



## Philadelphia

by Gary D. Pratt

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"The city of brotherly love" was founded in 1681. As one of America's oldest cities, Philadelphia's identity is grounded in its role as the nation's birthplace and home to the American Quaker movement. Despite its rich historical contributions and size (the 2000 census ranks Philadelphia sixth among U. S. metropolitan areas), the city has often been overlooked as a center for gay and lesbian culture, overshadowed by nearby New York City and Washington, D. C.

### Early Culture

Two figures that define much of the city's cultural history are the painter and photographer Thomas Eakins and the poet Walt Whitman. Eakins was born and educated in Philadelphia, and upon his return from Europe in 1876, his art challenged the puritanical culture of the time in its celebration of the male body. Whitman's poetry similarly challenged American prudishness. After the publication of the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman made his home across the Delaware River in the New Jersey city of Camden. He lies buried there in Harleigh Cemetery.

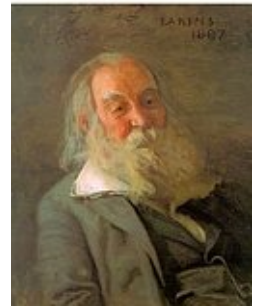
In 1893, Magnus Hirschfeld, German sexologist and early activist, toured several American cities, including Philadelphia. Although noting anecdotally the small presence of homosexual life in the city, Hirschfeld recounts a correspondent's notes about a Turkish bath with a large homosexual clientele.

### Post-World War II

Philadelphia's industrial growth and large military population due to its naval base spawned a vital gay and lesbian social life in the years following World War II. In the 1950s, lesbians and gay men frequented a number of Center City coffeehouses and bars, such as the Gilded Cage, Humoresque, the Surf, and the Westbury (which continues to operate).

But many of these venues were also subject to aggressive raids by then police captain, and later mayor, Frank Rizzo. Ironically, the 1950s was also a period of debate over the naming of the Walt Whitman Bridge. Supporters championed the naming as a memorial to the national poet who celebrated democratic values; detractors associated Whitman with decadence, effeminacy, and homosexuality. The bridge opened in 1957.

In the 1960s, Philadelphia was home to branches of the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), as well as national homophile periodicals, *Drum* (1964-69) and *The Ladder* (the publication of the DOB, edited by Philadelphia Barbara Gittings 1963-66). Perhaps the most important pre-Stonewall political action was the 1965 Fourth of July protest in front of Independence Hall. The orderly and peaceful demonstration of nearly 50 marchers, organized by East Coast Homophile Organizations (ECHO), drew national media attention and gave visibility to gays and lesbians.



A self-portrait (top) and a painting of Walt Whitman (above, 1887) by Thomas Eakins. Eakins and Whitman defined much of Philadelphia's cultural history.

## **Post-Stonewall**

As in other major cities, Philadelphia's lesbian and gay political groups became galvanized in the 1970s. A local Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was formed, and student groups emerged at Temple University, the University of Pennsylvania, and La Salle University. The city's first Gay Pride March was held in 1972; the *Philadelphia Gay News*, a weekly newspaper, began publishing in 1976; the Pennsylvania Lesbian and Gay Task Force (PLGTF) was formed in 1978 to advance lesbian and gay civil rights.

By 1980, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's sodomy law was declared unconstitutional, and in 1982 Philadelphia amended its human rights laws to extend protections to lesbian and gay people. Political life in the remainder of the decade was dominated by activities in response to the AIDS crisis, as in the establishment of Action AIDS in 1986, a local service organization whose initial support came largely from the gay and lesbian community.

## **Scandals and Clashes**

Events in 1992 served to fuel tensions between the glbtq community and City Hall. The year was marked by police invasions of an adult bookstore, a raid on Schuylkill River Park (a cruising area known locally as Judy Garland Park) where 19 men were arrested for indecency, the prosecution of 83-year-old Eddy Savitz for alleged sex with teenage male prostitutes, and a brutal police assault on members of ACT-UP demonstrating against President George H. W. Bush.

In 1993, Jonathan Demme's film *Philadelphia* opened, starring Tom Hanks as a gay lawyer who contracts AIDS and battles homophobia. The movie raised awareness about AIDS and gayness, and touched the consciences of many Philadelphians. Philadelphia's first gay and lesbian film festival was held in 1995 and the venue has grown each year since.

## **Today**

In the later 1990s local political action centered on domestic partner benefits. Although the City of Philadelphia now provides benefits to same-sex partners of its employees, the act is continually contested in the courts.

The William Way Center opened in 1997. Named for Bill Way, a city employee and community activist who advocated for affordable housing, the center serves as a meeting place, library, and archives for Philadelphia's glbtq communities.

The queer geography of Philadelphia has remained much the same since the 1950s, with social life largely concentrated in the Washington Square West neighborhood (or "gay-borhood") in Center City. Over the years, the West Philadelphia/University City and Mt. Airy areas have also had large glbtq populations.

Recently, the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation became the first government-supported tourism agency in the United States to attempt to attract gay tourists via television when it launched a multi-million dollar campaign to bring gay visitors to Philadelphia.

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