

A SHORT HISTORY OF LGBT ACTIVISM IN THE USA



Although the Stonewall riots in 1969 in New York are popularly remembered as the spark that produced a new gay liberation movement, the origins predate this iconic event. Certainly, militant resistance to police bar-raids was nothing new – as early as 1725, customers fought off a police raid at a London (UK) homosexual/trans-gender molly house. Organized movements, particularly in Western Europe, have been active since the 19th century, producing publications, forming social groups and campaigning for social and legal reform. The movements of the period immediately preceding gay liberation, i.e. from the end of World War II to the late 1960s, are known collectively as the Homophile movement. The **Society for Human Rights** was the first recognized gay rights organization in the United States, established in Chicago in 1924 having received a charter from the state of Illinois, and producing the first American publication for homosexuals, *Friendship and Freedom*. A few months after being chartered, the group ceased to exist in the wake of the arrest of several of the Society's members. Despite its short existence, the Society has been recognized as a precursor to the modern gay liberation movement and spurred the creation of future gay rights societies.

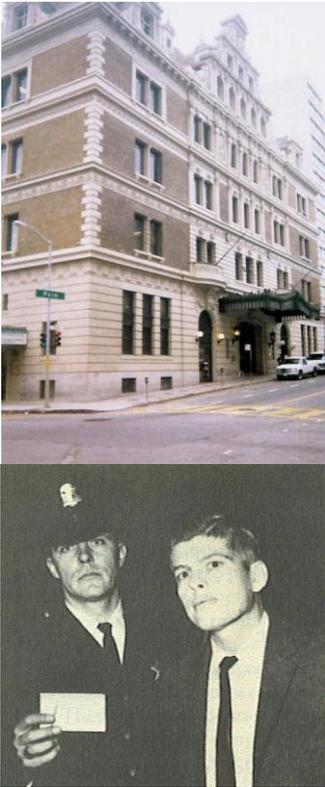
The **Mattachine Society** was founded in 1950 by Harry Hay and a group of Los Angeles male friends who formed the group to protect and improve the rights of homosexuals. Because of concerns for secrecy and the founders' leftist ideology, they adopted the cell organization being used by the Communist Party. In the anti-Communist atmosphere of the 1950s, the Society's growing membership replaced the group's early Communist model with a more traditional ameliorative civil rights leadership style and agenda. Then, as branches formed in other cities, the Society splintered in regional groups by 1961.

The **Daughters of Bilitis (DOB or the Daughters)**, was the first lesbian rights organization in the United States. It was formed in San Francisco in 1955, conceived as a social alternative to lesbian bars, which were considered illegal and thus subject to raids and police harassment. It lasted for fourteen years and became a tool of education for lesbians, gay men, researchers and mental health professionals. As the DOB gained members, their focus shifted to providing support to women who were afraid to come out, by educating them about their rights and gay history.

Other groups included the League for Civil Education, the Tavern Guild and the Society for Individual Rights, which was organized in mid-1964. In San Francisco, clergymen from the Glide Urban Center and Methodist Church formed, with gay activists, the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH). (This was the first group in the U.S. to use the word "homosexual" in its name.) Incorporated in December 1964, CRH began to educate religious communities about gay/lesbian issues as well as

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enlist religious leaders to advocate for homosexual concerns. The pioneering work of these religious leaders and homosexual activists had immediate and ever-growing social impact. The six major homophile groups in San Francisco joined together to cosponsor a private dance on New Year's Day 1965 to raise funds for the fledgling CRH. Notwithstanding the irony that CRH's first major public event was a lavish drag ball, the clergy worked with the homophile groups to ensure the success of this event. This included negotiating terms with the San Francisco police and city government that were notorious for their harassment and persecution of gays and lesbians.



Above: California Hall, now the California Culinary Academy.
Below: Herb Donaldson, CRH Lawyer, arrested for attempting to block police from entering the New Year's Day Ball, went on to become San Francisco's first gay judge.

Despite the agreement, as guests began to arrive at California Hall for the New Year's Day Ball, dozens of police officers appeared in the street with kleig lights and cameras. Police officers periodically entered the hall on the pretense of inspecting and six people were arrested. Even in the face of such harassment, more than 500 persons - including several clergymen and their wives - ignored or endured this attempted persecution and entered the dance. In response to the raid, the clergy leaders of CRH held a press conference the next morning. Their expression of outrage and call for an end to police harassment of homosexual persons provoked unparalleled public clamor and mobilization of activity by homophile groups and leaders. For the first time in a gay rights case, the ACLU stepped in to assist the three CRH lawyers and the "ticket-taker" who had been arrested. All four were acquitted and the police berated by the judge for their tactics and harassment. The outpouring of activity following the California Hall incident, often recognized as San Francisco's "Stonewall," thrust the newly-formed CRH into the public spotlight. A new organization, Society for Individual Rights, formed around the same time as CRH and, with more grass roots emphasis than some earlier homophile groups, began its rapid rise to become one of the preeminent gay rights groups of the late 1960s. The California Hall affair is recognized by San Francisco historians and activists as a major turning point in the modern gay/lesbian liberation movement, preceding the resistance at Stonewall in New York City by four years.

The 1960's also saw numerous gay rights protests in major cities on both coasts and in Chicago. One of the best remembered followed the LAPD raid on New Year's Eve parties, January 1, 1967 at two gay bars, the **Black Cat Tavern** and **New Faces**. Several patrons were injured, and a bartender was

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hospitalized with a fractured skull. Several hundred people spontaneously demonstrated on Sunset Boulevard and picketed outside the Black Cat.



Jack Nichols (left) pickets Independence Hall at the first Annual Reminder in 1965

The **Annual Reminders** were a series of early pickets organized by homophile organizations. The Reminders took place each July 4 at Independence Hall in Philadelphia beginning in 1965 and were among the earliest LGBT demonstrations in the United States. The events were designed to inform and remind the American people that LGBT people did not enjoy basic civil rights protections. The Reminders were held each year until 1969, with the final picket taking place shortly after the June 28 Stonewall riots.

Vanguard, founded in the fall of 1965 by Adrian Ravarour and Billy Garrison, was the first LGBT gay liberation youth organization in San Francisco, California. Ravarour trained members in principles of Rousseau's Social Contract, Payne's Rights of Man, The Bill of Rights and Dr. King's civil rights movement - so the youth would gain a philosophy to act from and to become a force of its own. Vanguard elected officers, published a newsletter and, in the spring, swept the streets, demonstrated on the street and picketed the Golden Gate Theater that had discriminated against them. A lesbian group of street people was also formed called the **Street Orphans**.



The **Compton Cafeteria Riot**, in August 1966, was one of the first recorded transgender riots in United States history. Compton's Cafeteria was one of a chain of cafeterias, owned by Gene Compton, in San Francisco from the 1940s to the 1970s. The Tenderloin location of Compton's at 101 Taylor Street (at Turk)—open from 1954 to 1972—was one of the few places where transgender people could congregate publicly in the city, because they were not welcome in gay bars. In addition, the cafeteria was open all hours. In July 1966, drag queens, hustlers, and transvestites were sitting in Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco when the police arrived to arrest men dressed as women. Because cross-dressing was illegal at the time, police could use the presence of transgender people in a bar as a pretext for making a raid and closing the bar. This harassment by guards and police led to picketing of the restaurant. In August, gay and transgender customers rioted at Compton's in response to continued police harassment. Many of the militant hustlers and street queens involved in the riot were members of **Vanguard**. The restaurant

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and the surrounding neighborhood sustained heavy damage. The following night demonstrators threw up another picket line, which quickly descended into new violence and damage to the restaurant. In the aftermath of the riot at Compton's, a network of transgender social, psychological, and medical support services was established, which culminated in 1968 with the creation of the National Transsexual Counseling Unit [NTCU], the first such peer-run support and advocacy organization in the world.



The **Stonewall riots** were a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations against a police raid that took place, in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn, in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. The demonstrations are frequently cited, inaccurately, as the first instance in American history when people in the homosexual community fought back against a government-sponsored system that persecuted sexual minorities, but they have become the defining event that marked the start of the gay rights movement in the United States and around the world. Within a few months, activist organizations including the Gay Liberation Front, the Gay Activists Alliance, Radicalesbians, and the Street Transvestites Action were formed in New York, concentrating on confrontational tactics, and three newspapers were established to promote rights for gays and lesbians. Within a few years, new, more aggressive gay rights organizations were founded across the U.S. and the world. On June 28, 1970, the first Gay Liberation marches took place in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York commemorating the anniversary of the riots. Similar marches were soon organized in other cities, but it wasn't until the mid '70s that they began to be called Gay Pride parades.

The **National Stonewall Democrats** was founded in 1998 by Barney Frank, at that time a Democratic member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Massachusetts. The organization brought together LGBT Democratic clubs across the United States which had been left unaffiliated after the 1987 dissolution of the National Association of Gay and Lesbian Democratic Clubs. The National organization suspended operations in January 2013 due to financial problems. State and local chapters continue, however. Desert Stonewall Democrats is proud to bear the name of the event that sparked a revolution and strives still today to achieve what those rebellious Stonewall Inn patrons fought for then - equal treatment under the law. Desert Stonewall Democrats thrives and grows today as an active and influential voice in regional politics, pursuing its mission of equality for all people.

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Before Stonewall - Some of the US Homophile Organizations and Dates of their Formation

1924 - The **Society for Human Rights**

1950 - The **Mattachine Society**

c. 1950 - Knights of the Clock

1952 - One, Inc.

1955 - The **Daughters of Bilitis**

c. 1960 - League for Civil Education

1962 - The Janus Society

1963 - East Coast Homophile Organizations (ECHO)

1964 - Society for Individual Rights

1965 - The Homosexual Law Reform Society

1965 - Ravavour

1966 - Phoenix Society for Individual Freedom

1966 - Society Advocating Mutual Equality

1966 - North American Conference of Homophile
Organizations (NACHO)

1969 - Homophile Action League