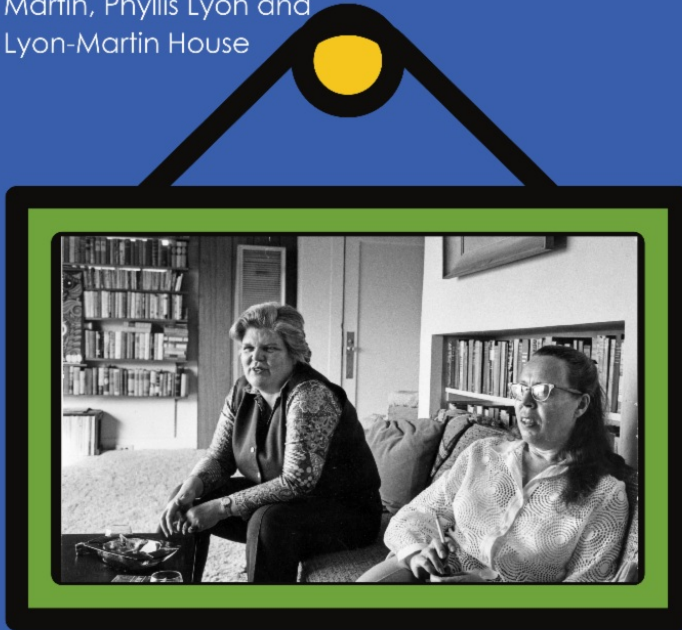


# History Happens



January 2021

Del Martin, Phyllis Lyon and the Lyon-Martin House



## Landmarking A Historic Lesbian Space in SF

by Mark Sawchuk

The LGBTQ community lost a pioneer in April, when LGBTQ activist Phyllis Lyon (1924–2020) passed away at her house in San Francisco. Together with her partner and later wife of over 50 years, Del Martin (1921–2008), Lyon cofounded the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955, the first lesbian-rights organization in the United States. Just a few months after Lyon's death, the Noe Valley house that Lyon and Martin shared for over five decades was sold and is now threatened with demolition.

Community members are organizing to attempt to save this historic structure from erasure, establishing the group [Friends of the Lyon-Martin House](#), for which the GLBT Historical Society, whose archives hold Lyon and Martin's [papers](#), is serving as fiscal sponsor. On October 19, District 8 Supervisor Rafael Mandelman initiated the process to name the Lyon-Martin House a San Francisco Landmark. With Mayor London Breed's approval on October 30, the nomination moves to the San Francisco Planning Department and from there to the Historic Preservation Commission. Success in naming the house a landmark will require major

support from the LGBTQ community during the series of hearings that accompany the landmarking process.

*History Happens* interviewed architectural historian and preservation planner Shayne Watson, who is spearheading the preservation efforts with Friends of the Lyon-Martin House.

### **Why is it important to preserve the Lyon-Martin house as a queer historic space in San Francisco?**

Connecting our history to the physical places where that history unfolded makes the stories really come to life. Imagine trying to convey the significance of Stonewall without the actual Stonewall Inn, or the Compton's Cafeteria Riot without that now-iconic building at the corner of Turk and Taylor. A bronze sidewalk plaque just doesn't cut it. The Lyon-Martin House is a landmark with or without formal designation. Just as Americans claim Independence Hall as a birthplace of American democracy, queer people throughout the world can claim the Lyon-Martin House as a place instrumental in the development and advancement of our fundamental rights — it's part of our collective experience.

**With our Executive Director Terry Beswick, you served as the co-chair of the Arts, Culture and Heritage Committee for the LGBTQ+ Cultural Heritage Strategy, which went to the Board of Supervisors last year. Does it provide guidance on saving sites such as the Lyon-Martin House?**

The [LGBTQ+ Cultural Heritage Strategy](#) was published in 2020 after three years of engagement with LGBTQ communities in San Francisco. Feedback from queer San Franciscans was clear: as current stewards of our history, we have a responsibility to ensure that San Francisco's LGBTQ heritage — in all its colorful diversity — is preserved for future generations to experience and celebrate. Our committee developed actions to realize this goal, including the development of a Historic Preservation Advocacy Group composed of experts in the areas of LGBTQ history, historic preservation and related fields. A primary goal of this group would be to fulfill the recommendations outlined in the [Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History](#), adopted by the Historic Preservation Commission in 2015, which serves as a guide for the treatment of historic properties associated with LGBTQ history. One of the first recommendations is to landmark sites of significance.

**If the Board of Supervisors designates the Lyon-Martin House as a landmark, what protections does this status offer?**

The current reality is that the Lyon-Martin House is private property and the new owners have a right to propose demolition. But if the Lyon-Martin House is designated a San Francisco Landmark, any proposed project that would result in demolition or substantive alterations to the building would need to be reviewed and approved by the Historic Preservation Commission at a public hearing. I certainly wouldn't want to be the person at the hearing trying to demolish or muck up the longtime home of one of the most significant lesbian couples in history.

Those who are interested in supporting our efforts to preserve this historic building can join the [Friends of Lyon-Martin House](#) by signing the [letter of support](#). And participate in the webinar on January 19 (check the Friends website for information) on the future of the house cohosted by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the California Preservation Foundation, and the GLBT Historical Society. Finally, you can write a letter or speak in support when the Lyon-Martin House Landmark designation is heard by the Historic Preservation Commission (in late February) and the Board of Supervisors (TBD).

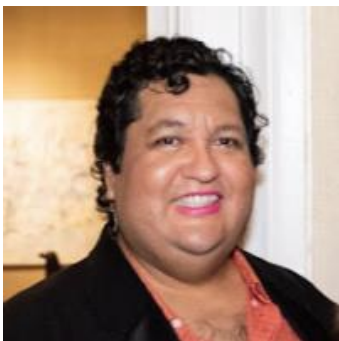
*Mark Sawchuk is communications manager at the GLBT Historical Society.*

*Shayne Watson is the owner of Watson Heritage Consulting, a Bay Area-based consultancy for architectural history and historic preservation planning.*

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## From the Board

### Hope & Resilience in an Overwhelming Year



by Tina Valentin Aguirre

Like many of you, I began 2020 with hopes that were quickly dashed. The devastation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd wreaked havoc on our visions and plans for the year. The ugliness of the presidential election created heartache and division. And much of the worst of 2019 persisted, including the murders of Black and brown trans women and the incarceration of migrant children.

LGBTQ people have been overwhelmed all year long, and yet these challenges created opportunities to make transformative changes in our community work. For me, it resulted in carving out more time to stay connected with friends, family and fellow community members. For the GLBT Historical Society, it prompted us to dive into difficult conversations around inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility and find new ways to reach our supporters and the public.

The society responded by embracing and enhancing our presence online. We organized dozens of online programs, including a special series contextualizing COVID-19 and the AIDS epidemic. We reconceived our year's planned exhibitions as virtual shows and adapted previous exhibitions as online displays. We successfully took our annual Gala online, and we made dozens of archival collections available remotely on our website. In the process, we found ways to cultivate hope and resilience.

Thank you for your support during this very rough year. If you have not made your year-end contribution to the GLBT Historical Society, I

encourage you to [donate today](#) to the extent that you are able. **All donations made by December 31 will be matched, dollar for dollar.** The incredibly difficult funding environment of this year will persist well into 2021, and we continue to rely on your generous support to make our work possible during these bewildering and uncertain times.

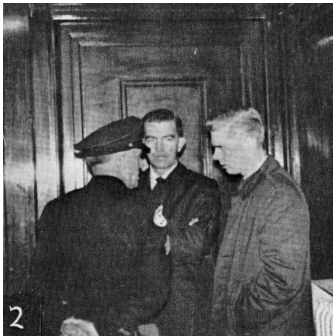
With your help, the GLBT Historical Society will not only persevere through these challenges — we will emerge knowing that 2021 will be a much better year. Thank you, and from myself and everyone at the GLBT Historical Society, Happy New Year!

*Tina Valentin Aguirre is the board chair of the GLBT Historical Society.*

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## In the Archives

### A New Year's Raid in Polk Gulch



By Isaac Fellman

On New Year's Day in 1965, San Francisco police raided a drag ball at California Hall. The Hall, half a mile from the current location of the society's archives, was built in the 1910s by members of the German immigrant community who lived in Polk Gulch before it became San Francisco's mid-century gayborhood. By 1965, the LGBTQ community was firmly established on Polk Street, and on New Year's, California Hall must have felt like home territory — a place for drag queens and their escorts to whirl and ring in the New Year.

The event was a benefit for the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, and ministers and their wives would share the queens' dance floor in a celebration of allyship. Instead, the evening was dominated by police intimidation. Although the local homophile organizations that cosponsored the ball had worked with the city to secure permits, the police showed up in force, aiming bright lights at the doors, photographing the attendees as they entered and eventually forcing their way in to arrest several people, including lawyers who protested their entry.

The lawyers' connections in their field, and the presence of straight people at the ball, drew sympathetic attention and advanced the straight public's understanding of queer people's rights. Police harassment in the city continued, especially among less affluent and privileged queer communities (who would have their own reckonings at events like the Compton's Cafeteria Riot in August 1966), but this high-profile case was a turning point.

The society's new [primary source set](#) on policing and resistance chronicles this story and many more. San Francisco's police have often set themselves against queer people. Documenting and telling these stories reminds us of the labor it took — and still takes — to make the city

work for us, to make the city our home.

*Isaac Fellman is the reference archivist at the GLBT Historical Society.*

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## Upcoming Online Events

### Queer Culture Club

### Sex in SoMa: Street Sex Photos



Thursday, January 14

7:00–7:30 p.m.

Online program

Free

Our new program series in 2021 is the “Queer Culture Club,” a monthly conversation on the second Thursday of each month that focuses on LGBTQ people who are defining the queer culture of yesterday, today and tomorrow. These programs feature GLBT Historical Society Executive Director Terry Beswick as he interviews queer culture-makers, including authors, playwrights, historians, activists, artists and archivists, to learn about their work, creative process, inspirations, hopes and dreams. In this first installment, cosponsored by the [LEATHER & LGBTQ Cultural District](#), San Francisco gay “radical sex” photographer Mark I. Chester will discuss his forthcoming book of contemporary photography, *Street Sex Photos* (2021). The book documents gay men’s sexual lives in the South of Market district of San Francisco in an era when the neighborhood was, in Chester’s words, “like a giant supermarket of the sexual underground.” Register online [here](#).

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# making history. together.

**Become a part of history by making your year-end contribution at [glbthistory.org/donate](https://glbthistory.org/donate). Every donation made by December 31 will be matched, up to \$50,000, doubling your impact!**

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## Current Exhibitions

### Performance, Protest & Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker

#### Online

Examine how rainbow-flag creator Gilbert Baker blurred the lines between artist and activist, protester and performer.

### 50 Years of Pride

#### Online

This photography exhibition documents the evolution of San Francisco Pride over the past half century.

### Labor of Love: The Birth of San Francisco Pride

#### Online

Learn how San Francisco forged the internationally renowned annual celebration that would come to be known as Pride.

### AIDS Treatment Activism: A Bay Area Story

#### Online

Explore the rise of and growth of the treatment activism movement in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s and 1990s.

### Angela Davis: OUTspoken

#### Online

Rare posters and ephemera from a private collection highlight the journey of Black lesbian activist Angela Davis.

### Reigning Queens: The Lost Photos of Roz Joseph

#### Online

Evocative color photographs depict San Francisco's epic drag and

costume balls of the mid-1970s.

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## Visit Us & Online Resources

The museum and archives are online-only until further notice. Archives staff members are still available to work with researchers; please contact us at [reference@glbthistory.org](mailto:reference@glbthistory.org).

**Online exhibitions:** Our online exhibitions are available here.

**Online archives resources:** Browse dozens of digital collections.

**Upcoming events:** More information about all of our online events.

**Past events:** Video footage of a large number of our past programs.

### THE GLBT HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

#### Exhibitions & Programs

4127 18th St.

San Francisco, CA 94114

(415) 621-1107

[www.glbthistory.org/museum](http://www.glbthistory.org/museum)

Temporarily online-oly

### DR. JOHN P. DE CECCO ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

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(415) 777-5455

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CREDITS. Feature: Phyllis Lyon (right) and Del Martin (left) in their house on Duncan Street, ca. 1975; photographer unknown, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers (1993-13), GLBT Historical Society. The Lyon-Martin House in 2012; photograph by Shayne Watson, used with permission. FROM THE BOARD: Photo of Tina Valentin Aguirre courtesy of same. IN THE ARCHIVES: Two plainclothesmen and one police officer in uniform inside California Hall at the New Year's Ball on January 1, 1965; photograph in *Citizens News* (February 1965), Periodicals Collection, GLBT Historical Society. EVENTS. Queer Culture Club 1/14: Photo of Mark I. Chester courtesy of same.

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## Back Issues



