



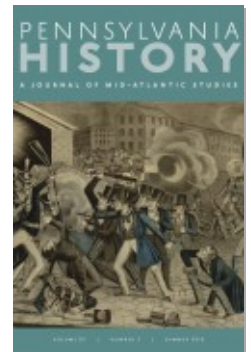
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## Out of the Closet and Into the Archives: A Partnership Model for Community-Based Collection and Preservation of LGBTQ History

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Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies, Volume 83, Number 3, Summer 2016, pp. 418-424 (Article)



Published by Penn State University Press

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# OUT OF THE CLOSET AND INTO THE ARCHIVES

## A PARTNERSHIP MODEL FOR COMMUNITY-BASED COLLECTION AND PRESERVATION OF LGBTQ HISTORY

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**ABSTRACT:** A special project to save Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning history at Dickinson College is discussed. The project may serve as a model for others wishing to recover LGBTQ history.

**KEYWORDS:** Dickinson College, LGBTQ Center of Central PA History Project

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) community has been largely ignored by historical institutions in their collecting practices. Yet this community has had a significant impact on American culture, politics, and public policy especially from the last half of the twentieth century to the present time. The increasing visibility of LGBTQ people and their activism for civil equality has mirrored other major civil rights struggles in the United States, such as the African American civil rights movement and the women's equal rights movement. While significant strides have been made to collect, preserve and present their stories and safeguard artifacts and documents chronicling these particular social justice causes, interest by historical institutions in LGBTQ civil rights artifacts and documents has lagged. A variety of community-based efforts, mostly in larger cities in the United States, have filled this niche, collecting and preserving what they can, mostly by volunteers. One example of this is the GLBT Community Center of Baltimore and Central Maryland, located in Baltimore. Another volunteer-run LGBT archives is the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City. These efforts are often hampered by a population that often hides or

discards the material evidence of its history because of societal pressures suggesting that it is not a history to be preserved and indeed celebrated.

Conventional wisdom holds that there is not much LGBTQ history to document in Pennsylvania outside of major cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. A new project is proving that is not the case. A group of LGBTQ activists in central Pennsylvania met in 2012 to discuss issues involved in their aging population. They realized that no one was documenting the history of the LGBTQ community in this region. Many early activists had died or were reaching advanced age. They concluded that the LGBT Center of Central PA needed to take a leadership role in creating a History Project that would be able to discover, recover, document, collect, preserve, and present area LGBTQ history through oral histories and material culture. The Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) Center of Central PA is a volunteer-led effort, begun in 2006, to create a regionally representative community center



FIGURE 1 Some of the History Project's artifacts and archival documents.

that is both a location and a unifying point for central Pennsylvania's large, diverse, and multicounty LGBT population. The center now offers office and programming space and two full-time paid staff. The organizers realized that it would be important to find a permanent repository for the outcomes of the History Project. Rather than taking on that responsibility, they realized the value that a professionally managed archival institution would add to the project. They approached the Dickinson College Archives and Special Collections Department in Carlisle, where they found a very willing partner.

In central Pennsylvania and other parts of the state, including rural and small communities, LGBTQ activism took root in the late 1960s and flourished through the present day. The Pennsylvania Rural Gay Caucus, created in 1975, developed a network of individuals and fledgling organizations that gave support to activism efforts throughout this large region. One of these member organizations, the Lehigh Valley Homophile Organization, or Le-Hi-Ho, held its first meeting in June of 1969, a few days before the police raid and riots at the Stonewall Bar in New York City, the pivotal flashpoint for the modern LGBTQ civil rights movement. A state historical marker now honors the gay civil rights demonstrations that took place on July Fourth in Philadelphia from 1965-1969. Records relating to these activities are sketchy. The History Project's leaders were determined not to let history be lost this way in central Pennsylvania.

Additionally, Pennsylvania was a leader in recognizing gay rights, notably in state government. In 1974 Governor Milton Shapp began a series of firsts for any governor of any state. He was the first governor to hold a formal meeting with LGBTQ activists; the first to issue an executive order prohibiting discrimination in employment for state employees on the basis of sexual orientation; the first to create a governmental body dealing with LGBTQ public policy issues by creating the Pennsylvania Council for Sexual Minorities; and the first to issue a governor's proclamation in support of a gay pride week.

The collaboration between the LGBT Center and Dickinson has provided a strong foundation for growth, as both institutions offer complementary skills and resources. The grounding of the project within a community-based LGBTQ organization brings tremendous credibility and access within the area's LGBTQ population. It has enabled the project to quickly locate a large number of people willing to share their stories through oral history interviews and their documents and artifacts. Approximately eighty interviews have been completed in the first three years of the project (with about ninety additional people on the waiting list), and more than thirty linear feet of

documents and artifacts have been added to the collection at the Dickinson College Archives and Special Collections.

Additionally, the History Project aligned well with the Dickinson Special Collection's mission to support teaching, research, and learning. The number of courses at the college dealing with issues of sexuality and gender is growing across many disciplines. LGBTQ initiatives and activism are also prominent on campus. There is a growing need for research resources that reflect life experiences across the gender spectrum, in order to support the academic curriculum and to foster the development of individual identities. As a result, there is a community at the college eager to support and contribute to the History Project's efforts. For example, in spring 2015 students enrolled in an LGBT Oral History course conducted and transcribed interviews with local individuals, which they then donated to the History Project. Dickinson students and faculty have also been among the first to conduct research using donations gathered through this initiative. Members of first-year seminars, English courses, and classes in women's and gender studies, among other disciplines, visit Special Collections regularly. These students explore the oral histories and textual materials to bring their course readings to life or to prepare essays and papers.

Making sure this history is accessible not just for today's researchers but far into the future requires careful preservation. Dickinson provides secure, climate-controlled storage for the physical documents, images, and artifacts donated to the History Project. The college also provides and maintains server space where the digital video generated during oral history interviews is stored. The special collections librarian oversees the management of the collection and supervises student interns each semester. The interns help to catalog archival donations, conduct and transcribe oral histories, curate exhibits, and perform research using the donated collections. These students are often interested in careers involving social justice and gender issues, and this internship provides them with an opportunity to cultivate their skills while supporting a nonprofit initiative. In return, they contribute their energy, technological know-how, research skills, and publicity networks to the project.

This partnership between a community-based organization and a professional archives was cited as the reason why the Society of American Archivists (SAA) awarded its prestigious J. Franklin Jameson Award for Archival Advocacy to the LGBT Center of Central PA History Project in 2014. The SAA awards committee felt that this was a model that they would like to see duplicated in other communities around the country.



**FIGURE 2** History Project intern Talya Auger (Dickinson College class of 2016, majoring in women's and gender studies) doing research with our collections.

From an archivist's perspective, this project poses interesting collection management challenges. The volume of documents and artifacts has grown quickly, from six linear feet to approximately thirty linear feet in only two years. It is also common for individuals to make multiple donations in rapid succession over a period of months or years as they discover items in boxes and on shelves. Archival standards for cataloging and organizing these types of materials are usually designed with one-time gifts in mind; the regular receipt of serial gifts through the History Project requires modification of traditional approaches. As a result, archival staff at Dickinson are always seeking ways to simplify existing workflows to accommodate new acquisitions in a flexible and efficient manner, while anticipating future space needs for this rapidly expanding collection. For example, catalogers format finding aids using a flexible numbering schema so new additions can be inserted easily, so that folders don't have to be renumbered and physically shifted to accommodate each new gift from a particular donor.

There are also digital requirements to consider. History Project interviewers capture high-resolution video recordings of each oral history in order to provide sufficient quality for a variety of uses, and as a result most interviews require four to eight gigabytes of storage space. While storage space itself may be cheap, the backup systems necessary to provide reliable long-term access require a significant investment of financial and employee resources. In this particular case, the History Project relies upon the support of the college's

Infrastructure Systems Department, which maintains Dickinson's servers, and the Academic Technology Department, which provides advice regarding video sharing and reformatting. Overall, the management of digital video files is new ground for Dickinson's Special Collections staff, requiring self-education regarding file formats, backup protocol, and software options to support file editing, display, and discoverability.

The actual content of the materials in the History Project's collection also poses concerns in terms of privacy. While eager to make these materials publicly accessible to a wide audience, project coordinators at the Center and the college recognize the potential for accidentally outing individuals, particularly through digitization initiatives. As a result, they have developed guidelines and processes to protect the rights of those represented in these collections. Oral history participants have the opportunity to restrict access to all or portions of their interviews, and may opt to submit audio-only interviews without video. Donors of archival material may choose to remain anonymous in print and digital finding aids. The project's digitization selection guidelines require permission from any individual named or depicted in a document in order for it to be made available online. Through these measures, the History Project coordinators strive to balance the privacy of those who contribute to the initiative, while making their powerful personal stories available to others.

The project has been able to discover and acquire a treasure trove of documents, as well as oral history interviews with the founders of some of these early Pennsylvania-based organizations, including the Caucus. The collection at Dickinson tells many important individual stories and as a whole presents a picture of a community of people who stayed and struggled to make life better for themselves in their home communities. The stories document the risks taken to come out of the closet, the shocking discrimination many endured, the difficult work of building an infrastructure of community organizations and services and securing civil rights ordinances city by city. There are stories of the community's response to the HIV/AIDS health crisis, creating an entire infrastructure of health services almost overnight, and the sadness from the loss of so many members of the community to the disease. But there are also many hopeful stories of successful careers, long-term relationships and political and public policy achievements for the community.

LGBTQ history exists in every community. By partnering with local LGBTQ community organizations and individuals, archival and

historical organizations may be able to replicate this model and find a new constituency for discovering and sharing their history.

BARRY LOVELAND holds a B.S. in building sciences from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and an M.S. in historic preservation planning from Eastern Michigan University. He worked for more than 32 years with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, retiring at the end of 2015. He has been involved in LGBTQ civil rights activism for nearly forty years and is a founder and chair of the LGBT Center of Central PA History Project.

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