



Washington, D. C.

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The capital of the United States since 1800, Washington, D. C. has also been one of the capitals of glbtq life in the country for more than a century, despite periodic crackdowns by the police and government.

Historically, the city's gay population has been divided by race and gender, which led to the early development of vibrant black glbtq and white lesbian communities and established the District of Columbia as a leader in the black glbtq and lesbian feminist movements.

The city has also been at the forefront of enacting glbtq rights legislation, even though the federal government has continually tried to thwart any local measure favorable to glbtq communities.

Cruising Men in the Nation's Capital

Washington's gay history dates back at least to the early 1890s, when black men in "womanly attire" held an annual "drag dance," and eighteen men, the majority of them African American, were caught engaging in oral sex in Lafayette Square across from the White House within the span of a few months in 1892.

The threat (and reality) of arrest notwithstanding, men seeking other men for sex continued to frequent the city's extensive federal park system. For example, "Jeb Alexander," a white, middle-class government employee, regularly cruised downtown parks, as well as sought sexual partners in the city's theaters and burlesque houses, during the early 1920s.

African Americans in the Life

With segregation limiting the access of African Americans to public establishments in the District until the 1950s, the parks were one of the few places where blacks and whites interested in same-sex sexual relationships could interact with each other, although several interracial clubs catered to lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals during the 1920s and 1930s. In the late 1940s, a bar located near Howard University was popular with black gay and bisexual men and white men looking to meet black sex partners.

Since African Americans who were "in the life" could not patronize many of the gay restaurants and bars that arose in Washington in the early and mid-twentieth century, they often entertained at home or socialized in bars or after-hours places with other African Americans.

They also began to create their own bars, including Nob Hill, which opened as a private club in the early 1950s and was thought to be the oldest continuing black gay bar in the country for many years before it closed in 2004.

Glbq African Americans in the capital have continued to make history, establishing the Baltimore-Washington Coalition of Black Gay Men and Women, the nation's first black gay activist organization, in 1978



The U.S. Capitol in Washington D. C. The photograph of the capitol created by Wikimedia Commons Contributor Jim appears under the Creative Commons Attribution License 2.0.

(which continues today as the D. C. Coalition of Black Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals) and the nation's first Black Lesbian and Gay Pride Weekend in 1991.

The District of Columbia has also been a cultural center for black glbtq artists, most notably in the 1980s, when local performers, including Essex Hemphill and Michelle Parkerson, achieved national acclaim.

Lesbian Feminist Activism

Lesbian feminist activists in the city have also had a national impact. The theory and practice of the lesbian feminist movement was shaped in part by the writing of the Furies, a collective of twelve white women who lived and worked together in Washington in 1971-1972. Members of the group, including Rita Mae Brown, Joan E. Biren (JEB), Ginny Berson, and Charlotte Bunch, subsequently became pioneers in lesbian literature, art, music, and politics.

In 1990, lesbian activists in the District founded the Mary-Helen Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer, the first national organization whose mission is to provide support to same-sex loving women affected by the disease. The group also seeks to educate lesbians about their cancer risk and medical practitioners about the community's health care needs. In large part because of the Mautner Project's efforts, the impact of cancer on lesbians and bisexual women is beginning to be discussed by the American medical establishment.

Policing Gay Desire

Besides its groundbreaking black glbtq and lesbian feminist movements, the District of Columbia stands out in glbtq history for being the site of one of the worst crackdowns against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in the twentieth century. Responding to the increased visibility of gay men in the parks and bars of Washington after World War II, and to Cold War hysteria that linked homosexuality and Communism, the city's Park Police launched a "Sexual Perversion Elimination Program" and the District Police formed a special morals squad. Together, they arrested more than a thousand gay and bisexual men per year in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The persecution culminated with Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt against suspected gay men and lesbians in the government, which led to the firing of hundreds of federal workers and the enactment of a 1953 Executive Order barring federal agencies from employing "sexual perverts."

Inasmuch as the government is the major employer in the city, this ban posed a severe hardship, particularly for white gay men. The number of government dismissals declined by the 1960s, but it was not until the 1990s that federal agencies began instituting anti-discrimination policies to protect the rights of their lesbian, gay, and bisexual workers.

In response to this persecution, Washington's first effective homophile organization, the Mattachine Society of Washington, was organized in 1961 by activists Frank Kameny, Jack Nichols, Lilli Vincenz, and others. Not associated with the national Mattachine Society, which had briefly sponsored a Washington chapter in the 1950s but which was in disarray in 1961, the new local organization's most visible action occurred in 1965, when it initiated a series of pickets of government institutions, including the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department, and the Civil Service Commission, that discriminated against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals.

The Federal vs. Local Government

While the federal government has historically been antagonistic toward the glbtq community, the local District government has been at the forefront of enacting glbtq rights legislation ever since Congress granted limited autonomy to the city in the early 1970s.

In 1973, Washington became the first major city in the country to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment, and public accommodations, and in 1976, these rights were extended to include child custody and visitation cases, the first such law in the United States. Lobbying from gay activists also led the city to cut off funding for the police department's morals squad in 1975, effectively ending decades of persecution.

Since the 1980s, however, the federal government has regularly tried to prevent the District from enacting pro-glbtc measures under a provision of the home-rule charter that enables Congress to overturn legislation passed by the D. C. city council. In this way, the government prevented the District from repealing its sodomy law for twelve years, finally relenting in 1993, and blocked a domestic partnership law until 2002-- nine years after it was passed by the city council.

Congress continues to prevent the District from spending funds to implement a clean needle exchange program to combat the spread of HIV and from enforcing a ruling by the D. C. Commission on Human Rights that ordered the Boy Scouts of America to reinstate two openly gay local scout leaders.

National Headquarters

As the national capital and the center of political power, Washington, D. C. has become home to a number of organizations important to the glbtq movement for equality. The Human Rights Campaign, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, GenderPAC, the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, the AIDS Action Council, the National Minority AIDS Council, and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) are just a few of the organizations headquartered in the capital.

Because Washington is the nation's capital, it has also been the site of the most important national demonstrations for glbtq rights, including four Marches on Washington.

Conclusion

Discussions involving Washington, D. C. and glbtq people often focus on the lack of support, if not outright hostility, of the federal government toward gay and lesbian rights. But the capital has vibrant glbtq communities with rich histories that deserve to be documented. A bookstore, medical clinics, bars and restaurants, and political and cultural organizations are just a few of the lively community institutions enjoyed today by glbtq residents of Washington.

[Same-Sex Marriage

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About the Author

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.