

A Crash Course on Researching and Interpreting LGBTQ (plus) Local History



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So you've been convinced by our previous articles and you want to incorporate LGBTQ history into your site's interpretation. Maybe you are ready to dig into a story you've been tiptoe-ing around for years, or maybe you're looking to find local LGBTQ stories to expand your interpretation. Either way, I recommend you start at the same place: researching the historical context. You can find helpful bibliographies in Susan Ferentinos' book, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites*, and on outhistory.org. There are decades' worth of scholarship on the history of same-sex sexuality and gender variance. You will want to familiarize yourself with the topic and time period you are focusing on to get a feel for general themes to look for and terminology you can use in searching.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender are each words with specific histories, many of them fairly recent. Individuals living 50 or 100 or 200 years ago probably understood their own gender and sexuality differently than we do today, and used different terms for it. These terms will be invaluable for research, but often are hurtful slurs when used in modern contexts. Alternative search terms for gay or bisexual include: character defect, deviant, immoral, invert, pervert, queer, sapphism, sodomite, and tribade. Again, do be careful. These terms are currently considered offensive; they should only be used to guide your research.

Your secondary source research might give you ideas of what to research to find LGBTQ histories in your area, but here are some ideas to consider. If you are looking for the recent local history of your area, community archives can be invaluable resources for you. Those may be housed in organizations like the Ohio Lesbian Archives, or collected by individuals in the community. Your outreach will help you connect with these resources and your community contacts will allow to do projects like oral history, which has been a crucial method for documenting LGBTQ history. (Of course, oral history takes a lot of trust building to be successful.)

Don't forget about very recent history as well. Did your town host its first LGBTQ Pride event last year? Consider taking some posters or photographs into your collection.

For older history, consider thinking not just of the LGBTQ acronym, but of looking more broadly for instances of same-sex love and sexuality and of gender variance. Maybe your town has a locally famous couple of men or couple of women who lived together and no one ever talked about it. Maybe you've found a sensational article in your local paper about a "woman who lived as a man for decades!" Try researching that and learning more about the context. If you interpret an asylum, a poor house, a penitentiary or even a single-sex school, you likely have stories to investigate. Same-sex



sexuality and gender variance have been medicalized and criminalized, and single-sex institutions are more likely to have instances of same-sex sexuality. You may also want to look into local laws about "sodomy" and "cross-dressing" as well as how state laws played out in your county or township. Alternative search terms for relevant criminal offenses include: buggery, disorderly house, gross indecency, importuning, indecency, obscenity, sexual offences, sodomy, soliciting, street offences, unnatural offences, and unnatural acts. Not all of the criminal charges under these terms will be dealing with LGBTQ individuals, of course—you'll need to do further research, but searching these terms can be a starting point.

Some of this history is painful and difficult to face, but making the choice to interpret it can be incredibly meaningful for your organizations and your community. There are many ways of interpreting LGBTQ history and it's ok to start small. You can incorporate acknowledgements of same-sex sexuality and gender variance into your regular interpretation, or hold a single special program or small exhibit. Just remember that doing good LGBTQ history requires the same principles as doing good history. Be transparent about what you do know, what you don't know, and how you learned it. If you're not sure what labels someone might have used for themselves, simply describe what you do know about their life. Consider that challenge an opportunity to help visitors understand that even sexuality and gender change over time. Use your cultural competency to be respectful of the experiences of the people who lived these histories as well as the people learning about them. Don't let the fear of backlash or making a mistake stop you from telling the full story of your historic site.

You can find more resources and examples in *Interpreting LGBTQ History at Museums and Historic Sites*, by Susan Ferentinos, on Outhistory.org, from the National Park Service's LGBTQ Heritage Initiative and on the Alliance website. You can also contact me at nancy.a.yerian@gmail.com or vibrantkin.org.