

## **The History and Legacy of the Stonewall Riots**

*adapted from PlanetOut.com*

In the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn, a dingy, Mafia-run "private club" on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village with a predominantly gay clientele. The charge was illegal sale of alcohol. It was the second time that week the bar had been targeted by the police, and other gay bars had also been raided in prior weeks. Police officers lined up the Stonewall's 200 patrons to check identification. Most were free to leave, but the staff, as well as three drag queens and two male-to-female transsexuals, were detained.

Eyewitnesses recalled that the scene outside the bar was at first campy and festive. Patrons were joined by tourists and passers-by, and everyone cheered when a gay person emerged from the bar, dismissed by the police. But when a paddy wagon arrived and the police loaded the bar's staff and the three drag queens inside, the crowd on the street grew surly. One person threw a rock through a window, and eventually garbage cans, bottles, and even a parking meter were used to assault the building. Someone set a fire with lighter fluid. By newspaper accounts, 13 people were arrested and three police officers sustained minor injuries in the confrontation.

Later that night and into Sunday morning, a crowd again gathered in front of the ravaged bar. Many young gay men showed up to protest the flurry of raids, but they did so by handholding, kissing, and forming a chorus line. Police cleared the street without incident this time, but another street altercation occurred a few days later.

Even more significant, though, was what happened later in the summer. At the end of July, gay activists circulated copies of a flyer calling for a mass "homosexual liberation meeting." The alliance that formed from the meeting held on July 24 adopted the name Gay Liberation Front (GLF); among its demands were not only an end to police harassment, but job protection for gay employees, the repeal of sodomy laws, and local and national anti-discrimination laws.

Soon, numerous other organizations and a host of gay liberation publications emerged, first in New York and then across the country. Estimates suggest that, at the time of the riots, there were a few dozen gay organizations in the United States. Within a few years, the number had risen to more than 400.

While the riots at the Stonewall Inn on Greenwich Village's Christopher Street seem carved in stone as the birth of the gay liberation movement, the event might not be remembered in quite the same way had it not been for the commemorative march and rally organized a year later. The riots in 1969 certainly gained a great deal of media attention, and represented a turning point in the history of gay militancy in New York. But without the Christopher Street Liberation Day Committee, "Stonewall" probably wouldn't be any better known than the "Annual Reminder" demonstrations held yearly on the Fourth of July outside Independence Hall.

Instead, young militants, whose media savvy and organizing skills had been honed during the social justice movements of the mid-1960s, decided to capitalize on the spirited resistance at the Stonewall and turn that event into a rallying point for a national movement. Almost immediately after the riots they started planning for the first anniversary march. Thousands of people turned out that first year in New York and in other cities across the nation. Now, decades later, Gay Pride festivities draw millions of participants to events around the world.