

The Stonewall Riots: Catalyst for Gay Rights Movement

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On June 28, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn nightclub. The crowd tried to impede police arrests outside the nightclub in New York City. Photo from Getty Images

On June 28, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay club located on Christopher Street in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. Employees and customers of the bar on Christopher Street were hauled outside roughly. Several were arrested. Their treatment sparked a riot among bar customers and neighborhood residents.

For six straight days, there were protests and violent clashes with police outside the bar, in neighboring streets and in nearby Christopher Park. The Stonewall Riots helped inspire the rapid growth of the gay rights movement in the U.S. and around the world.

The 1960s and preceding decades were not welcoming times for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Americans. Most LGBT people had to hide their sexuality in daily life. There were laws against sexual relations between gay people. There were also laws against being a drag queen, or cross-dressing — men dressing as women, or women dressing as men.

For such reasons, LGBT individuals flocked to gay bars and clubs. They were places of refuge where customers could express themselves openly and socialize without worry. However, the New York State Liquor Authority fined and shut down establishments that served alcohol to known or suspected LGBT individuals. It claimed that any gathering of gay people was “disorderly.”

Mafia made money from gay bars

Thanks to activists’ efforts, these regulations were overturned in 1966, and LGBT customers could now be served alcohol. However, engaging in gay behavior in public — holding hands, kissing or dancing with someone of the same sex — was still against the law, so police harassment of gay bars continued. Many gay bars still operated without liquor licenses. In part, this was because many were owned by the Mafia.

The Mafia thought it could make money off of gay customers. By the mid-1960s, the Genovese crime family controlled most Greenwich Village gay bars. The Stonewall Inn was bought by the Mafia in 1966, and turned into a gay bar.

Stonewall Inn was registered as a type of private “bottle bar,” which did not require a liquor license because customers were supposed to bring their own liquor. Club attendees had to sign their names in a book when they entered. The Genovese family bribed police to ignore the activities happening inside the club.

Without police interference, the crime family could cut costs as they saw fit: The Mafia didn't build a fire exit to leave the bar. It also didn't add running water behind the bar to wash glasses, or put in clean, properly working toilets. Even worse, the Mafia blackmailed the club’s wealthier customers, who wanted to keep their sexuality a secret.

Stonewall Inn was a large, popular gay bar

Nonetheless, Stonewall Inn quickly became popular. It was large and the cover charge to enter was cheap. It was also one of the few gay bars that allowed dancing.

Raids were still normal at gay clubs. However, usually crooked cops would tip off Mafia-run bars before they occurred. The advance warning allowed owners to hide their alcohol, which was against the law because it was sold without a liquor license. In fact, the NYPD had stormed Stonewall Inn just a few days before the raid that led to the famous riot.

When police raided Stonewall Inn on the morning of June 28, it came as a surprise. For some reason, the bar hadn't been tipped off this time.

Police entered the club, roughed up customers and arrested 13 people, including employees and people violating the state's cross-dressing laws. Female officers took suspected cross-dressing customers into the bathroom to check their sex.

The neighborhood fights back

Fed up with constant police harassment and social discrimination, angry customers and neighborhood residents hung around outside of the bar. They became increasingly agitated over the police's violence. At one point, an officer hit a lesbian woman over the head as she was being arrested. She shouted to onlookers to act. In response, the crowd began throwing pennies, bottles, cobblestones and other objects at the police.

Within minutes, a full-blown riot involving hundreds of people began. The police, a few prisoners and a Village Voice newspaper writer barricaded themselves inside the bar. The mob then set fire to the bar.

The fire department and a riot squad were eventually able to put out the fire, rescue those inside Stonewall and break up the crowd. However, the protests continued in the area for five more days. At times, they involved thousands of people.

The Stonewall uprising didn't start the gay rights movement. However, it did inspire a burst of LGBT political activism. It led to the foundation of numerous gay rights organizations. Among them were the Gay Liberation Front, Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD (formerly Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) and PFLAG (formerly Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays).

In 2016, President Barack Obama declared it was time to officially recognize the uprising's contribution to gay and human rights. The president made the site of the riots — Stonewall Inn, Christopher Park and the surrounding streets — a national monument.