

# STONEWALL: The Basics

A collaboration of the  
NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project,  
Making Gay History, New York Public Library,  
GLSEN, National Parks Conservation Association,  
and the Stonewall 50 Consortium.

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## What was the Stonewall uprising or the Stonewall riots?

In the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, homeless LGBTQ teens, trans women of color, lesbians, drag queens, gay men, and allies all decided to take a stand. What started out as an all-too-routine police raid of the Stonewall Inn gay bar in New York City turned into a multi-night uprising on the streets of Greenwich Village. It wasn't the first time LGBTQ people fought back and organized against oppression, but the Stonewall uprising ignited a mass movement that quickly spread across the U.S. and around the globe.

### **When did the Stonewall Inn open?**

The Stonewall Inn was opened in 1967 by Mafioso Fat Tony Lauria as a “private” gay club—one of the few in Greenwich Village where patrons could dance. Gay bars often operated as “private” clubs to circumvent the New York State Liquor Authority regulation that prohibited gay people from being served alcoholic beverages.

### **What was there before 1967?**

The two storefronts occupied by the original Stonewall Inn at 51-53 Christopher Street were constructed as stables in the mid-19th century. In 1930, the buildings were combined with one facade to house a bakery. In 1934, Bonnie's Stonewall Inn opened as a bar and restaurant and operated until 1964, when the interior was destroyed by fire. The building's existing 50-foot-wide facade looks much as it did at the time of the uprising in 1969.

**Since Stonewall was a “private” club, what were the requirements for getting in?**

To get in, you had to get past a bouncer, pay an entry fee (\$1 on weekdays and \$3 on weekends), and sign a club register. It was common for people to sign in with joke names such as Judy Garland or Donald Duck.

**What was Stonewall like inside?**

Beyond the front door, which was located in the 53 Christopher Street building, you entered a small vestibule. To the left was a coat check and to the right, through a doorway into the 51 Christopher Street building, was a long rectangular room. On the right side of the room was a long bar and beyond that was a dance floor and a jukebox. Opposite the bar was a small entrance back into 53 Christopher where there was a second dance floor, with a jukebox and a small bar at the rear, which was adjacent to two bathrooms. The Stonewall’s interior was painted black as a quick and inexpensive way to mask the fire damage the space sustained in 1964. The large front windows were painted black and backed by plywood. The Stonewall Inn’s main bar had no running water and there were no fire exits.

**Who went to the Stonewall Inn?**

It drew a diverse, young clientele, although only a small number of lesbians. Some patrons dressed in various forms of drag, including “scare drag,” and there were also people who wore business attire or jeans and flannel shirts. As Stonewall veteran Martin Boyce once said, “Stonewall was like Noah’s ark. There was two of everything.”

**Why was the Stonewall Inn raided by the police?**

Starting in 1934, after the end of Prohibition, the New York State Liquor Authority regulated liquor licenses, which prohibited the serving of alcohol in “disorderly” establishments. The presence of gay people was considered *de facto* disorderly. This led to routine police raids of gay bars and clubs. They’d selectively arrest patrons and managers, impound the cash register and alcohol, and padlock the front door. Management typically bribed the police, Mafia, and State Liquor Authority officials for protection, so they were tipped off in advance of an imminent raid and would sometimes turn up the lights to warn patrons to stop any open displays of affection or slow dancing, which could risk arrest.

**Who started the confrontation with the police?**

A number of eyewitnesses have offered differing accounts, but, as with almost any riot or spontaneous confrontation with the police, no one knows for certain what exactly sparked the confrontation or who threw the first punch or object.

**How long did the confrontations with the police last?**

The confrontations with the police unfolded over the course of six nights, with the most intense clashes occurring on the first and sixth nights.

**How many people participated?**

Accounts vary, but according to eyewitnesses the first night brought out five to six hundred people, the second night about two thousand, and the sixth and final night five hundred to a thousand. The third and fourth nights were relatively quiet.

**How many people were arrested?**

On the first night of the uprising 13 arrests were made, on the second night three, and on the sixth night five.

**Was anyone killed?**

There were no fatalities among the rioters or the police, although on the second night a group of rioters swarmed a cab on Christopher Street, rocked it back and forth, and the driver died later that night from an apparent heart attack.

**Was it a riot, an uprising, or a rebellion? Was there any looting?**

What took place at the Stonewall Inn is variously described as a riot, uprising, rebellion, or all three. A handful of Greenwich Village shops were looted on the final night of the uprising.

### **What happened to the Stonewall Inn after the uprising?**

The Stonewall Inn went out of business shortly after the uprising and was leased as two separate spaces to a number of different businesses over the years, including a bagel shop, Chinese restaurant, and clothing store. From 1987 through 1989, a bar named Stonewall operated out of 51 Christopher Street. When it closed, the historic vertical sign was removed from the building's facade. None of the original Stonewall Inn's interior finishes remain.

### **What about the current Stonewall Inn? When did it open?**

In 1990, 53 Christopher Street was leased to a new bar named New Jimmy's at Stonewall Place and about a year later the bar's owner changed the name to Stonewall. The current management bought the bar in 2006 and have operated it as the Stonewall Inn ever since. The buildings at 51 and 53 Christopher Street are privately owned.

### **Where can I find photos, film, and video of the Stonewall uprising?**

There is no film or video footage of the Stonewall uprising. There is one photo from the first night taken by *Daily News* photographer Joseph Ambrosini and four photos of Stonewall uprising participants from the second night taken by noted *Village Voice* photographer Fred W. McDarrah. There are several photographs of the damaged interior taken by McDarrah, and exterior photos taken right after the uprising by Diana Davies. Larry Morris with the *New York Times* took a number of photographs of groups of people on the streets on the sixth and final night of the disturbances.

### **Was the Stonewall uprising the first confrontation between the police and LGBTQ people?**

No. In addition to routine police raids of gay bars around the country where many arrests occurred, there were several previous, well-documented confrontations between LGBTQ people and the police, including at Cooper Do-Nuts in Los Angeles in 1959; at a fundraiser for the Council on Religion and the Homosexual in San Francisco in 1965; at a Dewey's restaurant in Philadelphia, also in 1965; at San Francisco's Compton's Cafeteria in 1966; and at the Black Cat Tavern in Los Angeles in 1967.

## Was the Stonewall uprising the start of the modern gay rights movement?

No, the uprising was a key turning point and a catalyst for explosive growth in a movement that began in the United States in 1950 with the founding of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles. (The first gay rights organization in the world was founded in 1897 in Berlin by Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld and the first, short-lived American organization, the Society for Human Rights, was founded in 1924 in Chicago by Henry Gerber.) Prior to the Stonewall uprising there were more than two dozen gay rights organizations in the nation's major cities with a modest number of members. In the aftermath of Stonewall and in the years that followed, organizers founded hundreds of new LGBTQ civil rights organizations across the country and around the world that drew hundreds of thousands of activists into the fight for equal rights.

### Is Stonewall where pride began?

While there are many reasons to take pride in how young people fought back against the police at the Stonewall Inn, "pride" as it relates to gay identity predates the uprising by three years. That's when a new gay activist organization was founded in Los Angeles that called itself PRIDE (Personal Rights in Defense and Education). PRIDE's newsletter evolved into the *Advocate* magazine, which is published to this day.

### Stonewall is a national monument. What does that mean?

In 2016, President Barack Obama designated the Stonewall National Monument in recognition of Stonewall's pivotal role in LGBTQ history, and it remains the first and only LGBTQ-related national monument. (National monuments are nationally significant lands and waters set aside for permanent protection.) The monument itself is Christopher Park, which is across the street from the site of the original Stonewall Inn. The buildings that were once occupied by the original Stonewall Inn are state and city landmarks. They were the first LGBTQ-associated properties listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places and were the first LGBTQ National Historic Landmarks. The park is owned by the federal government. The two buildings at 51 and 53 Christopher Street remain in private hands.

## How can I learn more about the Stonewall uprising?

Here's a short list of resources:

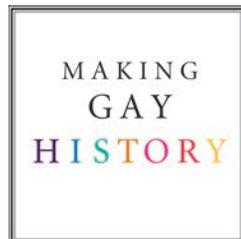
- David Carter's exhaustively researched *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (2004) is the definitive book on the Stonewall uprising.
- The PBS documentary *Stonewall Uprising* (2010) can be streamed on the American Experience website [here](#). It features several Stonewall uprising participants as well as Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine, who led the police raid on the Stonewall Inn. (Please bear in mind that all of the film and video used in the documentary that depicts riots comes from other riots or is a contemporary reenactment.)
- In the fall of 2017, the National Park Service hosted a scholars' roundtable on the significance of Stonewall. Read essays from multiple perspectives by participants David Carter, Lillian Faderman, Emily Hobson, Jen Manion, and Eric Marcus [here](#).
- *Love and Resistance: Out of the Closet into the Stonewall Era* (2019), Jason Baumann, Editor.
- *The Stonewall Reader* (2019), New York Public Library, Editor.
- *In Search of Stonewall: The Riots at 50, The Gay & Lesbian Review at 25, Best Essays, 1994-2018* (2018), The Gay & Lesbian Review.
- *Stonewall: A Building. An Uprising. A Revolution* (2019), Rob Sanders, Author; Jamey Christoph, Illustrator (Age Range: 5–8 years).
- NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission Designation Report for the Stonewall Inn (2015).
- Stonewall National Historic Landmark Nomination (1999).
- NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project Website.
- National Park Service's Stonewall National Monument Website.

To find out how the New York City media reported on the Stonewall uprising back in 1969, check out the links below.

- *New York Mattachine Newsletter* (by Dick Leitsch)
- *New York Daily News*
- *Village Voice*
- *New York Times*: [June 29, 1969](#); [June 30, 1969](#); [July 3, 1969](#)

*First Page Photo: The Stonewall Inn, July 2, 1969. Credit: Larry C. Morris/The New York Times /Redux.*

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