



Why Preserve and Share LGBTQ History?



MSS 1150 AV, Stonewall Union Records, courtesy Ohio History Connection



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In June, many cities around the world host Pride celebrations recognizing the contributions and impact of LGBTQ people. These festivals, parades, and other gatherings commemorate the Stonewall Uprising of June 28, 1969, which many consider a watershed moment in 20th century LGBTQ history.¹

Accordingly, this issue of *The Local Historian* will focus on LGBTQ history. In particular, it will provide suggestions for ways to collaborate with LGBTQ communities, and share strategies for researching and interpreting LGBTQ history. This article, specifically, aims to answer the question, "Why preserve and share LGBTQ history?" The answer involves exploring museum industry best practice and the role of museums and historic sites as trusted authorities on history.

First, we should briefly address the acronym itself. "LGBTQ" stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning. It is an umbrella term that describes sexual orientation, gender, and gender expression. Though seemingly inclusive, the acronym excludes many other orientations, identities, and expressions. Therefore, it is important to remember the acronym represents a wide variety of experiences and histories, and even has a history all its own. Starting with just "GL" (gay, lesbian) in the late 1980s, it has continually grown, reflecting the diversity surrounding sexuality and gender.

Diversity and inclusivity are central to museum industry best practice, and appear throughout the American Alliance of Museums' (AAM) Standards Regarding Public Trust and Accountability. The AAM stresses the importance of a mu-

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seum being “a good neighbor in its geographic area.”² In other words, a museum or historic site must be able to work with the communities its mission serves and the communities who live near the physical building or site itself. LGBTQ people comprise roughly 3.5 percent of Ohio’s total population, meaning public historians must assume LGBTQ people live near and visit local museums and historic sites.³

It is also important to realize museum visitors—LGBTQ or otherwise—are interested in learning about LGBTQ perspectives throughout history. In her award-winning book, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* (2015), Susan Ferentinos cites several examples of museums that saw increased and diversified visitation after incorporating LGBTQ perspectives into their interpretation (see the July/August 2015 edition of *The Local Historian* for Nancy Yerian’s detailed review of the book).⁴ By presenting LGBTQ narratives, historic sites and museums around Ohio could attract new and diverse audiences ready for fresh perspectives in exhibits, programs, and other initiatives.

Along with increasing visitation, inclusive narratives and interpretation allow museums and historic sites to authentically share history. Presenting an authentic account of history often requires exploring multiple viewpoints. For years, however, museums and historic sites underrepresented—if not plainly ignored—LGBTQ perspectives in collections, exhibits, and programs. Scholars such as Michael

Bronski and George Chauncey would strongly disagree with this approach to presenting history, as their works highlight the long histories of LGBTQ culture and people in the United States.⁵ It is important that public history organizations follow suit and present these histories to our audiences because, as Ferentinos wrote, “museums can offer...visibility to a group of people who have been consistently marginalized or erased in the larger culture.”⁶ The invisibility of LGBTQ history in museums and historic sites is problematic because the public trusts these institutions to accurately portray the past. Consider a 2018 American Association for State and Local History survey: 81 percent of respondents ranked museums and historic sites as “absolutely” or “somewhat” trustworthy.⁷

As public historians, we have a responsibility to share and foster a true understanding of the past. In order to do this, we may need to look hard at the narratives we present and, at the same time, those we do not present. Museums and historic sites long ignored LGBTQ perspectives. But, it is encouraging to see more public history organizations incorporating LGBTQ history into their exhibits, programs, and other initiatives. Such examples show the importance of revisiting and expanding the histories we preserve and share. By preserving and sharing diverse histories, such as those of LGBTQ communities, public historians can live up to industry standards. Moreover, they can meet the public’s expectation that museums and historic sites will present authentic, well-rounded historical narratives.

¹ “Stonewall National Monument – New York,” National Park Service, 1 March 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/ston/index.htm>, last accessed 12 April 2018; Susan Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015): 79–80.

² “Public Trust and Accountability: Standards Regarding Public Trust and Accountability,” American Alliance of Museums, 2013, last accessed 12 April 2018, <http://aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/public-trust>.

³ Gary J. Gates, “Gallup Special Report: New Estimates of the LGBTQ Population in the United States,” *The Williams Institute – UCLA School of Law*, February 2013, last accessed 12 April 2018, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/census-lgbt-demographics-studies/gallup-lgbt-pop-feb-2013/>; “LGBTQ Populations Map,” Movement Advancement Project, 2018, last accessed 12 April 2018, http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/lgbt_populationss; Dante Chinni, “LGBTQ Voters’ Political Clout, State by State,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 June 2016, last accessed 12 April 2018, <https://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/06/17/lgbt-voters-2016-political-clout-state-by-state/>.

⁴ Ferentinos 2015: 12–13. Nancy Yerian, Review of *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites*, by Susan Ferentinos, *The Local Historian*, July/August 2015, p.5.

⁵ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Megan E. Springate (ed.), *LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History* (Washington: National Park Foundation, 2016), last accessed 12 April 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lgbtqheritage/upload/lgbtqtheme-history.pdf>

⁶ Ferentinos 2015, 9.

⁷ John Dichtl, “Most Trust Museums as Sources of Historical Information,” *American Association for State and Local History*, 20 February 2018, last accessed 12 April 2018, <http://blogs.aaslh.org/most-trust-museums/>.