Stepping off the Curb: How Stonewall Kickstarted the Gay Revolution

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The gay community has always existed throughout American history, but it has been largely ignored until the Stonewall Riots. Its members hid in secret, and although that is still true for many people in the LGBTQ community today, both social and political rights for the gay community have grown, largely spurred on by movements formed in the aftermath of the Stonewall Riots. On July 28, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn, a prominent gay bar in New York City, on the grounds that they were illegally selling alcohol. They kicked out most patrons, and a crowd formed outside the bar (Thompson 28). However, some were prevented from leaving if they were underage or transgender and were held, ironically, in the coat closet (Marcus 200). Frustrated by the police shutting down a gay gathering, the crowd threw pennies, other coins, and even rocks at the officers inside the bar. Throughout the next two days, violence and police abuse escalated, which the gay community passionately fought against (Thompson 28). Although homophobia caused the raid, it resulted in an outpouring of growth and revelation for the community it attempted to suppress. The Stonewall Riots incited a national gay rights movement in America that has lasted until present day.

The first result of the Stonewall Riots was the development and evolution of gay organizations. Prior to Stonewall, homophile groups were the only support network available to gay people such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis (Thompson 17-18). These groups specifically did not use words like ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’ in naming their organization, displaying a more cautious viewpoint on gay issues (Clendinen and Nagourney 31). For example, after the Stonewall Riots, the Mattachine Society responded immediately by painting a message on the door of the Stonewall Inn pleading for “peaceful and quiet conduct on the streets of the village,” once again being proper in the eyes of society. In contrast, by morning, another
message was painted reading “support gay power.” This showed how quickly the more moderate and subdued homophile organizations would be replaced by a younger and more radical generation of activists (Clendinen and Nagourney 23, 26). The riots both angered and inspired the gay community, specifically inciting this younger generation to action. Almost immediately, “the startling word of gay people fighting back inspired the formation of new, and newly radical, ‘gay liberation’ organizations.” These groups were organized both by those who participated in the Stonewall Riots and those inspired by them (Marcus 171-172). Young adults started localized groups, especially on university campuses. Unlike the homophile groups, these new organizations did not shy away from using the targeted words such as ‘gay’ in their names, which they decided were less clinical than the word ‘homosexual’ (Clendinen and Nagourney 31). One of the larger and more influential groups was the Gay Liberation Front, formed immediately after the riots in New York City. The GLF was very radical and believed in uniting civil rights struggles for gender, sexuality, and race into one united front. Their platform included legalizing homosexual sex, drugs, abortion, and prostitution (Marcus 182-184). Although the radical and disorganized Gay Liberation Front lasted only nine months, it set a precedent for a path of “activism and confrontation” (Pohlen 73). A less radical yet still major organization was the Gay Activists Alliance, which also formed in response to the rioting (Marcus 410). The GAA’s main focus was attacking laws forbidding gay sex (Clendinen and Nagourney 92). In comparison to the GLF, the GAA lasted for twelve years until its demise in 1981. This demise was largely due to the professionalization of gay activism into a “nine-to-five” job. The goal of this professionalization was to bring “gay liberation into the mainstream of the American civil rights movement”, provide legitimacy for the LGBTQ cause,
and be able to create an organized national movement (Clendinen and Nagourney 195). This has been continued into contemporary times with national groups such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation which is leading the charge of the gay rights movement, a significant change from the earlier isolated homophile organizations (Faderman 525). The Stonewall Riots inspired action among the gay community to create gay liberation organizations that would have large impacts on society.

Leaders in the gay community decided that action was needed after witnessing Stonewall, so pride parades were created to celebrate the LGBTQ identity. One of those leaders was Martha Shelley, a lesbian who was already involved with the Daughters of Bilitis. After the riots, she helped start up the committee that organized the first gay rights parade in history, which was held as a direct result of Stonewall, taking place on its first anniversary (Marcus 180). In contrast to earlier protests, this parade consisted of thousands of people, all chanting, “Say it clear, say it loud. Gay is good, gay is proud”. Thousands of people came to participate in the Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade but still, they had to be courageous to step off that curb and “take that giant step into the streets” (Sargeant). However, these parades were not identical to the pride parades seen today, mostly because of the dangerous atmosphere created by the prevalent anti-gay sentiment. Some people marched with bags over their heads for fear of losing their jobs for their sexuality. It wasn’t until a few years after Stonewall that the concept of gay pride started to emerge as the movement became more widespread ("Coming Out in the 70's"). But today, that feeling of self love is inherent in these parades which celebrate the pride that the gay community has in their identities. To quote Fred Sargeant, a participant and organizer of the Christopher Street Liberation Day parade, “Of course, at the time, we could never have predicted that our
efforts would lead to hundreds of millions of people gathering together around the world…

[Pride] has become the world’s largest and one of its most prominent human rights demonstrations” (Sargeant). The creation of the Pride parade after the Stonewall Riots created a long lasting impact by encouraging gay pride in the LGBTQ community.

Not only did the gay community hold Pride parades to celebrate their identities, they began holding protests to actively draw attention to their community and fight for their rights. Prior to Stonewall, any protest held was small, quiet, and non-threatening due to the climate of fear that was present even in tightly knit gay communities (Sargeant). Confrontations between police and the LGBTQ community as well as raids on gay bars and clubs were frequent. Retaliation against the police was unexpected because gay men were perceived as “fairies” who were overtly feminine and weak, while gay women weren’t even considered a threat due to sexism; that is- until the Stonewall Riots. The riots broke these stereotypes by showing the general public not only that this community existed on a wide scale, but that they were willing to fight for their rights (Marcus 171). After the riots, protests against anti-gay discrimination increased in frequency and fervor. They were designed to draw attention to their community and raise awareness of homophobia. Some examples of this included holding “kiss-ins” with gay couples at anti-gay restaurants, and “zaps”, or hijacking an event or a live news report as long as possible (Marcus 171-172; Pohlen 75). But as time progressed, these protests became more active. They became larger as the groups expanded, and the movement became a national one. Today, protests for all social movements, including LGBTQ, are common and have even spread to the internet as the LGBTQ community continues to strive to have its voice heard (“Coming
Out in the 70’s”). The Stonewall Riots permanently altered how the gay community protested for their rights.

Originally incited by the Stonewall Riots, these protests resulted in an increase in civil rights and protection from anti-gay discrimination. Anti-gay discrimination was a constant threat for people who were part of the LGBTQ community. People worried about losing their jobs should their sexuality be discovered, and in some states, where homosexual sex was illegal, they feared arrest (Thompson 17-18). Despite this discrimination, most gay people were not actively involved in fighting for LGBTQ rights. While some people were involved in gay politics, most were not, because the LGBTQ community was not viewed as an oppressed minority at the time because it was not viewed as a community at all. However, in the radical 1960s and 1970s, this was ready to be changed. Other marginalized groups had begun to fight for their civil and social rights; the fight for gender and racial equality would serve as a model to help gays and lesbians recognize their oppression and learn how to fight it (Thompson 18). Stonewall helped kickstart this. The Stonewall riots took place in New York City, the nation’s communication center, so information about the riots were broadcast nationwide for the first time in gay history; they then inspired and angered the community (Marcus 171). Stonewall was clearly a violation of LGBTQ rights, and due to the liberal climate of the seventies, the gay community recognized that they deserved equality, which would lead to more advocacy within the community. Now that awareness of this oppression was prevalent, the movement could start actively and constructively fighting for equal rights under the law. One of the most prominent matters was that of marriage equality. In 1970, Jack Baker and Mike McConnell attempted to obtain a marriage certificate. Although it would ultimately be denied, it launched a demand for marriage licenses that would
continue until 2015 (Pohlen 78). The launch of the gay liberation movement in the seventies resulted in significant progress being made. In 2003, *Lawrence v. Texas* ruled that state sodomy laws were unconstitutional, something that the GAA had been fighting for since its creation, and in 2015, *Obergefell v. Hodges* declared that marriage was a fundamental right that could not be denied by individual states (Faderman 510; Clendinen and Nagourney 92). Chief Justice Kennedy wrote the majority decision, stating that the plaintiffs “ask[ed] for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right”. Of course, the LGBTQ community has yet to receive full legal equality. But in the words of Frank Kameny, “We started with nothing, and look what we have wrought!” (Faderman 633-635). The gay liberation movement gained momentum in the fight for their civil rights after being inspired and angered by the Stonewall Riots.

The gay rights movement was incited by the Stonewall Riots and continues to have a lasting impact into modern times. The aftermath of the riots transformed subdued homophile organizations into national organizations fighting for gay rights. These groups transformed subtle protests into pride parades and aggressive protest tactics designed to attract attention to the issues and make change. The gay community recognized that it was an oppressed minority that deserved full civil rights in American society, so it fought for progress to be made and accomplished significant progress, especially in recent years. The Stonewall Riots led to an unanticipated massive movement that would cause ripples throughout American society. In order to cause this change, there were many people who had to have a lot of courage to step off of the curb and into the streets to chant, “Say it clear, say it loud. Gay is good, gay is proud” (Sargeant).
Works Cited


Although this is an online source, it is legitimate because this video series interviews people who experienced the gay rights movement in America firsthand.


Although this is an online source, this source is legitimate because the Village Voice is a well-respected source, and Fred Sargeant, the author, experienced the first Christopher Street Liberation Day firsthand.

This source consists of many essays written by various authors who have experienced the gay rights movement firsthand.