



Boston

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Founded by strait-laced Puritans in the seventeenth century, Boston has seen a variety of responses to its glbtq citizens, ranging from acceptance of "Boston marriages" to vice squad raids of gay bars to joyous weddings of same-sex couples.

Moreover, as a center of learning and culture, Boston has exerted an influence on American thought disproportionate to its population. As Douglass Shand-Tucci has shown in his brilliant study entitled *The Crimson Letter: Harvard, Homosexuality, and the Shaping of American Culture*, responses to homosexuality at Harvard have varied from acceptance to anathema, and often with significant consequences for the society as a whole. Not only have many of the leading glbtq writers and artists been Harvard graduates, but so have many of the leaders of the movement for glbtq equality, from Frank Kameny to Martin Duberman to Charles Shively to Andrew Tobias.

Colonial Period

The first Europeans to settle in the area that would become Boston were the Pilgrims, who arrived on the *Mayflower* in 1620. The success of their settlement, due in no small part to the help of the indigenous Native Americans, emboldened another English group, the Puritans, to come to the New World and found the city of Boston in 1630. Two years later Boston became the capital of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

For approximately the first decade of the colony's existence there was considerable wrangling over what legal system ought to prevail. The settlers wanted to write their own laws, which caused the British government to make two attempts to revoke their charter. The colonists persisted and adopted their first criminal code, the *Body of Liberties*, in 1641. Its statute against sodomy was based on the language of the biblical book of Leviticus rather than traditional legal texts. The penalty was death.

Given the societal as well as legal climate, discretion was of paramount importance to people involved in same-sex loves, and so little is known about their lives.

No prosecutions for sodomy took place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and there were few dealing with other same-sex sexual practices. The first known case brought was against a servant woman, Elizabeth Johnson, who was found guilty of "unseemly practices betwixt her and another maid attempting to do that which man and woman do" in 1642. Her penalty was a whipping and a fine.

The British government eventually succeeded in revoking the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1684, restoring English law there.

Revolutionary Era

The small town of Boston grew and became more diverse. By the middle of the eighteenth century it had developed into an important commercial port for the British Empire.

Bostonians enraged by the high taxes imposed by the Tea Act of 1773 protested with the Boston Tea Party, in which a group of men boarded a merchant ship and tossed its cargo of tea into the harbor. Fervor for independence quickly grew.

The American Revolutionary War began in April 1775 with battles in the nearby towns of Lexington and Concord. Among the Bostonians who joined the Continental Army were at least two women.

Deborah Sampson, known to her fellow soldiers as Robert Shurtleff, was discovered to be female when she contracted a fever and was hospitalized. In a 1797 biography of Sampson, Herman Mann suggested that she had had romantic encounters with women while she was a soldier, but his conclusion was that "it must be supposed, she acted more from necessity, than a voluntary impulse of passion."

Sampson was honorably discharged and awarded a pension, but Ann Bailey was not so lucky. She, who served under the name Samuel Gay, was convicted of passing as a man and sentenced to two months in jail.

Nineteenth Century

Changes to the Massachusetts legal system in the nineteenth century included the elimination of the death penalty for sodomy in 1805. The new code called for one year of solitary confinement and up to ten years at hard labor. A further revision in 1835 increased the sentence to up to twenty years but without solitary confinement or hard labor.

The nineteenth century saw the rise of same-sex romantic friendships. Men, particularly the well-educated, often cited classical Greek figures such as Damon and Pythias or Orestes and Pylades as models for their special friendships. Given the legal situation, it was still important for men in particular to be circumspect in displaying affection.

Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal of his affection for a fellow Harvard student, Martin Gay, and of "those sensations of vivid pleasure which his presence was wont to waken spontaneously."

Emerson's disciple Henry David Thoreau also felt emotional attraction for other men and expressed his feelings in poems like "Friendship" and "Lately, Alas I Knew a Gentle Boy."

Another member of the Transcendentalist circle, Margaret Fuller, stated in her 1845 feminist study *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* that she believed that all people had both masculine and feminine qualities. On the subject of love she was unequivocal: "It is true that a woman may be in love with a woman, a man with a man."

Boston-born actress Charlotte Cushman, who was famous for playing male roles, established a household of artistic women in Rome. Three of them--British writer Matilda Hays and sculptors Harriet Hosmer and Emma Stebbins--were Cushman's romantic partners. When Cushman became terminally ill with cancer, she and Stebbins returned to the United States and lived together in Boston until Cushman's death.

Boston Marriages, Bohemianism, and Censorship

Boston gave its name to the unions of women who lived together in long-term committed relationships--"Boston marriages." Among the better-known of such couples who lived in or near Boston were writer Sarah Orne Jewett and Annie Adams Fields; poet and educator Katharine Lee Bates and Katharine Coman; sculptor Anne Whitney and painter Abby Adeline Manning; poet Amy Lowell and actress Ada Dwyer Russell; and Alice James, the sister of psychologist William James and novelist Henry James, and Katharine Peabody Loring, who became models for characters in Henry James's novel *The Bostonians*

(1886).

"Bohemianism" took root in Boston in the late nineteenth century. In the 1880s a group influenced by the work of Oscar Wilde formed a society called the Visionists. Among the members was artistic photographer F. Holland Day, well known for his work depicting the male nude. Day and his friend Herbert Copeland also established the publishing company that produced the first American edition of Wilde's *Salomé*, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley, in 1894. Due to the furor it created, the Boston Public Library quickly removed it from circulation.

Twentieth Century

The official primarily responsible for deciding what literary and theatrical works would be "banned in Boston" was the chief of the Licensing Division of the Mayor's Office, a post established in 1904. This censor came under close scrutiny from "morality groups," including the New England Watch and Ward Society and the Catholic-affiliated League of Decency.

The Watch and Ward Society also took a lively interest in the decisions of the Licensing Bureau, which controlled liquor licenses. Society members conducted surveillance of the city's gay bars and relayed their findings to both the Licensing Board and the vice squad.

Boston's gay and lesbian subculture flourished during the years of World War II. Gay men found opportunities for romantic encounters with sailors from the several naval bases in the area; and lesbians from small towns or rural areas who came to Boston to do war work were able to discover a community of women-loving women.

By contrast, the years following the war brought a new round of police attention. Both bars and private parties were frequently raided and those present arrested. If cases came to trial, the names and addresses of the people charged could be printed in the newspaper. Even if they were not convicted, they could suffer devastating consequences, including the loss of their jobs.

A patron of the Punch Bowl, a popular bar in the 1950s and 1960s, recalled the scene: "About once a night they would flash the emergency light, which meant that the vice were coming and you had to stop dancing with your boyfriend, since it was illegal back then. You could dance with a lesbian, or you could sit down."

Despite the harassment, a fair number of bars and few theaters, mainly clustered just south of Boston Common, catered to a gay clientele. Playland, in business since 1938, is the oldest gay bar in the city. Sporter's, a Beacon Hill venue, was made famous in Andrew Tobias's *The Best Little Boy in the World* (1973). Sporter's closed in 1995.

In the 1960s Boston undertook urban renewal projects that led to the razing of numerous older buildings, many of historic significance. Among the areas of the city that saw considerable demolition were gay and lesbian centers--Scollay Square, Bay Village, South Cove, and Park Square.

Although the origins of the urban renewal projects were not homophobic, at least one politician, city councilman Frederick C. Langone, expressed his approval of the destruction of gay bars, saying, "We will be better off without these incubators of homosexuality and indecency and a Bohemian way of life."

GLBTQ Organizing

Displaced but undefeated, Boston's glbtq citizens began organizing. 1969 saw the foundation of the Homophile Union of Boston and a chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis. The *Gay Community News*, a weekly newspaper for the national gay and lesbian community, was launched in 1973 and continued publication until 1999. The more radical paper, *Fag Rag*, flourished in the 1970s and 1980s.

Bostonians sent Elaine Noble to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1974, making her the first openly lesbian member of that body. When redistricting would have pitted her against fellow incumbent Barney Frank in 1978, she chose not to stand for re-election. Frank retained the seat and eventually went on to the United States House of Representatives, where he has been a prominent voice for glbtq rights.

In 1978, Gay & Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD) was founded. It has since become one of the nation's leading legal rights organization dedicated to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation, HIV status, and gender identity and expression.

Since at least the early 1980s, when glbtq religious activist, diversity consultant, and writer Brian McNaught held the position, the Mayors of Boston have appointed liaisons to the gay and lesbian community.

Although Massachusetts has a reputation as a liberal bastion, the passage of a bill to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation required a long and arduous battle. It took some seventeen years--often punctuated by obstructionist parliamentary tactics, heated debate, and public protest--before the bill became law in 1989.

Despite the anti-discrimination legislation a controversy erupted in 1992, when the South Boston Allied War Veterans Council attempted to ban the Irish-American Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Group of Boston from the city's annual St. Patrick's Day parade. Temporary injunctions allowed queer participation in the 1992 and 1993 parades, but in 1994 the sponsoring veterans' group elected to cancel the event for the sole purpose of preventing glbtq people from being part of the celebration of their Irish heritage. The case went to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled in 1995 that the veterans had a First Amendment right to determine who could participate in the parade.

In 1994, *The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* (since 1999, known as *The Gay & Lesbian Review / Worldwide*) began publication. An attempt to fill a void in glbtq culture, the *Review*, edited by Richard Schneider, Jr., has become the most literate and intellectual of glbtq journals.

Although Massachusetts's sodomy law had not been enforced against consenting adults in private for many years, efforts to repeal the statute in the legislature were repeatedly stalled by a conservative House Speaker. In 2002, the statute was finally voided by a unanimous Supreme Judicial Court ruling.

Same-Sex Marriage

In November 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, adjudicating a lawsuit filed by seven same-sex couples seeking the right to marry, ruled in *Goodridge v. Dep't of Public Health* that "a person who enters into an intimate, exclusive union with another of the same sex is arbitrarily deprived of membership in one of our community's most rewarding and cherished institutions. That exclusion is incompatible with the constitutional principles of respect for individual autonomy and equality under law."

The decision was bitterly attacked by conservatives, who called for a constitutional amendment restricting marriage to heterosexual couples. That measure may be on the ballot in November 2006.

Nevertheless, the weddings began on May 17, 2004, the first taking place in the Boston suburb of Cambridge just minutes after midnight. All seven couples who had shared in the long legal struggle now share May 17 as their anniversary date.

The day was one of celebrations across Massachusetts as hundreds of couples were married in city halls, churches, synagogues, parks, and in one case on their Christmas tree farm. Although small groups of right-wing opponents staged protests in Boston, the mood remained festive, with rainbow flags flying and the Boston Gay Men's Chorus serenading newlyweds.

Sexual Abuse by Priests

During the decade of the 1990s Boston was among the American archdioceses rocked by scandals of sexual abuse by priests. Victims included girls and women, but many were boys. For many years the archdiocese, under the leadership of Bernard Cardinal Law, merely transferred abusive clergymen from one parish to another instead of taking steps to halt their conduct. Catholics and others were outraged when the cover-up was exposed.

More than 500 victims filed lawsuits, which, it is estimated, may cost the diocese over a hundred million dollars.

Law resigned under pressure in December 2002, but Pope John Paul II quickly called him to Rome and installed him as archpriest of one of the city's main basilicas, St. Mary Major. In that capacity Law officiated at one of the Masses during the period of mourning for the pontiff in April 2005. All but one of the seven cardinals from United States dioceses absented themselves from the service.

Boston Today

In Boston today the principal gay neighborhood is the South End--not to be confused with the geographically adjacent but culturally distant South Boston neighborhood that hosts the St. Patrick's Day parade. There are lesbian communities in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood and also across the river in Cambridge.

Boston has a wide variety of gay and lesbian bars and clubs catering to tastes from drag to leather, from show tunes to jazz to the latest alternative rock. There are also gay- or lesbian-owned or -friendly restaurants, bookstores, health clubs, and lodging places.

A highlight of the year is Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Pride Week, which is held in early June. The celebration begins with the South End Pride Lighting, the illumination of pink lights bedecking a large tree outside the Boston Center for the Arts. Activities throughout the week include parties, dances, and harbor cruises. The festival culminates in a downtown parade at which glbtq Bostonians and their allies come together to celebrate with pride.

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