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Stonewall

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In the early morning hours of Saturday, June 28, 1969, New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn at 53 Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. The raid prompted resistance from lesbian, gay, and transgender patrons and onlookers, sparking several nights of antipolice rioting. The Stonewall riots are cited frequently as marking the birth of the gay liberation movement. Annual gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) pride marches around the world commemorate those early acts of resistance on or around the last weekend in June.

History of the Stonewall
The Stonewall Inn opened as a tearoom called Bonnie’s Stone Wall in 1930, the same year Mary Casal’s lesbian “autobiography” The Stone Wall was published in the United States. There is little documentation of the early years of Bonnie’s Stone Wall, but records show that it was raided frequently by the police. By the late 1960s the regular patrons of the Stonewall Inn included the most marginalized gay communities in the city: drag queens, male-to-female youth, hustlers, and homeless queer youth, all from a mix of ethnic backgrounds, including significant numbers of blacks and Latinos. At its central location in Greenwich Village, the Stonewall drew an eclectic crowd that included gay men from a variety of social classes and some working-class lesbians. Those drawn to the Village for its gay counterculture recognized the Stonewall Inn as one of a handful of New York City clubs catering to sex and gender outlaws, though many chose not to frequent the Mafia-run establishment to avoid raids, blackmail, watered-down drinks, imperfect sanitation, and mixing with marginal classes of people.

The Political Background
The Stonewall riots occurred amid the social upheaval of the civil rights movement, antiwar protests, student activism, and feminist activism. Specific acts of GLBT resistance and instances of oppression preceded and influenced the events, as did victories and increasing visibility around the world.

European and American homophile organizations founded in the 1950s worked to reduce legal discrimination against gays and lesbians. In 1961 Czechoslovakia and Hungary eased laws criminalizing sodomy, followed by Israel in 1963, then England and Wales in 1967, and East Germany in 1968. In the United States, Illinois became the first state to decriminalize sodomy (1962). West Germany and Canada both decriminalized sodomy in 1969, before the riots.
Founded on the West Coast in the 1950s, American homophile organizations became more visible during the 1960s, staging the first pro-homosexual public pickets in several eastern cities in 1965. As homophile organizations and the gay press were stepping up their tactics and rhetoric, street resistance was picking up as well. In August 1966 transgender youth picketed and later threw dishes, swung purses, and smashed windows in San Francisco’s Compton’s restaurant when security guards and police harassed the regular transgender clientele. In February 1967 homophile activists in Los Angeles organized a legal defense and an orderly public protest after brutal New Year’s Eve police raids on gay bars there.

New York’s homophile Mattachine Society waged a campaign against police entrapment in 1965 and in 1966 staged “sip-ins” to challenge the New York State Liquor Authority’s practice of closing down gay bars. Courts decided that serving liquor to homosexuals was not in itself illegal, but establishments permitting homosexuals to congregate could be considered “disorderly” and were subject to closure. The New York Penal Code stipulated that people wearing fewer than three articles of clothing appropriate for their gender were subject to arrest, targeting drag queens, butches, and transgender people for police harassment. The Mafia established gay bars as private clubs (the Stonewall Inn kept a sham membership register) and profited not only by selling liquor of questionable heritage but also by exploiting “club members” in prostitution and extortion schemes while keeping police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation at bay with payoffs and blackmail.

In light of the state-sanctioned discrimination, however, the Stonewall Inn was valued as a gathering place for people on the sexual margins. In 1969 the Stonewall Inn was a symbol and a space for an increasingly visible and vocal queer community.

A spring 1969 election increased New York Mayor Lindsay’s attention to policing both the Mafia and queers, resulting in increased numbers of bar and bathhouse raids. During the week before the Stonewall riots police allowed residents of Kew Gardens in Queens to cut down trees, ruining a popular nighttime gay cruising area. Police had just raided the Stonewall Inn on the Tuesday before the Friday night Stonewall raid as well as several other gay places in that period.

The Riot and Its Aftermath
The raid on the Stonewall Inn took place around one in the morning, a peak attendance hour on a hot Friday night-Saturday morning. Greenwich Village was mourning the gay icon Judy Garland, with record players blasting her voice into the streets. Seymour Pine of the New York City Vice Squad, Public Morals Division, led four other officers inside the Stonewall, wondering why the two undercover male
and two undercover female officers already inside the inn had not communicated with them. Patrons in the bar that night report that the crowd was fed up with police harassment and that there was grumbling and resistance from the approximately two hundred persons detained inside to the identity check the officers demanded at the outset of the raid. Pine suggests that the raid's goals were routine: to arrest the employees and maybe a token transvestite, confiscate the illegal alcohol, and bust up the bar to put it out of business for a while. Pine reports that trouble started inside the bar when “transvestites” suspected of wearing gender-inappropriate clothing refused to go into the bathrooms for genital checks. One man inside the bar reported that lesbians in the bar loudly protested their manhandling by the police.

Instead of quietly dispersing from the Stonewall that night, a crowd gathered outside. Exiting the inn after identity checks, drag queens camped it up for a sympathetic crowd that also witnessed brutal police tactics. Witnesses reported seeing a drag queen or transgender cross-dresser being clubbed by police who were roughly pushing her into a police wagon as well as a butch lesbian strenuously resisting that kind of mistreatment. The crowd responded by shouting and throwing coins at police, and the situation escalated into a full-blown melee. As police grew fearful of the crowd hurling bricks and bottles, they barricaded themselves inside the Stonewall. The crowd attacked the bar, breaking the front window with a garbage can and using a parking meter as a battering ram against the door, followed by the throwing of improvised firebombs.

Witnesses attribute the boldest initial resistance to street youth, many of whom were black and Latino, transgender, and cross-dressing. The police attempted to disperse the crowds by blocking and clearing the streets, but they were haunted by impromptu kick lines of “Stonewall Girls” who doubled back to taunt them repeatedly into the early morning. Nearby, lesbians in the Women’s House of Detention lit toilet paper and sent it streaming down from high jailhouse windows in a display of support. When word got out, a crowd gathered the next Saturday night; the protest was smaller the following Sunday but gathered strength on Wednesday after the newspaper *The Village Voice* ran a front-page article on the riots.

Immediately after the riots New York gay and lesbian activists began to organize anew, starting the Gay Liberation Front, which soon split to form the Gay Activists Alliance. In November 1969 the Eastern Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations proposed the Christopher Street Liberation Day March to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall riots. This was the first of what are
now annual celebrations of GLBT pride and resistance held in cities around the world.

**Bibliography**

