

A SHORT HISTORY OF LGBT ACTIVISM IN THE USA



Although the Stonewall riots in 1969 in New York are popularly remembered as the spark that produced a new gay liberation movement, the origins predate this iconic event. Certainly, militant resistance to police bar-raids was nothing new – as early as 1725, customers fought off a police raid at a London (UK) homosexual/trans-gender molly house. Organized movements, particularly in Western Europe, have been active since the 19th century, producing publications, forming social groups and campaigning for social and legal reform. The movements of the period immediately preceding gay liberation, i.e. from the end of World War II to the late 1960s, are known collectively as the Homophile movement. The **Society for Human Rights** was the first recognized gay rights organization in the United States, established in Chicago in 1924 having received a charter from the state of Illinois, and producing the first American publication for homosexuals, *Friendship and Freedom*. A few months after being chartered, the group ceased to exist in the wake of the arrest of several of the Society's members. Despite its short existence, the Society has been recognized as a precursor to the modern gay liberation movement and spurred the creation of future gay rights societies.

The **Mattachine Society** was founded in 1950 by Harry Hay and a group of Los Angeles male friends who formed the group to protect and improve the rights of homosexuals. Because of concerns for secrecy and the founders' leftist ideology, they adopted the cell organization being used by the Communist Party. In the anti-Communist atmosphere of the 1950s, the Society's growing membership replaced the group's early Communist model with a more traditional ameliorative civil rights leadership style and agenda. Then, as branches formed in other cities, the Society splintered in regional groups by 1961.

The **Daughters of Bilitis (DOB or the Daughters)**, was the first lesbian rights organization in the United States. It was formed in San Francisco in 1955, conceived as a social alternative to lesbian bars, which were considered illegal and thus subject to raids and police harassment. It lasted for fourteen years and became a tool of education for lesbians, gay men, researchers and mental health professionals. As the DOB gained members, their focus shifted to providing support to women who were afraid to come out, by educating them about their rights and gay history.

Other groups included the League for Civil Education, the Tavern Guild and the Society for Individual Rights, which was organized in mid-1964. In San Francisco, clergymen from the Glide Urban Center and Methodist Church formed, with gay activists, the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH). (This was the first group in the U.S. to use the word "homosexual" in its name.) Incorporated in December 1964, CRH began to educate religious communities about gay/lesbian issues as well as