

History Happens



GLBT
Historical
Society
museum & archives

February 2021



The Henry Gerber House



Villa Lewaro



Azurest South



The Ma Rainey House

A Foundation Many Generations Deep: Preserving Black LGBTQ Spaces and Sites



by Jeffrey "Free" Harris

On February 19, Free Harris joins Shayne Watson in a program about [LGBTQ historic preservation](#). See the [events listing](#) below for more information. Here, he discusses some significant sites of Black queer history and how preservationists are correcting and updating the historical record.

Historic preservation is inherently a complex process. Black History Month

is an opportunity to consider the specific challenges that arise when preserving Black LGBTQ places. One challenge is conducting thorough historical research to open “historical closets” — to uncover and identify the people and events that haven’t been talked about within an LGBTQ context. This also entails examining the broader networks of queer Black people, in order to reconstruct their social worlds and find unexplored threads.

A good example of this kind of work is [Azurest South](#) (circa 1938), a historic house on the National Register of Historic Places located on the campus of Virginia State University, a historically Black university. It was designed by Amaza Lee Meredith, an extraordinary self-taught architect who learned the International Style, a post-World War I architectural style. Her architecture is significant on its own. So too is the fact that she lived with her partner and VSU colleague, Dr. Edna Meade Colson. This couple likely was part of a larger LGBTQ community at VSU, and that’s a network worth exploring.

Re-Centering the Obscured

We also have to reexamine familiar sites to highlight obscured figures. For example, there is the [Henry Gerber House](#) (circa 1885), a National Historic Landmark in Chicago. It was the home of the nation’s first gay-rights organization, the Society for Human Rights, in 1924 and 1925. Interestingly, one of the early presidents of the Society was an African American, John T. Graves. This is the same time period as the Harlem Renaissance, which is famous for its queer dimensions, yet Graves is an important figure in queer history who has all but disappeared from the historic record. Preservation research can help re-center figures like Graves.

There are many such fascinating examples. There’s entrepreneur and millionaire Madame C. J. Walker’s home, [Villa Lewaro](#) (circa 1916–18), in Irvington, New York. Her daughter A’lelia Walker, who inherited the home after her mother’s death, was a bisexual benefactor to queer members of the Harlem Renaissance. And [the house in Columbus, Georgia](#) belonging to the “Mother of the Blues,” Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, is a museum, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. But only recently has it become more widely known that Rainey was bisexual. Many places may have similar “hidden” histories.

Updating Narratives

Ongoing research results in our having to update the historic narratives in various listings on national, state and local historic registers to explicitly acknowledge unknown or unacknowledged LGBTQ historical information. In other instances, similar research helps us to prioritize new places worthy of preservation and/or recognition. As an out and Black preservationist, my hope is that we can get ahead of the game with regard to the preservation and designation of African American LGBTQ historic places of the recent past. I hate to admit it, but 1970 is now 50 years gone, so it’s officially historic!

Having written and spoken about African American LGBTQ historic

places has been self-affirming. It's wonderful information for all of us to know. Younger generations, particularly, are more invested in seeing the full spectrum of who we are. They want to learn about historic queer people of color, transgender people and people outside of binary gender structures. To do this work in the African American context is a joy. I'm standing on a foundation that is many generations deep.

Jeffrey A. "Free" Harris is an independent historian and preservation consultant who works with historic preservation organizations, historic sites, nonprofit organizations and academic institutions on preservation issues related to diversity and historic site interpretations.

From the Board

Three Questions for Oliver Slate-Greene



by Mark Sawchuk

One of the newest members of the GLBT Historical Society's board of directors is Oliver Slate-Greene, a surfer, poet and queer-history enthusiast. As we welcome him onto the board, we asked him a couple of questions to learn more about why he decided to join — and what aspects of LGBTQ history inspire him.

Why is working on the society's board meaningful for you?

OSG: I am not known for my brevity, and the simplicity of this answer is surprising to me, but... it's because images and history matter. They help us locate ourselves in time and space. And as we eke out a more equitable future — it's going to become an increasingly sacred act to protect against revisionism, and to honor all those who came before and made all *this* possible.

Which topics in queer history are you eager to learn more about in the archives?

OSG: I'm a lover of all things femme, so I'm eager to learn more about the lives lived, and figures who channel that femme vibe/lifestyle. I want to learn more about the lived experiences of my BIPOC trans siblings. Also, I want to see pretty colors, interesting shapes, read sexy words... There's a funny thing that happens naturally living outside of the rote straight/cis script — the world comes to life differently, senses get heightened. Both out of pleasure (yay), and for safety reasons (boo). This sensorial-steeped way of being pours out of queer folks and onto pages, into zines, on canvases, or photo paper, and it's really quite captivating if you know where to look.

What figure in LGBTQ history inspires you?

OSG: That would be Lou Sullivan, who said, "I wanna look like what I am

but don't know what someone like me looks like. I mean, when people look at me I want them to think — there's one of those people that reasons, that is a philosopher, that has their own interpretation of happiness. That's what I am."

Oliver Slate-Greene is a member of the GLBT Historical Society's board of directors and serves as the head of growth for a venture studio in the Bay Area.

Upcoming Online Events

Illustrated Talk

Rainbow High: LGBTQ Stories in Aerospace History



Friday, February 5

6:00–7:30 p.m.

Online program

Free | \$5 suggested donation

Throughout the history of aviation, from Leonardo Da Vinci to Major Margaret Witt, LGBTQ people have designed and flown aircraft, pursued the dream of space flight and risked their lives for their country. In this exciting talk, Sean Mobley, the volunteer coordinator at the Museum of Flight in Seattle, will share the histories of some key LGBTQ pioneers in aerospace history. He'll also discuss figures in the aerospace industry who have worked to advance the cause of LGBTQ equality. Register online [here](#).

Queer Culture Club

Catching Up With Dazié Grego-Sykes



Thursday, February 11

7:00–7:30 p.m.

Online program

Free | \$5 suggested donation

In this month's installment of the Queer Culture Club, GLBT Historical Society Executive Director Terry Beswick will be interviewing Oakland-based performance artist, educator, author and activist Dazié Grego-Sykes, the associate artistic director for the Tenderloin-based performance ensemble "Skywatchers." Mr. Grego-Sykes is well known for his two solo plays *Am I a Man* and *Nigga-Roo*, as well as his 2017 poetry collection *Black Faggotry*. Queer Culture Club is 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. Each program interviews queer culture-makers, including authors, playwrights, historians, activists, artists and archivists, to learn about their work, creative process, inspirations, hopes and

dreams. Register online [here](#).

Living History Discussion

Legends, Monsters & Chosen Family With Tina Aguirre



Monday, February 15

6:00–7:30

Online program

Free

This event produced by Still Here San Francisco and cosponsored by the GLBT Historical Society will take an intimate, in-depth look at the creative life and work of Tina Valentin Aguirre (genderqueer, they/them/theirs) in conversation with Still Here’s artistic director, Natalia Vigil. A poet, movie director and opera producer, Aguirre is the chair of the GLBT Historical Society Board of Directors and became the district director for the Castro LGBTQ Cultural District last September. Among Aguirre’s artistic works are a 30-minute documentary with Augie Robles, *¡Viva 16!* (1994) and poetry published in *Still Here San Francisco* (2019, Foglifter Press). The evening will feature poetry, new videos and a Q&A session with audience members. Founded in 2012, Still Here is an intergenerational cultural-preservation project amplifying the voices and creativity of LGBTQ Black, indigenous and people of color raised in San Francisco. Register online [here](#).

Panel Discussion

Preserving LGBTQ Historic Places



Friday, February 19

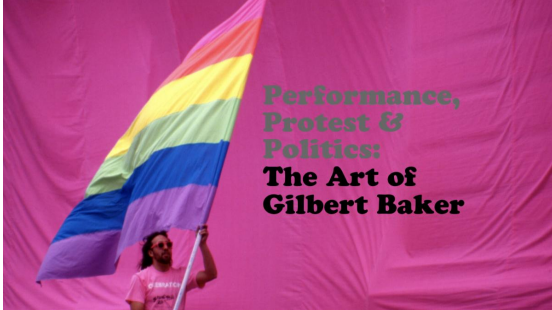
6:00–7:30 p.m.

Online program

Free | \$5 suggested donation

Preserving and landmarking historic sites associated with significant events and people is critically important to promoting an understanding of our shared history. This is especially so for the LGBTQ community, much of whose history has been occluded or deliberately erased. Architectural and preservation experts Jeffrey “Free” Harris and Shayne Watson will discuss how historians identify and prioritize LGBTQ sites worthy of preservation, and consider the steps involved in preservation and landmarking efforts. Among the topics to be highlighted will be sites of significant Black queer history and ongoing efforts to preserve the Lyon-Martin House in San Francisco. Register online [here](#).

Current Online Exhibitions



Performance, Protest & Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker

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



50 Years of Pride

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



Labor of Love: The Birth of San Francisco Pride

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

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



Angela Davis: OUTspoken

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

Evocative color photographs depict San Francisco's epic drag and costume balls of the mid-1970s.

Give the gift of
queer history!



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.

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

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