



Northampton

by Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur

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Located in the Connecticut River Valley in the Berkshire Foothills of western Massachusetts, Northampton is a small city with a population of about 30,000, yet it has become a center of queerness, especially of lesbian activism.

Northampton began as a Puritan community, purchased from the native Nonotouck tribe in 1654. Prior to 1808, it was a small farming community with limited access to the outside world because of transportation problems. But beginning in 1808, transportation improved with the erection of a series of bridges, the building of a canal, and an 1845 railroad linking Northampton to Springfield, New Haven, and the wider world. Excellent private preparatory schools for girls, boys, and deaf children were built in the area, as well as a vocational school.

In 1871, Sophia Smith established Smith College, one of the few remaining elite women's colleges in the United States. Northampton's wider environment also includes four other colleges, including Amherst College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Hampshire College (known for its experimental and innovative curriculum), and Mount Holyoke College (the first institution for women's higher education in the United States).

Perhaps because of the high concentration of young, educated women in the region, along with its liberal politics, Northampton has become a magnet for queer culture and people. The town now boasts a glbtq community center, a gay men's chorus, referral networks for glbtq-friendly therapists and educators, and numerous social and support groups.

Glbtq-friendly businesses in the area include a lesbian inn, adoption agencies, attorneys, a sex toy shop, a store featuring glbtq merchandise and books, financial advisors specializing in domestic partner advising, jewelers specializing in commitment rings, a women's magazine, performance spaces, and a nightclub, all promoted by a glbtq chamber of commerce.

The queer culture of Northampton differs, however, from that of such queer hot spots as San Francisco and New York City. Northampton's queerness, while now very welcoming to gay men, is explicitly female and lesbian.

This has been the source of some controversy for the city's gay community, particularly in regards to the annual pride parade, which draws thousands of marchers and spectators, as well as participants in a post-parade rally. Particularly controversial has been the inclusion of bisexuals and transgender people, though the march in recent years has been inclusive of all queer people.

In the early 1990s, lesbian separatism was strong in the city, leading to, for instance, bookstores and restaurants that admitted only women, as well as a newspaper that accepted advertisements only from lesbian-owned businesses, though those practices have since diminished. Notable lesbian residents include Leslea Newman, poet and author, as well as academics and political luminaries.



Main Street in Northampton, Massachusetts. Photograph by Daniel Heintz. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License 2.0.

Politics in Northampton have also been contentious. Lesbians (whose numbers have been estimated variously from a few thousand to as many as 10,000) and other queer people have competed for influence with the old guard, who grew up in Northampton when it was still a local industrial center.

In the 1990s, one candidate for city council even ran on a platform of abolishing the pride parade. Additionally, a May 1995 city council measure establishing a domestic partnership registry was overturned by a voter referendum six months later.

However, recent years have led to more progressive local politics as lesbian residents have become established members of the political field.

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About the Author

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