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The National Park Service LGBTQ Heritage Initiative: One Year Out

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We, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer people (LGBTQ), all the subdivisions of the sexual and gender minority community, exist in America. The places we remember and hold dear, those places that have become part of our identity, also exist. Still. Many of them.

— *Mark Meinke, 2016*

Introduction

ON OCTOBER 11, 2016, NATIONAL COMING OUT DAY, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell stood at a lectern in the Main Interior Building in Washington, DC, and, in front of a large in-person audience as well as a virtual audience from across the country, announced the release of *LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History* (Figure 1; Springate 2016). This document provides a broad context for identifying, evaluating, and preserving places important to LGBTQ history across the United States. Its release was a milestone for the National Park Service (NPS) LGBTQ heritage initiative that began in earnest in 2014 with the donation of \$250,000 from the Gill Foundation (an LGBTQ non-profit) to the National Park Foundation (NPF), which is the official friends group and fundraiser for the NPS. This was the first time ever that a federal government agency has looked at LGBTQ history at a national level (the Pride of Place project in the UK began shortly after the NPS initiative). In this paper, written one year after the release of *LGBTQ America*, I reflect both on the process and the impact of the work, and try my hand at telling the future, looking at its influence into 2018 and beyond.

The LGBTQ heritage initiative was part of broader work that the NPS was doing in the areas of Civil Rights (National Park Service 2008) and in recognizing and addressing the fact that the histories of several communities were underrepresented in NPS parks and programs, including on the National Register of Historic Places and as National Historic Landmarks (NHLs).¹ For example, when the LGBTQ heritage initiative kicked off in May 2014, out of the over one million individual places on the National Register only five were listed for their

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Figure 1. The cover of *LGBTQ America*. Design by Beth Pruitt.

association with LGBTQ history; one of these was the Stonewall Inn in New York City, which was the sole LGBTQ NHL (see Table 1). The Underrepresented Community Grants program, as well as the Women's History, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Latino heritage initiatives, have also been part of the NPS response to this lack of representation of all American stories.

Origins and initial development

In 2012, as a PhD student at the University of Maryland, I began two years of independent study coursework with the NPS cultural resources directorate in the Washington office. Building on work begun by the agency in 2010, I began gathering community input about places with LGBTQ history across the USA. Several hundred places, both rural and urban, were identified by members of the public. Information compiled about these places included important dates, street address, and a brief statement of history. This information was initially compiled in a spreadsheet. As the spreadsheet grew, it became increasingly difficult to conceptualize the scope: how many properties, their location, how many were already on the National Register for LGBTQ history, which ones were on the National Register but whose nomination excluded mention of its LGBTQ history, and which places were not listed on the Register at all. On a whim, I mapped the places to Google Maps (Figure 2), providing exact locations whenever possible, except for private residences, where approximate locations were indicated. The map markers were then color coded based on listing status, and a short entry on the LGBTQ importance of the place was provided. The result was a powerful visualization of the data that people could connect with. The message? To paraphrase Mark Meinke (2016) from his prologue to *LGBTQ America*, we (LGBTQ people) exist. Everywhere. So do our places. And that LGBTQ history *is* American history, part of the fabric of our nation from coast to coast, urban and rural, north to south.

I made the map publicly visible on Google Maps, and began sharing the link, inviting people to submit places to be added. The list quickly grew to over 750 places, with people volunteering to fill in those regions not already represented. It was never a stretch to find LGBTQ historic places to add to the map; it was simply a matter of looking. An incredible amount of information on specific places is available online, in archived LGBTQ community



	Place Name	Location	Designation*
1	Alice Austen House (Clear Comfort)	Staten Island, NY	NRHP Amendment (3/23/2017)
2	Bayard Rustin Residence	New York City, NY	NRHP (3/8/2016)
3	Carrington House	Cherry Grove, NY	NRHP (1/8/2014)
4	Cherry Grove Community House and Theatre	Cherry Grove, NY	NRHP (6/4/2013)
5	Dr. Franklin E. Kameny Residence	Washington, DC	NRHP (11/2/2011)
6	Edificio Comunidad de Orgullo Gay de Puerto Rico (Casa Orgullo)	San Juan, PR	NRHP (5/1/2016)
7	Elks Athletic Club (Henry Clay Hotel)	Louisville, KY	NRHP Amendment (10/25/2016)
8	Furies Collective House	Washington, DC	NRHP (5/2/2016)
9	<i>The Great Wall of Los Angeles / The History of California Mural</i>	Los Angeles, CA	NRHP (9/18/2017)
10	Henry Gerber House	Chicago, IL	NHL (6/19/2015)
11	James Merrill House	Stonington, CT	NRHP (8/28/2013) NHL (10/31/2016)
12	Julius Bar	New York City, NY	NRHP (4/21/2016)
13	Mitchell Camera Co. Building (Studio One/The Factory)	West Hollywood, Los Angeles, CA	NRHP DOE (2/7/2017)
14	Pauli Murray Family Home	Durham, NC	NHL (1/11/2017)
15	Stonewall	New York City, NY	NM (6/24/2016) NHL (2/16/2000) NRHP (6/28/1999)
16	Whiskey Row Historic District	Louisville, KY	NRHP Amendment (1/25/2017)

*NRHP = National Register of Historic Places; NHL = National Historic Landmark; NM = National Monument; DOE = Determination of Eligibility

Table 1. Places recognized by NPS programs for their LGBTQ history as of October 2017.

newspapers, in LGBTQ travel guides (some dating back to the 1940s), and in the memories of community members across the country.

On May 30, 2014, Secretary Jewell stood outside New York City’s Stonewall Inn to kick off the NPS LGBTQ Heritage Initiative. Place is important, and as a recognition of the support of NPS for this project, Jewell chose to make her announcement at Stonewall, site of the 1969 riots against police harassment that marked a turning point in the struggle for LGBTQ civil rights. In 1999, Stonewall became the first place listed on the National Register for its LGBTQ history; in 2000, it was the first such place to be designated an NHL. Webpages introducing the LGBTQ Heritage Initiative were launched on nps.gov, and both a dedicated, publicly available email and a public comment portal on the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment system were made available.

Scholarly involvement

Continuing my work with the NPS, I assisted the agency in convening a scholars’ roundtable to help chart the way forward. Selecting which scholars to invite was a challenge. We needed folks who were experts in LGBTQ history and place; we needed to ensure that all of the communities under the LGBTQ umbrella were included; we wanted folks who had had long careers in this field, and we wanted some newer faces; we needed the voices not just of academics but also of preservation professionals and community activists; and we wanted to have geographic representation from across the country. Through conversations, I found out that several invitees were reluctant to accept, afraid that their attendance would be little more than a political “stunt” for LGBT Pride Month. Their fears were not without precedent: the



Figure 2. Detail of the Google map showing places with LGBTQ history.

federal government had, until not that long before, fought against LGBTQ rights, including in the armed services, employment protections, and marriage. We immediately drafted an email to send to all the invitees acknowledging their concerns, letting them know that I identified as queer, and that the project had actually been in the works for the two previous years—this was no flash in the pan.

Over 20 scholars came to Washington, DC, in June 2014 for an intense day of work and a panel presentation where the public had the opportunity to ask questions (which formed the basis for a Frequently Asked Questions page on the initiative’s website).² Working together, the scholars charted a bold agenda for the LGBTQ Initiative:

- *It needed to be inclusive and intersectional.* The unique histories of as many LGBTQ communities as possible needed to be included. Much of the popular narrative around LGBTQ history focuses predominantly on the history of the white, urban, middle-class, cis-gender gay male experience.³ Missing are the histories of transgender folk, lesbians, bisexuals, people living in rural areas, and people of color. The scholars’ panel charged us to include the interwoven story of all of these people, as well as to represent the different LGBTQ histories experienced by these groups. For example, the history of African American LGBTQ people is different from that of white LGBTQ people, because African American history is different from white history in America. The history of queer people in Miami, Florida, is different from that of queer people in Chicago, Illinois, because those two places have different histories. There is no single LGBTQ community, but many communities that need to be recognized. As well as being inclusive throughout, there was a call for community histories of places beyond San Francisco and New York City, and for historical contexts including African American, transgender, and Native American communities.

- *The theme study needed to be organized thematically, not chronologically.* A single chronological telling (such as “Pre-Stonewall,” “Stonewall to HIV,” “HIV to Activism”) erases the complex overlapping and interdependent histories of America’s LGBTQ communities. Themes including “health,” “the military,” “community formation,” “historic preservation,” and “leisure” were identified.
- *The “Q” (queer) had to be included.* The LGBTQ Heritage Initiative was originally the LGBT Heritage Initiative. Recognizing that some still consider “queer” to be a hurtful term—the name people called you when harassing or beating you on the streets—the scholars argued for its inclusion (1) to acknowledge that gender and sexual identities fall along a spectrum, and so to include those who do not identify as male or female, gay or lesbian, but either specifically as queer or as another identity not captured by “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” or “transgender”; and (2) to acknowledge the reclaiming of the term by many within the LGBTQ communities and its use in mass media as an important historic turning point in the 1990s (Queer Nation, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, etc.).
- While most theme studies focus on properties where historic events took place more than 50 years ago, the LGBTQ theme study needed to include more recent history. We could not write a historic context for LGBTQ experience in the United States and not include Stonewall, the Gay Liberation Front, the several marches on Washington, HIV/AIDS, or the push for the rights of LGBTQ people to serve in the military and marry—all of which happened within the last 50 years.

The scholars also confirmed the broad goals of the heritage initiative: (1) to engage scholars, preservationists, and community members to identify, research, and tell the stories of LGBTQ-associated properties; (2) to encourage national parks, national heritage areas, and other areas affiliated with NPS to interpret LGBTQ stories associated with them; (3) to increase the number of places included on the National Register for their LGBTQ history, through new or amended nominations; and (4) to increase the number of places designated as NHLs for their LGBTQ history, through new and amended nominations. The capstone of the project would be the production of the LGBTQ theme study. These goals not only charted a path forward, but also incorporated a means of evaluating the success of the initiative (increased LGBTQ interpretation and representation). Following the scholars’ roundtable, I accepted an offer to contract with the National Park Foundation as the prime consultant for the LGBTQ Heritage Initiative.

Response

Response to the announcement of the initiative was overwhelmingly positive. The few negative comments we received throughout the project were predominantly from those who did not understand that the National Park Service is obligated to represent all Americans, and from those who, not understanding that the initiative was privately funded, said they did not believe that the government should be spending funds for this work. Many, many LGBTQ people and their friends, family, and allies—including myself—have become extremely emo-

tional when they found out about the project, and tears have not been uncommon. The power of being seen and acknowledged cannot be overstated.

One comment in particular from a member of the LGBTQ public triggered a change in how we were working. I was pointed to a blog post that decried a lack of transparency in the initiative process. Echoing the early apprehensions of some of the scholars, this person was afraid that the endeavor was for political show, holding up as evidence the “secrecy” surrounding who was involved. Recognizing this as a potential barrier to the involvement of LGBTQ communities more broadly, we committed to full transparency for the project, and a list of the scholars and their affiliations was published online.

Shortly after the scholars panel, potential authors were approached to write the various chapters. Authors were instructed to write for a general (non-academic) audience; to tell their piece of the story using place (i.e., tying it to specific places that could be visited, rather than generic regional overviews); to be inclusive in terms of time, geography, LGBTQ identities, and ethnicities; to avoid erasing bisexuality;⁴ and to aim for 5,000 to 6,000 words. They were also told that each chapter would be peer reviewed by at least two subject-matter experts. The names of authors and the chapters they were writing were all posted online, as was the list of peer reviewers (without noting which chapters they reviewed). Authors and peer reviewers self-identified as queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and straight; Native American, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Latino, African American, white, and Asian American; and as historians, geographers, archaeologists, historic preservationists, clergy, community activists, and journalists.

Outreach and concerns

As writing began, community outreach about the LGBTQ heritage initiative continued. Community members were reached through a network of personal and organizational contacts, who often also shared information throughout their networks; stories in the LGBTQ and mass media; via social media; and in-person community outreach in cities including San Francisco, DC, and Chicago. A seven-page “how to get involved” guide was published in hard copy and online, encouraging people to engage on many different levels with LGBTQ history in their communities and beyond.⁵ Without question, community engagement shaped the initiative, confirming the scholars’ roundtable call for intersectionality and inclusion, providing additional information on places with LGBTQ history, and resulting in the addition of several additional chapters beyond those initially planned. Because of this involvement throughout the process, the theme study was much broader, more inclusive, and stronger than it otherwise would have been.

Commonly expressed concerns included that it would be hard to address those who were closeted or, because of history, would not have identified themselves as LGBTQ; that transgender folk—especially transgender people of color—would be excluded and bisexuality erased; and that only a “sanitized” history would be told. In San Francisco, people at the community meeting took umbrage on behalf of Los Angeles because LA was not going to be included as a city-level case study. In response to these concerns, I was able to talk about our approach of discussing people’s relationships rather than their identities (unless

they self-identified), which addressed the relatively recent history of LGBTQ as identities as well as the problem of bisexual erasure; that the theme study would not be “sanitized,” but that, without being explicit, topics such as bathhouses, physique magazines, cruising, and safer sex programs would be discussed as important parts of our histories and community formation; and I was able to show the map of hundreds of places and communities across the country with LGBTQ history and explain that the few cities represented in the theme study were case studies only, examples of telling queer history using place at the city level.

The theme study

The audacious goal was to have the theme study completed and available to the public by June 2016, one year after the scholars’ roundtable. Logistically, that proved to be a little bit too ambitious a goal, but by October 2016, only 18 months from the announcement of the NPS LGBTQ Heritage Initiative, the theme study, *LGBTQ America*, was released—a testament to the commitment to the project by the authors, peer reviewers, and production staff. It consists of 32 chapters, fills over 1,200 pages, and mentions over 1,300 places associated with LGBTQ history across the United States. The sheer size of the volume precluded the production of print copies; it is available for free download on the NPS website.⁶

What the theme study does *not* do is identify places that are eligible for listing on the National Register or for designation as NHLs (a limitation dictated by time and money). Nor does mention in the theme study mean that a place is automatically or will automatically be listed (which is true of all theme studies). The theme study was designed to be a catalyst for the identification and preservation of LGBTQ historic places across the country, providing information and context so that National Register and NHL nominations could be written by members of the public and properly evaluated by historic preservation officers and other staff who shepherd and manage the nomination process.

Other products

The theme study was not the only product of the LGBTQ Heritage Initiative. Its announcement spurred LGBTQ historic preservation actions across the country. From May 30, 2014, to October 11, 2016:

- Stonewall was proclaimed a National Monument (June 24, 2016).
- The number of places listed on the National Register for their LGBTQ history went from five to nine.
- One new NHL was designated.
- Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park in California produced an exhibit on LGBTQ experiences on the WWII home front, based on oral histories the park had been collecting since before the initiative was announced.
- Independence National Historical Park hosted a temporary exhibit on the 50th anniversary of the Annual Reminders, LGBTQ demonstrations at Independence Hall every July 4th from 1965 to 1969 reminding people that not all Americans benefitted from the same rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

- I answered numerous emails and phone calls from people looking to get involved with the project, and was able to direct them to resources for preparing local histories and/or nominations.
- Too cumbersome to continue to be managed by a single person, the use of the Google Map was retired. Instead, a crowd-sourcing/citizen-science project was begun on the Historypin platform.⁷ This allows people to mark their own histories on an interactive map without going through an intermediary. The *LGBTQ America* Historypin project allows people and community groups to add a single place or an entire set of places organized by theme or region. Interns and independent study students pre-populated the Historypin project with places from the original Google Map, as well as creating additional entries, so that the project would have content when it was announced to the public. A “Find Your Place” booklet, introducing people to queer historic places and some of the broad themes that were emerging from the theme study, was written and published online.⁸
- The Historic American Building Survey (HABS), an NPS program, documented the Furies Collective House and published a poster featuring an image of its exterior.
- Inspired by the heritage initiative, a woman in Texas successfully petitioned the state for two LGBTQ historic markers: one for Gloria Anzaldua (an influential Chicana cultural theorist who had relationships with men and women), and one for Barbette (a female impersonator and internationally acclaimed high-wire and trapeze artist).
- In communities such as Galveston, Texas, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia, as well as in Nevada and Virginia, project organizers have acknowledged the role of the LGBTQ initiative in inspiring them to begin recording and preserving their histories.
- Grants for LGBTQ historic preservation were awarded as part of the Underrepresented Community grants program managed by the National Park Service, including for projects in New York City and Louisville, Kentucky.
- The Northeast Region of the National Park Service began work identifying significant LGBTQ sites on a region-wide scale, as has the National Capital Region.

A year out

The level of activity in the year since the theme study was introduced has remained high, and a lot has happened. In October 2016, I was hired by NPS as a federal employee. This change resulted in a different way of working for me. For example, being a federal employee means limitations on travel and having to clear publications and press interviews beforehand, as well as strict ethics rules about political engagement and favoritism (and the appearance of these) while “on the clock.” It also opened up possibilities for expanded engagement within NPS.

By several measures—including increased LGBTQ interpretation in NPS, and an increase in the number of places listed for their LGBTQ history on the National Register of Historic Places and designated as NHLs—the LGBTQ Heritage Initiative has been a success.

Since October 11, 2016, seven additional properties have been added to the National Register or designated as NHLs, bringing us to a total of 12 places listed on the National Register for their LGBTQ history (an additional property has been deemed eligible, but not

officially listed because of owner opposition), three NHLs, and one National Monument. These places represent civil rights struggles, the arts, social life, and community building; women, men, and transgender folks; Black, white, and Latino folks; the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, South, Midwest, and California. More representation is needed, but it is a start—and more nominations are in the works. The HABS program prepared a historic context report for LGBTQ nightlife in Washington, DC, and conducted preliminary surveys of five associated properties (Bailey 2016); the Asian American Pacific Islander theme study chapter by Amy Sueyoshi is being translated into Japanese for inclusion in a volume there; and a contract has been signed with Berghahn Books for a series of three historic preservation textbooks based on the theme study to be published in 2018: *LGBTQ Identity and Place*; *LGBTQ Community and Place*; and *LGBTQ Preservation and Place*. For Transgender Day of Remembrance in November 2017, New Bedford Whaling Historical Park partnered with local groups to present a screening and discussion of the documentary film *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (France 2017). Staff at Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site has received training on engaging with visitors and interpreting LGBTQ history, and a three-day training on LGBTQ interpretation for NPS interpreters nationwide was held this December in Philadelphia. The theme study has been downloaded over 12,500 times from the NPS website since its release in October 2016, including a bump in July 2017 after a post about the theme study went viral on tumblr, “loved” and viewed over 73,000 times.

Conclusion

Without question, the NPS LGBTQ Heritage Initiative and *LGBTQ America* have been a success. Even a year out, they continue to catalyze research on and conversation about LGBTQ history and heritage across the nation. Perhaps the greatest measure of success is that, a year out, LGBTQ history and heritage are no longer confined to an NPS initiative. It is part of what we do, “Telling All Americans’ Stories.”⁹ Keys to this success, in my opinion, were community-driven design and direction, organizational transparency, the serendipitous visualization of data in Google Maps, and a commitment to intersectionality.

The project was not without its challenges. In particular, the scope of the work was both a strength and an obstacle. As inclusive as we tried to be, it was impossible to include chapters focusing on every LGBTQ community. There is, for example, no chapter dedicated to women’s experiences, or to violence against LGBTQ people, or to drag, the LGBTQ press, the rise and importance of LGBTQ campus organizations, rural LGBTQ histories, or to any number of communities with large LGBTQ communities with deep roots. Looking forward, I see continued use of the theme study as a jumping-off point to writing community histories tied to specific places; to nominating increasing numbers of places to the National Register and the NHL program, as well as to local and state historic marker programs; and to further incorporating LGBTQ history into American history, where it belongs.

Acknowledgments

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The views and conclusions contained in this article are those of the author and should not be interpreted as representing the opinions or policies of the US government. Mention of trade names or commercial products does not constitute their endorsement by the US government.

Endnotes

1. Administered by NPS, the National Register of Historic Places is a list of historic places (both publicly and privately owned) deemed worthy of protection. Places can be listed on the National Register for their local, state, or national significance. The National Historic Landmarks program is also managed by NPS, and recognizes places that have exceptional integrity and historical significance.
2. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/lgbtqheritageadminhist.htm>.
3. “Cis-gender” means that your internal feeling of gender aligns with the gender you were assigned at birth. It is the opposite of “transgender,” which is when someone’s internal feeling of gender does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth. The prefixes “cis” and “trans” are descriptors from chemistry, meaning “same” and “opposite,” respectively.
4. Bisexual erasure happens when a bisexual person who is in a same-sex relationship is identified as homosexual, and when in an opposite-sex relationship is identified as heterosexual. This effectively erases their bisexual identity.
5. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/upload/GetInvolvedFinalversion-508-compliant.pdf>.
6. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/lgbtqthemestudy.htm>.
7. <https://www.historypin.org/en/lgbtq-america/>.
8. https://www.nps.gov/articles/upload/LGBTQ-Finding_Our_Place-508-compliant.pdf.
9. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/index.htm>.

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