

BY THE WAY

10 LGBTQ+ historic sites to visit, beyond Stonewall

Activists are working to preserve sites that reveal the deep roots of America's LGBTQ+ communities



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Three years before the 1969 Stonewall Inn riot in Manhattan, there was watershed moment in the LGBTQ+ rights movement at a diner in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. On a hot August night in 1966, [a riot at Compton's Cafeteria](#) allegedly began when a police officer grabbed one of the patrons, who retaliated by tossing a cup of coffee in his face. Soon, tables toppled over, sugar shakers crashed through the diner's windows. A group of trans women and drag queens, fed up with years of police harassment, pushed the cops out into the streets.

While Stonewall is often cited as the origin of the modern movement for LGBTQ+ liberation, this lesser-known act of resistance stands as one of the most pivotal events in the community. But today, even many trans and queer people don't know much about the events that unfolded at Compton's Cafeteria — a symptom of how comparatively little LGBTQ+ history has been documented, taught and preserved in the United States.

More than 90,000 places are currently preserved on the [National Register of Historic Places](#). But of those, [only 28 are listed specifically for representing LGBTQ+ history](#), according to the [NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project](#).

In 2017, the trans community in San Francisco's Tenderloin created the [world's first designated area devoted to trans culture and history](#) known as the [Transgender District](#). Among the district's key aims is standing up to the Bay Area's gentrification to preserve the neighborhood's trans heritage, with national historic designation for Compton's as one stated aim.

“The Transgender District was founded by Black transgender women leaders from the Tenderloin neighborhood who wanted to ensure we had a space to celebrate our resilience, our culture, and see our histories in ways we’ve learned the histories of others,” said Aria Sa’id, the district’s president and chief strategist.

In October, Compton’s Cafeteria became the latest LGBTQ+ site to be nominated for the National Register of Historic Places, the federal government’s official list of sites significant to American history, culture and architecture.

But the nomination hit a bureaucratic snag. In late December, the nomination for Compton’s Cafeteria was returned for corrections to the California State Historic Preservation Office, which made the submission. The National Park Service says the nomination needs clarifications “regarding integrity, boundaries, and level of significance before we can evaluate it further.”

If it finally ascends to the National Register, it’ll be long overdue, activists and historians say. And it’s only one example of a rich history that has been sidelined for decades.

“We are the least represented community in the entire United States on the local, state and national level in terms of official recognition,” said Jay Shockley, a retired senior historian at the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission and co-founder of the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project.

Over two decades ago, Stonewall became the first site on the register when it was added in 1999; it’s now a National Monument and a National Historic Landmark. Shockley was one of the co-authors of Stonewall nomination. And while he cites that as a victory, he said it’s equally important that people understand the roots go much deeper — history that even many LGBTQ+ people he speaks with don’t know about because they’ve never been exposed to it.

“Until there is commemoration, designation and honoring of our community, we’re not full American citizens,” he said. “Every isolated kid in every right-wing state needs to know there’s a very rich history that they should be proud of.”

The work of organizations like the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, partly funded by an NPS Underrepresented Communities Grant, is starting to tip the scales. It’s nominated more than a third of the LGBTQ+ sites currently on the National Register. Many other such projects and historical surveys have taken off in cities and states including Los Angeles, Chicago, Kentucky, St. Louis, Maryland, Virginia and many others. The NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project maintains a list of similar national and international projects. And many of these projects operate with a growing sense of urgency.

Historically, lagging preservation practices, layers of bureaucracy and deep-seated discrimination have been barriers to progress. The Park Service has taken steps to make LGBTQ+ history more visible in recent years, including a 32-chapter theme study published in 2016.

While complex bureaucracy remains one barrier, “the greatest threat to our historic LGBTQ+ spaces is redevelopment as a result of gentrification,” explained Shayne Watson, an architectural historian and historic preservation consultant.

Ultimately, documenting LGBTQ+ history is as much about trans and queer futures as it is about the past, advocates say. “What’s happening now isn’t new,” said Sa’id, who emphasized the Compton’s Cafeteria riot parallels what trans and queer people face today.

“History teaches us that if we don’t pay attention to the past, it keeps repeating,” she said.

Here are 10 spots on the National Register of Historic Places that reveal the deep roots of America’s LGBTQ+ communities.

Julius’ Bar (New York City)

You can still grab a gin and tonic in this Greenwich Village historic landmark to LGBTQ+ culture, which was added to the National Register in 2016. Julius’ Bar, [the oldest gay bar in New York City](#), was the site of a 1966 “sip-in,” when members of the activist Mattachine Society organized a protest to New York State Liquor Authority regulations that, at the time, prohibited bars from serving to suspected LGBTQ+ people. This was a significant inhibitor to queer life in the city of that era, when watering holes like these served as one of the few relatively safe gathering spots for the community. The sip-in was part of a larger campaign that the Mattachine Society carried out, which eventually led to reforms that limited harassment and led to a more open and dignified LGBTQ+ social life.

Henry Gerber House (Chicago)

Designated a [National Historic Landmark](#) in 2015, the [Henry Gerber House](#) stands in remembrance of the founder of the first known gay rights organization in the United States, the Society for Human Rights, which he founded in Chicago in 1924. The police raided Gerber’s home in 1925, seizing the typewriter he used to write the organization’s mission statement, a significant milestone in American LGBTQ+ history.

James Baldwin Residence (New York City)

One of his generation’s brightest literary stars, James Baldwin was a pioneering gay Black writer who wrote some of the most influential works of fiction, nonfiction and poetry in the American canon. The [James Baldwin Residence](#), his primary American home from 1965 to his death in 1987, was added to the National Register in 2019.

First Unitarian Society (Denver)

In 1975, this Unitarian church hosted the first known religious ceremony for a gay wedding in Colorado. In a challenge to the law, Boulder County clerk Clela Rorex issued a marriage license for Richard Adams and Tony Sullivan four decades before a Supreme Court ruling made marriage equality legal nationwide.

Darcelle XV Showplace (Portland, Ore.)

Before the world's oldest working drag queen died at the age of 92 earlier this year, Darcelle XV was able to live and see the drag revue she opened with her life partner in 1967 earn historic recognition. Ascending to the National Register in 2020, Darcelle XV Showplace remains one of the world's oldest drag revues and the foundation of Portland, Ore.'s, storied drag scene. Today, notable queens such as Poison Waters still take to the stage for shows at the tightly packed venue, where the walls are plastered with historic photographs and ephemera of Darcelle XV; her partner, Roxy; and the cast of its long-running show continue to take to the stage for sold-out weekend performances.

Caffe Cino (New York City)

From 1958 to 1968, this cafe run by an openly gay proprietor was pivotal in staging work by queer playwrights and helped shape the future of queer theater in New York City. Caffe Cino is considered the birth of "off-off Broadway theater" and was added to the National Register in 2017.

The Furies Collective (D.C.)

Considered the first Lesbian landmark added to the National Register, this rowhouse in Capitol Hill was the site of the Furies Collective, a radical lesbian commune in the early 1970s. It was home to a dozen lesbian activists who published literature that had a meaningful impact in shaping both feminist and queer thinking in the 20th century.

Edificio Comunidad de Orgullo Gay de Puerto Rico (San Juan, Puerto Rico)

A pioneering landmark to LGBTQ+ liberation in Puerto Rico, this former queer community center in San Juan was the site of the island's first queer rights organization, which opened in 1974. Added to the National Register in 2016, it's now the site of a mural depicting passion fruit flowers.

The Women's Building (San Francisco)

Founded in 1971, this pioneering community center has incubated movements that have had an outstanding impact on civil rights movements both locally and nationally. Considered the first women-led and -owned organization of its kind, the Women's Building — added to the National Register in 2018 — continues to offer social services and continues its role as a key feminist gathering point. The building itself hosts one of San Francisco's largest and most-photographed murals.

Trinity Episcopal Church (St. Louis)

The first site in Missouri to be named to the National Register in 2020 for its significance in LGBTQ+ history, this Episcopal Church in St. Louis's Central West End is one of the early churches in the country to support the LGBTQ+ community, host activist gatherings, respond to the needs of victims at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and serve as the meeting point for the city's first gay rights organization in 1969. Today it's the only Episcopal parish in the country to receive such recognition.