990s in Albany and never even received a hearing in the Senate.

As a result, New York is alone among states in that it recognizes legal same-sex marriages performed elsewhere but does not perform them itself. All New York gay couples have to do to be married is travel to such neighboring jurisdictions as Vermont, Connecticut, Massachusetts or Canada and wed legally. When they come home, they will be married in the eyes of the state -- just as if they had been able to legally marry here.

This has been true since same sex couples in New York began legally marrying in Canada in 2003. Gov. David Paterson drew much more attention to this quirk in New York law last year, though, when he [ordered](#) state departments and agencies to report on how they were complying with it.

Like all other same-sex married couples, New Yorkers lack federal rights associated with marriage due to the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act. Sen. [Charles Schumer](#) , who voted for that anti-gay bill, this year became the last statewide official to come out in favor of same-sex marriage, joining Paterson, Comptroller

[Thomas DiNapoli](#)

, Attorney General

[Andrew Cuomo](#)

, and Sen.

[Kirsten Gillibrand](#)

, who

[announced](#)

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her support the day the governor picked her to succeed Sen. Clinton, who does not support same-sex marriage.

Serving a Community

Beyond the political arena, New York has played central roles in the development of the LGBT community, especially in the arts (a whole other column) but also in the provision of services.

[Lambda Legal Defense](#) , founded in 1973 in New York as the first legal group devoted to defending gay rights, now has offices around the country.

The New York LGBT movement, which I was very much a part of, was tragically rather weak when the syndrome that came to be called AIDS was first noticed in 1981. AIDS devastated the gay community but also led to development of a vast gay social services establishment starting with the [Gay Men's Health Crisis](#) co-founded by Larry Kramer and five others. Kramer went on to give a speech in 1987 that sparked the creation of the [AID](#)

[S Coalition to Unleash Power](#)

or ACT UP, a group dominated by dying gay men and supportive lesbians who radicalized activism again and changed forever the way people with diseases advocate for what they need to survive. ACT UP chapters spread around the world, and the New York contingent still has a few stalwarts carrying the torch of AIDS activism.

New York City had the first predominately gay, lesbian and transgendered high school with [Harvey Milk High School](#)

founded by the

[Hetrick-Martin Institute](#)

for LGBT youth in 1985. Its continued existence is testimony to the fact that many mainstream city schools are still not safe places for such students. The institute itself, where I once worked as director of education, was founded to advocate for these youth in 1979 by the late Damien Martin and Emery Hetrick.

New York's [SAGE](#) -- for Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders -- was the first U.S. group for older gays and lesbians in 1978.

Gay journalists founded the [Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation](#) in 1985 to fight

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anti-gay defamation in the media, especially at the New York Post. Originally a fierce watchdog, it has gone on to become a largely West Coast operation famous for big annual dinners honoring positive LGBT portrayals in the media. Such has been the arc of the movement.

Joining the Establishment

For better or worse, the political movement has become much more institutionalized, too. None of the early activists, from the Gay Liberation Front in 1969 to the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, with which I worked in the 1970s and '80s, had paid staff. The [National Gay Task Force](#) (now the [National Gay and Lesbian Task Force](#)) began to change that in 1973. Its executive director, Bruce Voeller, received a (modest) salary, and it favored the suits of lobbyists over jeans, t-shirts and the "zap" actions of the Gay Activist Alliance. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force now has offices all over the country with a major presence in New York.

In New York, the [Empire State Pride Agenda](#) with paid lobbyists in New York and Albany and organizers around the state, dominates the movement in New York politics. The city also has lots of LGBT political clubs, mostly Democratic but also the [Log Cabin Republicans](#)

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Diverse New York has also had a wealth of racial and ethnic LGBT groups, including the defunct Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization whose [exclusion](#) from the St. Patrick's Parade sparked international campaigns for LGBT Irish people seeking to participate in mainstream. (Now gay Irish can march in the parade in Dublin and Queens but still not Manhattan's.) There are also groups for people of color such as the [Audre Lorde Project](#)

, named for the late lesbian poet laureate of the state. Virtually every major religious sect has an LGBT caucus of some kind.

Beyond the City

Stonewall, while a spontaneous reaction to police abuse, resulted from the liberationist and anti-war activism that was in the air in 1969 along with the actions of individual LGBT folk at the bar and in the street that night who collectively reacted with anger to the latest indignity to which they were subjected.

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Forty years later, New York City still beckons as somewhat of a Mecca for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, though it has become too expensive for many young people just starting out and less than hospitable when you look at the recent [false arrests](#) of gay men for prostitution. At the very least, New York and its gay and lesbian residents sparked a nascent movement that spread across the country and around the globe. Their effort made it easier for millions of people to live open and satisfying LGBT lives -- without moving to New York.

Andy Humm, a former member of the City Commission on Human Rights, has been in charge of the civil rights topic page since its inception in 2001.