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## The Next Chapter for LGBTQ Heritage

Posted on: [May 2nd, 2014](#) by [Special Contributor](#) | [1 Comment](#)

By: [Megan E. Springate](#)

A shared history is one of the most powerful ways that people feel connected to one another. Even as an immigrant new to U.S. soil, a person is part of a shared heritage of people coming from elsewhere and making America great. While the United States has a deep and rich lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) history—and not just in the big cities of New York and San Francisco—these histories have largely been ignored or marginalized.

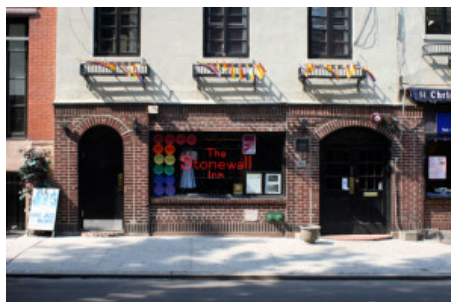


*The Washington, D.C., home of Franklin E. Kameny, a significant figure in the American gay rights movement, was listed in the National Register in 2011. | Photo by Farragutful, via Wikimedia Commons.*

In 1998 the National Trust’s *Forum Journal* published Gail Dubrow’s article, “[Blazing Trails with Pink Triangles and Rainbow Flags: New Directions in the Preservation and Interpretation of Gay and Lesbian Heritage](#).” In it, Dubrow described a nascent grassroots movement poised for national recognition. Although there were no LGBTQ National Historic Landmarks or listings in the National Register of Historic Places at that time, in local communities around the country, preservationists were recording gay and lesbian oral histories, curating gay and lesbian archives, and mounting exhibits about gay and lesbian history and neighborhoods. Her article’s publication in a national forum, however, was promising, suggesting that national recognition was, indeed, on the horizon.

In the climate of the late 1990s, Dubrow described people avoiding lesbian and gay preservation due to “a powerful combination of fear, isolation, [and a] caution about being pigeonholed.” She also discussed challenges of the subject matter itself: the ethics of outing people; the challenges of public interpretation; the fluidity of sexuality across a lifetime; and the historically contingent definitions of homosexuality. Perhaps most importantly, Dubrow offered a six-point Action Agenda: 1) write gays and lesbians into the history of the preservation movement; 2) reinterpret existing landmarks to give a more accurate and complete history of gay and lesbian lives; 3) identify undesignated properties significant in gay and lesbian history, conducting thematic surveys to help identify these and generate nominations; 4) increase public education and awareness through maps, tours, signage, and find sources of financial and political support; 5) develop mechanisms of communication, support, and activism for lesbian and gay preservation; and 6) develop strategies for improving the capacity of preservation organizations and agencies to address lesbian and gay concerns.

In the years since “Blazing Trails,” lesbian and gay preservation has become LGBTQ preservation, and there has been slow but steady progress. On the local level, for example, the home of [Henry Gerber](#)—founder in 1924 of the Society for Human Rights, the first gay rights organization in the U.S.—was listed as a Chicago Landmark, and the State of Pennsylvania placed a marker near Independence Hall in Philadelphia commemorating the 1965-1969 Annual Reminders that took place there. Each July 4



*The Stonewall Inn, Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, Manhattan. | Photo by Johannes Jordan, via Wikimedia Commons.*

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during these years, members of several homophile organizations picketed Independence Hall to remind people that gays and lesbians did not enjoy the same rights and freedoms as other Americans. After 1969, the Annual Reminders were replaced by Pride Day celebrations commemorating Stonewall. Nationally, the National Trust featured a tour of LGBTQ places as part of 2009 Pride Month in which people in communities across the country expressed that "These Places Matter." Five properties are now listed as National Historic Landmarks (NHL) and on the National Register of Historic Places (NR) specifically for their connections with LGBTQ history:

- Stonewall, New York City, N.Y. (NHL; [listed 2000](#))
- Dr. Franklin E. Kameny Residence, Washington, D.C. (NR; [listed 2011](#))
- Cherry Grove Community House and Theater, Fire Island, N.Y. (NR; [listed 2013](#))
- Carrington House, Fire Island, N.Y. (NR; [listed 2014](#))
- James Merrill House, Stonington, Conn. (NR; [listed 2013](#))

Community and national projects continue to document and preserve LGBTQ heritage. These include oral history projects like [Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles](#) at the University of Chicago, the [ACT-UP Oral History Project](#), and the [LGBT WWII Homefront oral history project](#); the archiving of materials from various LGBTQ communities by organizations like the [Lesbian Herstory Archives](#), the [Leather Archives and Museum](#), the [Transgender Archive](#), and the [Human Sexuality Collection](#); and the opening of LGBTQ museums including the [GLBT Historical Society](#).

People are also thinking about LGBTQ history and heritage on a broader scale. Currently in the works are at least three projects geared specifically to identify or help identify LGBTQ historic properties and promote and facilitate the formal recognition of LGBTQ historic places. These include citywide mapping and context statements for San Francisco and [Los Angeles](#) and a guidelines and information document in preparation by the [National Park Service](#) to aid in the identification and nomination of LGBTQ properties to the NR and NHL. Despite these important advances, much work remains to be done.



*Henry Gerber's home has been designated as a Chicago Landmark. Photo by Thshriver, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

All of the items on Dubrow's Action Agenda remain relevant, despite the passage of a generation. Reflecting social changes since her article was published, I suggest the following additions: a) Recognize the effects of intersectionality on presenting, evaluating, and understanding LGBTQ heritage. Be especially mindful of under-representing ethnic groups, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender individuals, those who identify as queer, and those involved with subcultures like drag or leather; b) Recognize and allow for the challenges of representing history often associated with marginalized places and with people and events whose history may survive only as rumor or willful silence; and c) Honor how people identified themselves in different times and places, particularly given the historical contingency of the categories gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and homosexual.

A broad commitment to diversity in preservation must include LGBTQ heritage. The exclusion of groups of people or the eliding of identity from our historical narratives makes them incomplete and flawed. LGBTQ heritage is deeply interwoven into the threads that make the American tapestry, including civil rights (Bayard Rustin, advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr.); health (the first studies of women's health; HIV/AIDS; designation of sexuality as pathology and challenges to this); politics and



*The home of American poet James Merrill, located in*

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## Links to Preservation

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public policy (gay marriage; military service; privacy laws; the Culture Wars); commerce and communities (bookstores; community centers; clubs; urban “gayborhoods”); science (astronaut

*Stonington, Conn., is now the site of a writer-in-residency program. | Photo by Pi.1415926535, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Sally Ride). This history also demands that we face and come to terms with our lesser selves: the Upstairs Lounge arson; Matthew Shepard; and Frank Bolt, first prisoner at Alcatraz. To understand the full richness that is American history, LGBTQ must be included.

Through the efforts of many, recognition and interpretation of LGBTQ history and heritage continues to develop. Continued advocacy, cooperation, networking, and work from the grassroots to federal agencies will help ensure that LGBTQ heritage becomes part of the American story.

#### Notes:

Dubrow, Gail Lee (1998) "[Blazing Trails with Pink Triangles and Rainbow Flags: New Directions in the Preservation and Interpretation of Gay and Lesbian Heritage](#)". *Historic Preservation Forum* 12(3): 31-44.

**Editors Note:** This story is a web companion to the Spring 2014 issue of *Forum Journal: Imagining a More Inclusive Preservation Program*. Read more stories on diversity [here](#).

*Megan Springate is a PhD candidate in the Anthropology Department at the University of Maryland College Park. She is currently under contract with the National Park Service to write a guidelines and information document to help facilitate the inclusion of more LGBTQ properties in the National Register and National Historic Landmarks Programs.*

[Diversity, Forum Benefit](#)

## One Response

### Mark Meinke

May 2, 2014

It should be pointed out the Washington, DC's LGBTQ community's map and context survey were first completed in 2002 and presented at the 2002 Washington DC Historical Studies Conference. The listing of LGBTQ historic sites in DC has been available online to researchers and the local community on Rainbow History's website since 2001.

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