

History Topic of the Month

Stonewall 1969

The LGBT+ community has fought a long campaign in the USA to gain equality in the law. One of the turning points in this struggle was a clash on 28 June 1969 between members of the community and the police outside a bar called *The Stonewall Inn* in New York. As a police raid went wrong, a protest against police harassment turned into a riot. These events helped spark a campaign that stretched across the USA and the world to fight for equality and justice.



Contributer: © Philip Scalia / Alamy Stock Photo

Iconic gay bar The Stonewall Inn, Greenwich Village, New York City, USA.

LOVE IS LOVE



Contributer: © shutterstock/nito

LGBT+ rights in the USA

In the years after World War II LGBT+ rights in America, like many other countries around the world, were virtually non-existent. Prejudice was normal: a report by the US Senate in 1950 called same-sex relationships "acts of perversion" and those identifying as LGBT+ "lack the emotional stability of normal persons".

LGBT+ people were not allowed to work in the military and many other government-paid positions – from the CIA to postmen. From 1947-50 4,380 military servicemen were discharged and 420 people fired from government jobs, under suspicion of being homosexual. The American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality as a mental disorder.

Many States passed laws against any display of affection – even holding hands – between people of the same sex. States passed laws against people wearing 'gender inappropriate' clothing. LGBT+ people could be sent to mental health hospitals. By 1969, Illinois was the only State where homosexual relations between men or between women was not illegal.

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The LGBT+ community in New York

New York had a large LGBT+ community, many living in Greenwich Village. This didn't mean that they weren't victims of persecution. In the early 1960s, the Mayor of New York City ran a campaign to try to close all the gay bars in the city. He felt the LGBT+ community gave the city a bad reputation.

Undercover police officers tried to entrap gay men in bars. Thousands of people every year were arrested for "crimes against nature". Anyone found wearing clothing considered inappropriate for their gender could be arrested. Many people arrested had their names published in newspapers, which could lead to them losing their job. Police persecution became a part of everyday life.



Contributer: © Adam Stoltman / Alamy Stock Photo

The LGBT+ Pride March is an annual march commonly referred to as the Pride Parade in New York City. This image is taken from the march on 25th Jun 2017.

The "sip in"

The law in New York stated bars and nightclubs could be closed if they were "disorderly". Because any public expression of affection between two people of the same sex was considered "disorderly", many bars refused to admit LGBT+ people. Signs like "If you are gay, please go away" were common.

The Mattachine Society – one of the first gay rights campaign groups in the USA – decided to stage a demonstration against this. On 21 April 1966 Dick Leitsch, John Timmons and Craig Rodwell went into a bar called *Julius*, ordered drinks – and then announced: "We are homosexuals. We are orderly, we intend to remain orderly, and we are asking for service." The barman immediately refused to serve them. The men sued – and the Commission on Human Rights agreed they had the right to be served.

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The Mafia takes advantage

While this was a victory, many things remained the same. The Mafia spotted a business opportunity: a large community had nowhere to go, and the Mafia could use its contacts to make sure their premises were only raided after tip-offs.

The Mafia served watered-down beer at high prices. But because their bars were the only places in New York where members of the LGBT+ community could be themselves on a night out, many of their bars became very popular. By the late 1960s, the Mafia controlled most of the gay bars in Greenwich Village.

The bars were also an excellent blackmail opportunity for the Mafia. If wealthy gay men were found in the bar, the Mafia would blackmail them to keep their sexuality a secret.

Stonewall Inn

One of the most popular bars was the *Stonewall Inn*. Guests here had to sign an entry book on arrival – this was so the Mafia could argue it was a private club, allowing it to sell alcohol without having a liquor licence.

The *Stonewall Inn* welcomed transgender people, who were turned away from many other gay bars (because they attracted too much attention). Entrance was cheaper. It was possibly the only gay bar with a dance floor. It was one of the few places in New York where LGBT+ people could enjoy the sort of night-out everyone else in the city treated as normal.



Contributer: © Philip Scalia / Alamy Stock Photo

The Stonewall Inn, Greenwich Village, New York City, USA.



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28 June 1969: Police raid

At 1:20am on Saturday 28 June, police officers arrived at the *Stonewall Inn*. A tip-off had been misunderstood. The police stopped anyone leaving and started searching the customers. Those believed to be cross-dressing were sent to a room at the back of the bar. Some women were searched to prove they were women. People started refusing to co-operate, so the police decided to take many of the customers into custody.

The raid turns into a riot

But things were already starting to go wrong. The police were surprised at how angry the customers were. Many of the customers who were thrown out of the bar started protesting. They were joined by many other people – eventually well over 200 people were protesting outside. Shouts of “Gay Power!” and “We shall overcome!” were heard. Nervous police officers started to become increasingly rough with the people arrested.

Suddenly, a police officer hit an unknown woman over the head while forcing her into a police van. She shouted out “Why don’t you guys do something?” just before the police officer picked her up and threw her into the van. This sparked the unhappiness into an uprising.

Battle begins

The crowd tried to help those arrested to escape. Bottles and bricks were thrown at the police. Eventually the police officers had to take cover inside the *Stonewall*. The police had never experienced such anger from the LGBT+ community – most of them expected gay people to go home ashamed after being confronted. The riot lasted for almost three hours.

For the next five nights, thousands of people took to the streets again to protest police persecution. Campaigners like Marsha P Johnson, a drag queen who had often visited the *Stonewall Inn*, Zazu Nova and Jackie Hormona helped co-ordinate responses from people fed up with being treated like criminals because of who they were.

While some were unhappy about the violence, for many people it was an outpouring of anger after decades (or lifetimes) of persecution.

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The impact of Stonewall

Stonewall helped to change how the LGBT+ community campaigned for its own rights. Like many other movements at the time (such as civil rights and women rights), new groups and campaigns became more active in demanding equal rights. The Gay Liberation Front was formed by Johnson and others in New York shortly after in 1969 – it was the first LGBT+ organisation to use “gay” in its title. Gay newspapers were launched.

The first anniversary of Stonewall saw the first Gay Pride march in New York. Up to 15,000 people took part. By 1972, Gay Pride marches took place in cities across the USA. Gay rights groups appeared across the USA, Canada and Europe. Stonewall helped an entire community to decide to take a stand against persecution.

The Stonewall Riots helped to give a voice to the campaign for equal rights. In Britain, it gave its name to one of the country's leading LGBT+ charities. Stonewall was founded by at the home of actor Ian McKellen on 24 May 1989. The group campaigns for civil rights for the LGBT+ community and continues its work today.



Contributer: © Manchester Photo Graphy / Alamy Stock Photo

Sir Ian McKellen waving a flag at Gay Pride Parade March August 2010
Manchester UK

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Discussion points

- Imagine if you had served your country and were then fired because of who you were? How would that make you feel?
- How do you think it might have made those in the LGBT+ community feel in the 1950s when their own government described them as “perverse” and that being themselves could lead to them being arrested and imprisoned?
- Entrapment is a police operation to try and get people to commit a crime so you can arrest them. It is used to arrest people the police believe are planning to commit a crime. Why do you think the police used this against gay men in New York in the 1960s?
- Why do you think the crowd became so angry during the police raid?
- Why do you think Stonewall helped people to feel proud about who they were?
- What can you find out about the struggle for equal rights in the UK? What was life like for LGBT+ people in the UK during the 1950s and 60s?
- What else can you find about the Stonewall organisation in the UK?
- Stonewall's symbol is a rainbow flag. What can you find out about why this is?

Reading list

Books

Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution - David Carter

The Stonewall Riots - Gayle E Pitman

The Stonewall Reader - edited by the New York Public Library

Stonewall: Breaking Out in the Fight for Gay Rights - Anne Bausam



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Podcasts



<https://www.history.org.uk/podcasts/categories/434/podcast/116/british-lgbtq-history-1914-1960>

<https://www.history.org.uk/podcasts/categories/442/podcast/548/the-origins-of-the-lgbtq-movement-in-the-us>

Articles



<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/>

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/06/harvard-scholars-reflect-on-the-history-and-legacy-of-the-stonewall-riots/>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/01/an-amazing-1969-account-of-the-stonewall-uprising/272467/>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-48643756>

<https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/the-stonewall-riots>

<https://www.history.com/news/stonewall-riots-facts-gay-rights-lgbt>

<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk>

Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#) webpages for more great content.

