THE BEGINNINGS
1900 – 1968

PSYCHIATRY
MILITARY
GOVERNMENT
CRIMINAL JUSTICE
MEDIA
LGBT COMMUNITY
“[I am writing you] if only to tell someone where we are, and why we are here; even if only to have someone on the outside worry about us.”

**WHILE DARREN AND I** were visiting West Chester [Pennsylvania], a group of hustlers stopped us and wouldn’t let us pass. After taunting us, one of the kids **punched me** in the stomach and kicked me in the face, while Darren yelled for the police. Finally they left, and Darren and I ran to the train station, when we were picked up by the police and taken to
headquarters. It seems the hustlers realized the seriousness of what they had done, and in an attempt to protect themselves they told the police that it was Darren and I who solicited them! And I, who was beaten and kicked, was accused of assault, for it was said that I placed my hand on the rear of one of them. I won’t even mention “police brutality” because I know it would be censored. Darren and I are waiting in this prison; waiting, but we don’t know what for. We have been in this prison nearly a month now, with at least 4 more to go until we have a trial—all this simply because we cannot afford bail or an attorney.

Naturally, we’ve lost our jobs, and while we’re waiting, we’re probably losing
our house and furnishing—all because a bunch of college hustlers won’t tell the truth!...As we may only write two letters a month, this is my second. My first plea for help went unheeded, as will, I am sure, any further letters I may write. My family never wants to see me again—there is no one Darren and I can turn to for help. [I am writing you] if only to tell someone where we are, and why we are here; even if only to have someone on the outside worry about us. But what we are really hoping for is help to fight this case—a most profound injustice... Now that you know that we are in prison for a crime that we did not commit, I can only beg that you will do anything possible to help us. Please sir,

– Richard

**NOTE.** This letter was written to *ONE Magazine* in 1964. The magazine editors located a lawyer for Darren and Richard, and the two were released from jail. *Source: Letters to ONE* by Craig Loftin.
DEFINITION OF TERMS

Although the terms gay, lesbian, transgender, and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) are used in this chapter, these are not terms people used in the early to mid-20th century. Homosexual was the term most often used for lesbian and gay in this era. Queer was considered a derogatory term, unlike the positive all-inclusive meaning it has today. No term existed in the English language for transgender prior to the 1950s. In the 1950s and 1960s, transsexual became the most widely used term.
1920s Harlem offered black lesbians and bisexuals a relatively safe place to engage in same-sex partnerships. Artists were usually quiet about their gender preference, but others like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (top) and Gladys Bentley (below) were more open to claiming a lesbian or bisexual identity.

**LGBTQ REPRESENTATION** dates back to the earliest human civilizations. However, gay and lesbian communities only started to gain visibility in America with the development of industrialized urban centers in the late 1800s, most notably in New York. In 1903, New York police, under pressure from religious morality groups, conducted the first known raid targeting gay men. The Armed Services launched its first known investigation of homosexual behavior in 1919, with a probe into the activities of its cadets in Newport, Rhode Island. Although the military had a long history of persecuting homosexual activity dating back to the Revolutionary War, the Armed Services only officially made consensual sodomy a criminal offense in 1920.

Alcohol prohibition from 1920 to 1933 saw a period of greater freedom for LGBTQ people. Illegal speakeasies allowed LGBTQ people relatively safe places to congregate away from police intervention. Performers such as Gene Malin, Ma Rainy, and Bessie Smith openly espoused gay and lesbian identities, while female impersonators such as Julian Eltinge became popular international performers. Books with gay, lesbian, and transgender themes such as Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and Radclyffe Hall’s *Well of Loneliness* garnered wide popularity. Annual drag-queen balls drew thousands of participants in New York, while smaller balls gained popularity across the nation.
The Beginnings

The pathologizing of gay and lesbian people began with the invention of the term homosexual by mental health professionals in the late 1800s. As the profession of psychiatry grew in prominence, mental health doctors grew increasingly presumptuous they could identify and ultimately transform gay, lesbian, transgender, and intersex people into heteronormative adults. In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) officially codified homosexuality as a mental disorder in their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). Although this listing has since been removed from the DSM, mental health experts of this era employed a number of unsuccessful therapies in an attempt to cure homosexuality in their patients.

Psychotherapy, popularized by Freud at the turn of the century, utilized psychoanalysis, hypnosis, group therapy, and other verbally-based techniques to attempt to cure gay, lesbian, and transgender people. Behavior modification therapy, an attempt to cure same-sex impulses by associating them with negative stimuli, gained popularity in the 1950s. Maximum-security mental health facilities, such as Atascadero State Hospital, allowed mental health professions to employ more extreme methods including electric shock, lobotomies, sterilization, and drugs such as succinylcholine (a drug that simulates the feeling of dying) to try to cure patients of their homosexuality.

The rising stature of the psychiatric profession, as evidenced by the establishment of a National Institute of Mental Health in 1946, had implications for LGBTQ people far beyond mental health.

Dr. Harry Benjamin was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1885. He moved to New York in the 1920s and started a practice focusing on endocrinology and gender identity. From then until the 1960s, he was the go-to person for transgender people seeking medical treatment in the United States. Dr. Benjamin assisted Christine Jorgensen, Reed Erickson, and Renée Richards, among others, to medically alter their physiology and to provide social and legal support. Benjamin, and a network of doctors and psychologists, established the Harry Benjamin Foundation in the 1960s to assist transgender people in obtaining surgery. In 1966, he published the groundbreaking *Transsexual Phenomenon*. Benjamin retired in the 1970s and was honored as a pioneer for his work. The influential Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA) was named in his honor.
services. During World War II and thereafter, the military used psychiatric evaluations as the basis for discharging gay and lesbian service members. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 denied entry in the country to those with “psychopathic inferiority,” a psychiatric term that was explicitly intended to deny access to, and later deport, gay and lesbian people. The 1950s Lavender Scare (to be explored in the "Government" section later) was justified, in part, on psychiatric views of the mental instability of gay and lesbian people. Print media in the 1950s published psychiatric-based articles on the homosexual threat to gender norms and on how to prevent homosexuality in children. Even the Revised Standard Version of the Bible added the mental health term “homosexual” in 1946.

**THE TRANSITION FROM WORLD**  
War I to World War II led to a change in Armed Forces policies from discharging those who had committed the act of sodomy, to discharging those with “homosexual proclivities” —regardless of whether any sexual act had been committed. Nonetheless, because of the dire need for soldiers during World War II, the Armed Services did not strictly enforce its policies, and great numbers of gay and lesbian people served with distinction in World War II.

After the war, the number of expulsions for homosexuality increased three-fold. The Armed Force expelled many gay and lesbian service members under a blue discharge. Blue discharges were not dishonorable, but did disqualify the veteran from receiving benefits and subjected them to discrimination when seeking future employment.
The Veterans Administration discontinued blue discharges in 1947, but replaced it with an undesirable discharge category that continued to be used against gay and lesbian service members. In 1949, the Department of Defense issued a statement that required the expulsion of all known homosexuals from service. While the Korean War and the need for military personnel led to a temporary drop in discharges, the end of the war saw the high number of expulsions for homosexuality resume.
THE ANTI-COMMUNIST FRENZY following World War II led to the Lavender Scare in which gay and lesbian people were targeted by the federal government. Anti-homosexual crusaders argued that gay and lesbian people’s innate immorality and mental instability left them vulnerable to blackmail by Communist agents. No evidence corroborated this accusation, but gay and lesbian people had no political influence nor advocates to counter the hyperbolic claims against them. In 1953, President Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10450, banning lesbian and gay people from working for the federal government or any of its private contractors.

Consequently, the FBI launched a campaign to root out gay and lesbian people from federal employment. Thousands of gay and lesbian people were ultimately fired as security risks from federal employment in the 1950s and 1960s. The investigation also had a broader impact, as unknown numbers of LGBTQ people simply quit their federal jobs rather than face a possible FBI inquiry. Many state and municipal governments, as well as private employers, followed the federal lead to root out gay and lesbian employees. In some professional fields, this campaign effectively created blacklists of gay and lesbian people who could no longer find employment in their respective fields.

AN OPENLY GAY AFRICAN-AMERICAN QUAKER PACIFIST, Bayard Rustin was one of the most important and influential civil rights activists of the 20th century. He schooled Martin Luther King Jr. about Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence. With King, he formed the Southern Christian Leadership Council. In 1963, he conceived and then organized (in just eight weeks) the March on Washington, site of King’s “I have a dream” speech. However, on the eve of the march, he was denounced on the Senate floor as a “Communist, draft dodger, and pervert.” Eventually Rustin was forced out of the civil rights movement by internal politicking in which his homosexuality left him vulnerable. He continued to advocate a protest agenda informed by a belief that “economic inequality is the graveyard of democracy.” Rustin was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013.
AT THE END OF PROHIBITION in 1933, state liquor authorities formed to regulate the dispersal of alcohol. These authorities used their power to revoke the licenses of bars that served gay and lesbian clientele. Police enforced the regulation by raiding and shutting down bars that served gay and lesbian people. Purposefully vague local morals, lewd conduct, and disorderly conduct statues permitted police to harass and arrest gay and lesbian patrons with impunity. Because bars were the primary public places where gay and lesbian people congregated, the raids created an atmosphere of fear that permeated the community.

Police canvassed and ran entrapment schemes at public areas frequented by gay men. Police selectively arrested gay, lesbian, and transgender people for such transgressions as wearing clothing of the opposite sex, behaving as someone of the opposite sex, or even holding hands with a member of the same sex. Those arrested were vulnerable to violence from police and, if jailed, from inmates. If their arrest became known, they faced the loss of their jobs, eviction from their homes, and social ostracization. Arrestees often had little choice but to quietly pay their fines, rather than contest their arrest in

PEARL M. HART 1890 – 1975

THE FIFTH DAUGHTER OF IMMIGRANTS, Pearl M. Hart left school at fourteen to earn a living. However, she soon returned and earned a law degree from the John Marshall Law School in Chicago in 1914. Hart was the first woman lawyer to practice criminal law in that city, where she became a champion for social justice. As a public defender, she successfully defended women unfairly accused of prostitution and gay men arrested on dubious morals charges. In the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s, she defended naturalized citizens accused of subversive activities whom the federal government acted to deport.

Hart helped to found and served on boards of many social justice groups, including the National Lawyers Guild and Mattachine Midwest. She taught law at her alma mater and worked pro bono for causes close to her heart. She sympathized with the needs of the most vulnerable in society and actively fought for the rights of children. She lived with her same-sex partner for thirty years and died leaving a meager financial estate and a huge legacy.
In 1924 Chicago, Henry Gerber launched the first known homosexual rights organization in America, The Society for Human Rights (SRH). Police arrested Gerber and shut down the organization a few months after its founding. The police confiscated and never returned papers associated with the SRH publication, *Friendship and Freedom*, as well as Gerber’s typewriter.

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LGBTQ people were particularly vulnerable to extortion and violence. Victimized LGBTQ people rarely filed charges out of fear of exposure or that they would be the ones arrested. Perpetrators of violence against gay, lesbian, and transgender people could even claim what become known as a “gay panic” or "trans panic" defenses which justified any violence, including murder, in the name of protecting oneself against a same-sex advance. California became the first state to ban the use of such a defense in 2006, and as of 2019, has been joined by six other states.

Fears of homosexuality led to gay purges in local communities and universities. In Boise, Idaho, fear of an underground homosexual ring led to the questioning of roughly 1,500 people, of which fifteen were sentenced to prison, including one for life. In Florida, a years-long state funded task force successfully removed scores of gay and lesbian educators from public schools. Universities across the country saw an escalation of the expulsion of gay and lesbian students and professors.
IN 1927, THE STATE OF NEW YORK banned theater productions that promoted homosexual content. In the 1930s, the Hays Code forbid homosexual content in movies. Book and magazine publishers commonly refused to print positive portrayals of gay, lesbian, and transgender people for fear of legal prosecution.

In the 1950s, print media gave voice to the psychiatric view that homosexuality was a mental illness and a threat to male and female gender norms. Articles advised how to rear children to ensure they did not become homosexual. Tabloids printed conspiracy theories of a gay and lesbian underground targeting children and family values.

In the 1950s, cheap and sensationalized gay and lesbian fiction became abundantly available. Called “pulp fiction” for the cheap paper it was printed on, these works utilized tragic cautionary endings so as to avoid their confiscation by authorities for promoting homosexuality. Still, the stories were popular in the lesbian and gay community because they were among the few sources of mass media coverage of lesbian and gay people.
The San Francisco beat writers addressed homosexuality and bisexuality in their literature and poetry and harbored openly gay and bisexual members, including William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg. Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* and William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* both successfully fought off obscenity charges brought, in part, because of homosexual content.

**LGBTQ COMMUNITY**

**DURING WORLD WAR II**, the large congregation of men and women in same-sex environments in the military, and in United States factories, meant gay and lesbian people could find each other in numbers never before possible. After the war, many gay and lesbian service members decided not to return home, but instead remained in large port cities with other gay and lesbian people. Despite persecution, gay and lesbian communities flourished in most major United States cities and a few vacation areas such as Cherry Grove on Fire Island in New York.

*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* published in 1948 became one of the best-selling and most influential academic publications of the 20th century. Among its findings were that 37% of the male population had experienced a homosexual encounter, while 10% were predominantly or exclusively homosexual for an extended period of their adult life. The book called into questions the notion that homosexuality was a rare or abnormal behavior.
A few social-based groups emerged to meet community needs. One the first known incorporated LGBTQ groups in American history, the Veterans Benevolent Association, launched in 1945 as a social and support group for gay veterans. The interracial social club Knights of the Clock launched at the end of the decade. The Satyrs Motorcycle Club founded in 1954 in Los Angeles became one of the oldest continually operating gay organizations in North America and helped spawn the formation of gay motorcycle groups across the United States.

Other social gatherings were more informal. In-home parties provided protected spaces for LGBTQ communities. Reputed LGBTQ-friendly public parks and beaches, sports leagues, and even science fiction clubs provided other venues for same-sex people to meet and interact. *Swasarnt Ner’s Gay Girl’s Guide* in 1949 was one of the earliest to publish gay-friendly gathering places. Annual gay travel publications like the Damron guides and gay tours, such as those led by ONE Incorporated, emerged in the 1960s.

James Baldwin survived an abusive stepfather, bullying, and poverty to become one of the great writers and civil rights advocates of the 20th century. He explored racism and the African-American community in his texts, including in the critically acclaimed novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and essay collection *Notes of a Native Son*. In his book *Giovanni’s Room*, he dealt explicitly with a gay relationship, treating the gay characters as men first, rather than homosexual stereotypes. Baldwin himself was never in the closet and weathered enormous criticism for his sexual orientation. Baldwin spoke out against racism, homophobia, sexism, classism, and poverty all his life, a moral witness to prejudice and inhumanity in all its forms.
Motorcycles, cars, sports, parks, and beaches each held social opportunities for same-sex interactions outside of the bar culture.
SEXUAL PREFERENCE IS IRRELEVANT TO FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT.