



Before Stonewall: Philadelphia's 'Annual Reminders' of the 1960s

Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash

By Patrick McKnight

Last year marked the 50th anniversary of the June 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City. This event is widely remembered in popular culture as the beginning of the modern LGBTQ rights movement. However, several years before 1969, activists in Philadelphia were already hard at work making important strides for the rights of the community. Unfortunately, this groundbreaking work is often overlooked.

It's somewhat easy to forget how much progress has been made towards LGBTQ equality in just the past 20 years. Philadelphia has played a critical role. As is so often the case, the city served as a focal point for larger discussions about civil liberties and the proper role of government. Philadelphia's unique legacy presents a backdrop where the egalitarian principles of America's founding can be contrasted against modern inequities.

The pre-Stonewall LGBTQ rights movement illustrates an important chapter in Philadelphia's history. This article discusses selected events and leaders from this period.

Dewey's Sit-in

On April 25, 1965, a historic sit-in began at Dewey's Lunch Counter on 17th Street near Rittenhouse Square. Dewey's was a restaurant chain with several locations in the Philadelphia area. The business apparently had a policy of refusing service

to customers it felt challenged existing gender norms. Three of the teenagers who helped organize the protest were arrested. Clark Polak, president of the Janus Society, offered to help obtain a lawyer for the three teenagers. He was also arrested and charged with disorderly conduct.

The Janus Society was founded in Philadelphia in 1962. Its monthly magazine, *DRUM*, was one of the earliest LGBTQ publications in the country. *DRUM* may have been the most popular LGBTQ publication in America during the 1960s.

For five days, members of the Janus Society protested and distributed literature outside the restaurant. A second sit-in on May 2, 1965, also led to denials of service but no arrests.

Many of the details and identities involved with the Dewey's Sit-in remain unclear. However, this event helped lay the foundation for another historic protest just a few months later.

Annual Reminders at the Liberty Bell

Between 1965 and 1969, local LGBTQ activists marked the Fourth of July by holding "Annual Reminders" in front of the Liberty Bell. Many historians consider these protests the first of their kind in the country. The protests both celebrated American ideals while attempting to remind the general public those ideals

Philadelphia has been instrumental in both the civil rights and LGBTQ movements, and this history deserves to be remembered.

remained unfulfilled.

The demonstrators focused on employment issues and wore suits or dresses. The organizers had strict rules for the conduct and appearance of participants. In 1965, demonstrators believed “respectability” was important to win the hearts and minds of the public. No public displays of affection were permitted under the rules.

In late June 1969, the Stonewall Riots in New York City marked an inflection point for the LGBTQ movement. The last Annual Reminder has held just a few days later. Stonewall also marked a shift towards a more radical approach in tactics. The old model of “respectability” no longer seemed appropriate to many demonstrators.

In 1970, many of the local organizers of the Annual Reminder helped launch the Christopher Street Liberation Day event in New York City. Some historians consider this the first pride day parade in the United States.

This choice was made in Philadelphia at a November 1969 meeting of the Eastern Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations (ERCHO). ERCHO released the following statement about the decision:

That the Annual Reminder, in order to be more relevant, reach a greater number of people, and encompass the ideas and ideals of the larger struggle in which we are engaged—that of our fundamental human rights—be moved both in time and location.

We propose that a demonstration be held annually on the last Saturday in June in New York City to commemorate the 1969 spontaneous demonstrations on Christopher Street and this demonstration be called CHRISTOPHER STREET LIBERATION DAY. No dress or

age regulations shall be made for this demonstration.

We also propose that we contact Homophile organizations throughout the country and suggest that they hold parallel demonstrations on that day. We propose a nationwide show of support.

Local Leadership

The list of local leaders who played critical roles in the movement is too long to

list. However, one of the most influential is Barbara Gittings.

Barbara Gittings moved to Philadelphia when she was 18 and lived here until her passing in 2007. She helped organize the Annual Reminders and countless other events.

Gittings has been described as, “the Rosa Parks of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement.” Among her other accomplishments, she was instrumental in having homosexuality removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders in 1972. In 2012, Philadelphia named a section of Locust Street “Barbara Gittings Way” in her memory.

Conclusion

Philadelphia has a rich legal history. In a sense, the founding of the nation is so monumental it can overshadow our subsequent accomplishments in the popular imagination. This is understandable but unfortunate. Philadelphia has been instrumental in both the civil rights and LGBTQ movements, and this history deserves to be remembered.

Philadelphia in the 1960s was a melting pot of legal activism. This period in Philadelphia history holds important implications for 2020 as Philadelphia attorneys and activists continue to shape the national dialogue about legal equality and individual rights.

This is a long, proud Philadelphia tradition that deserves to be continued. ■

Patrick McKnight is an associate at Klehr Harrison Harvey Branzburg LLP in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



Barbara Gittings picketing Independence Hall as part of an Annual Reminder on July 4, 1966. © Kay Lahusen, Equality Forum