Stonewall National Monument

YourGuides Tour Transcript

1. Overview

I'm Ken Lustbader, one of the co-directors of the NYCLGBT Historic Sites Project. We're a Cultural Heritage Initiative and educational resource documenting LGBTQ related sites from the 17th century to 2000 that convey the community's history and influence on American culture. Our goal is to make an invisible history visible. I'll be leading you on a brief tour that will provide a concise summary of the Stonewall uprising that started in the early morning hours of June 28 1969. Stonewall is considered a key turning point in the LGBTQ liberation movement. We'll be visiting a total of nine points that are located in a very small geographic area of the Stonewall National Monument. As such it does not represent the long entire LGBTQ history of Greenwich Village nor does it entirely reflect on the diversity of today's LGBTQ community. We're now standing in Christopher Park, the triangular landscape across from the original Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York City. The Park and adjacent area have played an important role in the history of the LGBTQ liberation movement. In June 2016, after a multi-year effort by local advocates President Barack Obama designated Stonewall National Monument. The boundaries of which encompass Christopher Park and are identical to the boundaries established in the National Register of Historic Places listing in 1999 and the National Historic Landmark listing in 2000.

Since the 19th century Greenwich Village has had an LGBTQ presence and just prior to World War I this area of the village became popular for the artistic and socially and politically progressive. Middle class gay men and lesbians appropriated their own spaces despite some opposition from fellow villagers. The village emerged as the first neighborhood with a significant LGBTQ population in New York City and one of the first nationally. Through the 1960s, the area south of Washington Square southeast from here was the location of many bars and clubs that welcomed or merely tolerated LGBTQ patrons. Gay bars were crucial to creating a sense of community and cultivating political action in an era of discrimination. By the mid 1960s LGBTQ bars and life were moving northwest to this section of Greenwich Village. At that time Christopher Park was a favorite hangout for a diverse group of often homeless gay street youth or in those who might today identify as transgender or gender nonconforming. At the time of the Stonewall uprising crowds including many of the street youth took over the park in Christopher Street and at its peak several thousand people filled the streets.

2. The Stonewall Inn Uprising

In the early morning hours of June 28, 1969 homeless LGBTQ teens, trans women of color, lesbians, drag queens, gay men, and allies all decided to take a stand. What started out as an all too routine police raid of the Stonewall Inn gay bar in New York City, turned into a multi night uprising on the streets of Greenwich Village ending on July 3rd 1969. It wasn't the first time LGBTQ people fought back and organized against repression. But the Stonewall uprising ignited a mass movement that quickly spread across the U.S. and around the globe. The events during that six day period are credited as a key turning point in the LGBTQ rights movement. At the time of the 1969 uprising, the original Stonewall Inn operated out of two buildings with one facade that took its name from the former restaurant Bonnie Stonewall Inn. Bonnie’s had closed in 1964 after a fire destroyed much of its interior. The space was vacant until the mafia opened Stonewall as a gay bar in 1967. The building's existing facade looks much as it did at the time of the uprising in 1969. It's important to note that starting in 1934, after the end of prohibition, the

New York State Liquor Authority regulated liquor licenses which prohibited the serving of alcohol in disorderly establishments. The mere presence of gay people was considered de facto disorderly. This led to the mafia operating gay bars as unlicensed private clubs such as Stonewall, which were then subject to routine police raids and payoffs.
The Stonewall raid was not unusual but what was unusual was the reaction of the bar's patrons and the crowd outside. Instead of dispersing, the angry group began to fight back as bar patrons were arrested, throwing objects at the police who were forced back into the bar for hours. The demonstration continued over the next few nights outside the Stonewall anf on the nearby streets. The struggle for LGBTQ rights did not actually begin at Stonewall as a number of homophile groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis had already been organizing for rights beginning in the 1950s. However, Stonewall dramatically changed the movement by inspiring LGBTQ people throughout the country to assertively organize on a broader scale. This became the gay liberation movement which involved more radical political action and assertiveness during the 1970s. In the immediate aftermath of Stonewall, the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance were formed in New York City in 1969. STAR, the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, an early transgender group was founded in 1970 by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. Within two years, LGBTQ rights groups had been started in nearly every major American city. The Stonewall went out of business shortly after the uprising and was replaced by a number of commercial establishments over the years. The current Stonewall Bar opened in 1993 at 53 Christopher Street and has operated under the current management since 2006.

3. Stonewall: A Seedy Mafia Run Bar
We are now inside the current Stonewall Bar looking towards the front of the building and Christopher Street.The interior walls of the original Stonewall were painted black to cover the damage of the 1964 fire. The exterior windows the same size as of today were covered in plywood also painted black. The Stonewall Inn was opened in 1967 by the Mafia as a private gay club, one of the few in Greenwich Village where patrons could dance. Gay bars were often operated as private clubs to circumvent the New York State Liquor Authority regulation that prohibited gay people from being served alcoholic beverages.
The Stonewall drew a diverse young clientele, although only a small number of lesbians. Some patrons dressed in various forms of drag, including scare drag and there were even some people who were business attire or jeans and flannel shirts. As Stonewall veteran Martin Boyce one said “Stonewall was like Noah's ark. There was two of everything.”
Since Stonewall was a private club, to get in you had to pass a bouncer, pay an entry fee; a dollar on weekdays and three dollars on weekends and sign a club register. It was common for people to sign in with joke names such as Judy Garland or Donald Duck. Beyond the front door, which was located in this side of the building that you're standing in, you entered a small vestibule. To the left was a coat check and to the right through a doorway into 51 Christopher Street was a long rectangular room. On the right side of that room was a long bar and beyond that was a dance floor and a jukebox

4. Oppression of LGBTQ People
We're now looking at what was the location of stonewalls original dance floor in number 53 Christopher Street. This room had a jukebox and a small bar in the rear which was adjacent to bathrooms. The Stonewall’s main Bar had no running water and there were no fire exits during the raid on June 28, 1969. A crowd consisting of bar patrons, street youth and neighborhood residents became increasingly angry

and began chanting throwing objects as the police made arrests. Police called in reinforcements but were barricaded inside the bar. For hours the police tried to clear the neighborhood's streets while the crowd fought back. The LGBTQ community historically suffered harassment, discrimination and oppression from their families, organized religion, psychiatric professionals and government. LGBTQ people could not touch, dance together, make direct eye contact or wear clothes of the opposite gender without fearing arrest. For women, people of color, youth and those who are gender nonconforming it was even more challenging. Police harassment of gay bars and entrapment were top concerns of the LGBTQ community in the 1960s. The Mattachine society and the Daughters of Bilitis were two of the nation's first gay rights groups referred at the time as homophile groups whose early political activism helped lead to the Stonewall uprising and changes immediately after. The Stonewall Inn went out of business shortly after the uprising and was leased as two separate spaces to a number of different businesses over the years. From 1987 through 1989, a bar named Stonewall operated at the adjacent building at 51 Christopher Street. When it closed, the historic vertical sign was removed from the building's facade. None of the original Stonewall inn's interiors remain the current Stonewall Bar opened in this location in 1993 and has operated under the current management since 2006.

5. The Uprising on the streets around Stonewall

This is an aerial view of Christopher Park giving you a sense of the street pattern in the immediate vicinity surrounding Stonewall. In 1936, a monument to General Sheridan was dedicated in Christopher Park causing this location to often be confused as Sheridan Square which is around the corner. In 1999, the 30th anniversary of the uprising, Christopher Park was included in the National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Stonewall Inn. In the early 19th century Street plan, the city of New York created a North-South East-West grid to assist in the organized development of the city. In parts of Greenwich Village, that grid was not adopted and the old streets remain. To this day, these angled streets that are off the grid confuse residents and visitors. However, many of the people during the Stonewall uprising were familiar with these streets much more so than the police. For this reason they were able to play a game of cat and mouse running around corners and outflanking the police.

Christopher Park in portions of Grove Street, Gay Street, Waverly Place, Greenwich Avenue, 6th Avenue and West 10th Street played a critical role in how the events of Stonewall persisted over the duration of six days. According to the 1999 National Register nomination, "The street pattern in this neighborhood is significant because it is one of the elements that contributed to the events of late June and early July 1969 and helps to explain why this police raid sparked a riot, while others did not." There are many streets leading directly into and out of the site of the Stonewall Inn. In 2016 President Barack Obama designated Stonewall National Monument in recognition of the Stonewall as pivotal role in LGBTQ history and remains the first and only LGBTQ related national monument. The monument itself is Christopher Park which is across the street from the site of the original Stonewall Inn. The buildings that were once occupied by the original Stonewall Inn are state and city landmarks. They were the first LGBTQ associated properties listed on the state and national registers of Historic Places and were the first LGBTQ national historic landmarks. The park is owned by the federal government. The two buildings at 51 and 53 Christopher Street remain in private hands.

6. Christopher Street and the Waterfront

Soon after Stonewall, this area of Christopher Street and the park itself became an important gathering spot for the LGBT community. Since then, it is where the community has gathered as a rallying place for civil rights and solidarity and for mourning and remembrance.
Just a month after the uprising in July 1969, activists organized a rally that began in Washington Square Park and ended at Christopher Park to protest the police's actions at Stonewall. Activists Morty Manford and Martha Shelley addressed a crowd of several hundred people in Christopher Park which was the first event recognizing the significance of the uprising. At the time, Christopher Street, a narrow commercial corridor that runs from Greenwich Avenue to the Hudson River waterfront was also becoming an important gay thoroughfare.
The waterfront itself with abandoned pierced and warehouses were reappraise created as a destination for gay men to sunbathe naked cruise and have public sex by the early 1970s. The waterfront has its own LGBTQ history. By the early twentieth century the waterfront and numerous piers with shipping terminals comprise the busiest section of New York's port. The area was surrounded by thousands of seamen of all nationalities and more than half a million unmarried and transient workers came into the port each year. By World War I, the area had become a popular cruising area for gay men and by the 1930s the opening of the elevated highway cut through the area making up more of a backwater. The concentration of men, numerous bars and warehouses and nighttime isolation, established the waterfront as one of the main centers for gay life that thrived well after World War II due to the various economic forces. By the mid 1960s, the piers and warehouses were abandoned. This enabled the area to retain its popularity for gay men to cruise and have sex at night. The waterfront taverns on the western end of Christopher Street and the adjacent blocks were replaced with gay bars. Between 1971 and 1983, the vast interiors and offices of the piers ruin like terminals were the site of a diverse range of artistic work including site based installations, photography, murals and performances. By the 1980s, it had had become a destination and first or second home for many marginalized queer youth of color trans activists of color. Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera founders of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries in 1970 established a presence in this area and provided food and clothing to those congregating there.

7. New York City’s First Pride Parade
At the one year anniversary of the Stonewall uprising on Sunday, June 28, 1970 marchers first gathered on Washington place between Sheridan Square and Sixth Avenue for the Christopher Street Liberation Day march, what we now refer to as The New York City Pride march. From Greenwich Village, a growing crowd followed a route up 6th Avenue to Central Park where the march ended with a gay in the sheep meadow. This incredibly brave, for the first time public march ended up attracting thousands of participants much to the surprise of the organizers.
As historian Lillian Fetterman commented “Never in history had so many gay and lesbian people come together in one place for a common endeavor.” Craig Rodwell, owner of the Oscar Wilde Memorial bookshop, was one of the four lead organizers of the march along with Fred Sargeant, Linda Rhodes and Ellen Brody. Rodwell had been an organizer of the annual Fourth of July Reminder Day demonstrations in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia from 1965 to 1969. Among the earliest significant LGBTQ protests in the United States, these were held to highlight the community's lack of basic civil rights.
The last Reminder Day took place on July 4th 1969, only one day after the end of the Stonewall uprising. Rodwell had chartered a bus of younger people from New York who joined the Philadelphia demonstration but did not adhere to the strict conservative dress code, nor did they follow the orderly rules of conduct of previous years. It was clear that the events of Stonewall had already changed things.Soon after, Rodwell began thinking about organizing a gay holiday as a way to channel the

changes of LGBTQ activism after Stonewall and to replace the reminder day demonstrations with a march in New York City. In November of 1969, the group proposed that the annual reminder, in order to be more relevant, reach a greater number of people and encompass the ideas and ideals of the larger struggle in which we are engaged; That of our fundamental human rights, be moved both in time and location. We propose that a demonstration be held annually on the last Saturday in June in New York City to commemorate the 1969 spontaneous demonstrations on Christopher Street and this demonstration be called the Christopher Street Liberation Day. No dress or age regulation shall be made for the demonstration. We also propose that we contact homophile organizations throughout the country and suggest that they hold parallel demonstrations on that day. We propose a nationwide show of support." After much debate the organizers decided against holding the march on the last Saturday of June but opted for the last Sunday instead. The 28th, the same day when the Stonewall uprising began. The annual march contributed greatly to solidifying the significance of Stonewall in LGBTQ history. Today, millions of LGBT people participate in more than 300 parades protest marches and celebrations to mark the anniversary of Stonewall in towns and cities in over 60 countries around the world.

8. Post World War II LGBTQ Organizations

Located at 59 Christopher Street, the Mattachine Society of New York occupied office space on the second floor of this building from 1972 until it dissolved in 1976. The location is particularly poignant as it is just three buildings away from the Stonewall Inn. The dissolution of the Mattachine was due in part by the emergence of more radical activist LGBTQ groups that formed after Stonewall in 1969. At the time, members of Mattachine were only slightly older than the leaders of the new influential groups. However, it is important to note that in the two decades prior to Stonewall there were organized efforts to counter LGBTQ discrimination and oppression. The Mattachine society and Daughters of Bilitis, both founded in California in 1950 and 1955 respectively were early and leading American homophile groups. The term homophile was then in common use for gay and lesbian organizations. In the conservative post-World War II era they were considered quite radical for campaigning for the rights of gay men and lesbians to exist openly in society without fear of arrest or persecution. Among the important issues they raised were the roles of government, religion and psychiatry as major agents of oppression.

9. Gay Liberation Sculpture

We are now looking at sculptor George Siegel's Gay Liberation completed in 1980. In 1979, the tenth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, New York City announced that a statue commemorating LGBTQ liberation would be placed in Christopher Park. Due to controversy from Village residents, LGBTQ activists and the lack of official support the sculpture was not installed here until 1992. Executed in bronze, with the artist's signature white patina, the memorial was commissioned with the stipulations that the figures... "Had to be loving and caring and show the affection that is the hallmark of gay people and it had to have equal representation of men and women." Mysteriously abstract, Gay Liberation avoids direct reference to the uprising. Since its installation, the sculpture has become an important and at times controversial focal point of the park. In the 1980s, landscape architect Philip Winslow who later died of AIDS related causes redesigned portions of Christopher Park. His work included installing new benches and brick paving. The overall Park configuration still looks as it did during the Stonewall uprising. According to early LGBTQ rights activist Randy Wicker, Christopher Park and Christopher Street were also where his friend and longtime roommate Marsha P. Johnson could often be found.

Johnson was a critical figure during the Stonewall uprising and the years following. Shortly after the uprising, Johnson formed the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries with trans woman Sylvia Rivera. In Christopher Park, she also spoke at activism related events.