

PRIDE PIONEER: FRANK KAMENY AND THE EARLY GAY RIGHTS MOVEMENT



Frank Kameny holds the sign reading “Gay is Good” at a parade in New York City, 1970.

In 1958, astronomer Frank Kameny was fired from his job with the U.S. Army Map Service for being gay. At the time, there was a strong social stigma and widespread discrimination against gay men and women. Those who were dismissed from jobs for homosexuality were expected to accept their fate and to be ashamed. Kameny defied those expectations, appealed his firing, and helped to launch the movement for gay pride.

At the beginning of the gay rights movement, majority public opinion was generally hostile toward anyone identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (then commonly referred to as “transsexual”). In 1950, a congressional committee released a report saying that gay people were unfit for federal employment. Three years later, President Dwight D. Eisenhower acted on the report by signing an executive order that barred gay men, lesbians, and bisexual people from federal employment.

In the 1950s and 1960s, local police in cities such as Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco frequently arrested people for dancing, kissing, or even holding hands in public if they were of the same sex. For such behavior, they could be charged with lewd conduct or some similar offense. Many states had laws against cross-dressing, or when someone dressed in a way that that was deemed not to match their gender. Police also raided bars where gay men and women could otherwise experience safety and acceptance.

Kameny's Early Activism

Franklin Edward Kameny grew up and eventually became a public figure in this time of discrimination. As a young man, Kameny was exceptionally bright. He entered Queens College at age 15 to study physics. His studies were interrupted when he was drafted into the U.S. Army during WWII. After serving in combat in Europe, he finished his undergraduate studies in New York and then earned his Ph.D. in astronomy at Harvard University.

Kameny taught for a few years at Georgetown University before taking a job with the U.S. Army Map Service in 1957. Soon after he was hired, however, the Army found out that Kameny had been arrested in 1955 during a police “sting” operation for a consensual homosexual encounter. He was, consequently, fired from his position on the grounds of “immoral behavior.”

Kameny did not accept his dismissal. He appealed his dismissal to the Civil Service Commission with the help of a lawyer. He claimed that he was not informed of what he had done that was supposedly “immoral.” He had only been labeled “homosexual.” But the commission barred him from federal employment. The stigma of his dismissal also made it very difficult for Kameny to get a job. Having no source of income, the available funds he had quickly ran out.

By 1958, Kameny had exhausted the appeals process. But he had one final possibility. He filed a *writ of certiorari*

with the United States Supreme Court, which is a legal filing requesting that the Supreme Court hear a case. Moreover, he did it *pro se*, which means that he drafted the writ himself, without the help of a lawyer.

In the writ, Kameny argued that the U.S. Army Map Service had no right to fire him for “immoral behavior” because homosexuality is not, in fact, immoral. The Supreme Court declined to hear Kameny’s case. But Kameny’s writ was an important step in the fight for gay rights.

At this time, people like Kameny who were accused of “indecent behavior” simply for their homosexuality usually either denied the charge or accepted their firing. Frank Kameny instead was ready to make his case that homosexuality was not “immoral” and was nothing to be ashamed of. After being fired, Kameny dedicated the remainder of his life to fighting for gay rights.

The Mattachine Society

Kameny, along with another activist named Jack Nichols, founded a chapter of the Mattachine Society in Washington, D.C., (MSW). The Mattachine Society had been founded in 1950 in Los Angeles, California, as an advocacy organization for gay men. Branches in other U.S. cities formed during the 1950s. It was named after a French secret society of unmarried men in the medieval and renaissance periods.

Kameny wanted the MSW to be more than what he called a “genteel, debating society.” He adapted what he learned from observing the Black civil rights movement to make the MSW more activist. He wanted the MSW to lead protests against the policies of the Civil Service Commission and to assist gay people with their legal struggles against discrimination.

In 1962, under Kameny’s and Nichols’s leadership, the MSW organized a massive letter-writing campaign to hundreds of elected federal officials. The following year, Kameny testified before congressional subcommittees for four-and-a-half hours against a bill to forbid the Mattachine Society from raising funds. The bill ultimately failed in the U.S. Senate.

When it became known in 1965 that the Communist government of Cuba had labor camps for lesbians and gay men, the MSW organized picket lines at federal buildings. Protesters carried signs that equated the U.S. government and Cuba in their repressive policies toward gay people. The protests were relatively small but they gained attention at notable locations such as the White House and — on the Fourth of July — Philadelphia’s Independence Hall.

At the picket lines, Kameny wanted participants to display a formal, professional image. He insisted that they not hold hands or show any public affection, and dress professionally. They had to follow a strict dress code, including jackets and ties for men and conservative dresses and heels for women.

Kameny and the MSW also helped gay Americans obtain security clearances, which were denied to anyone the government labeled homosexual. Gay immigrants were also barred from entering the United States. The MSW

In the mid-20th century, the United States and the Soviet Union were the world’s two “superpowers.” They competed for influence across the globe. After World War II, many U.S. congressional leaders feared that the United States would adopt Soviet-style communism. The late 1940s and 1950s were a time known as the Red Scare as Senator Joseph McCarthy and others in Congress sought to expose secret leftists (communists and socialists) working within the U.S. government and military.

At that same time, gay, lesbian, and bisexual employees in the U.S. government were deemed suspicious and were swept up into fears around communism. Between the late 1940s and throughout the 1960s, thousands of government employees accused or suspected of being gay were fired or forced to resign in what has become known as the Lavender Scare. Frank Kameny, for example, was a target of the Lavender Scare.

Senator McCarthy and others in Congress associated gay people with communism for at least two reasons. First, gays and lesbians generally fell outside of the mainstream of society. Consequently, they tended to form independent social groups and subcultures. (Due to police repression, the groups were often secretive.) McCarthy feared that communists were more likely to infiltrate clandestine groups. Second, since homosexuality was cause for termination of employment or even criminal prosecution, gay employees were seen as particularly subject to blackmail by Soviet agents.

under Kameny fought people’s unjust firings and dismissals from the military, the closing of gay bars, and for the defense of those who they believed were entrapped by the police.

Towards Gay Liberation

On June 28, 1969, New York City police raided a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn. The police often raided gay and lesbian bars looking for evidence of crimes against “public morals” such as men holding hands, dancing together, or “cross-dressing.” Police could then temporarily shut a bar down and seize the bar’s alcohol.

Many of the gay and transgender patrons of the Stonewall Inn, however, refused to obey police orders that night. When some police officers began using force, the patrons fought back. The resulting Stonewall riots, or Stonewall uprising, lasted for several days. A new, more confrontational gay-rights movement began. Within months, activist newspapers with the word “Gay” in the title emerged in major cities.

Before Stonewall, gay-rights activism largely followed the orderly model set by Kameny, the Mattachine Society, and the lesbian advocacy group Daughters of Bilitis (taking their name from a fictional character associated with the ancient Greek poet Sappho). These activists emphasized a goal of working to have homosexual and bisexual people accepted by mainstream American society, or *assimilation*.

The post-Stonewall era of gay rights activism was different. Some gay-rights organizations openly allied themselves with more confrontational elements of the antiwar and Black

liberation movements such as the Black Panthers. Many more began to speak of “gay pride” and not assimilation. They encouraged gay people to “come out” by talking about being gay to friends, family, and the media.

Unlike some of his fellow activists from the earlier era, Kameny was comfortable with the new movement. With its emphasis on pride, the new activists became concerned as much with gay liberation as with gay rights. Inspired by Stokely Carmichael’s famous slogan “Black is beautiful,” Kameny coined the slogan “Gay is good.”

Kameny’s Later Activism

Prior to 1973, homosexuality was listed as a mental illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The DSM is a standard, official guide used by mental health professionals such as psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and social workers. Kameny and other gay activists disrupted the 1970 and 1971 meetings of the American Psychological Association (APA, which publishes the DSM) in protest over the manual’s designation of homosexuality. “We’re not the problem!” Kameny shouted from the audience, “You’re the problem!” The activists advocated for understanding homosexuality as a normal expression of human sexuality.

By 1972, Kameny and lesbian activist and magazine editor Barbara Gittings were officially part of the program of the APA meeting. They spoke at the meeting on behalf of removing homosexuality from the list of mental disorders. Their efforts succeeded. The third edition of the DSM was published in 1973 without homosexuality listed in it.

The federal government still officially barred gay men and women from employment in the 1970s. The MSW was also still active and continued to oppose the employment restriction. The Civil Service Commission finally lifted its restriction in 1975, allowing openly gay and bisexual people to hold federal jobs. The rules that had led to Kameny’s own dismissal from the Map Service in 1957 were now overturned.



President Barack Obama shakes Frank Kameny’s hand in the Oval Office in 2009 after signing a presidential memorandum extending some benefits to same-sex partners of federal employees.

Kameny has been recognized as a founding figure in the gay rights movement. Every June, in commemoration of Stonewall, there are LGBT pride parades all over the nation and in many countries throughout the world. In 2009, Kameny met with President Barack Obama and received an official apology from the U.S. government for his firing in 1957. Upon his death in 2011, Kameny was eulogized in a *New York Times* obituary for his important work in promoting pride.

WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. Describe the ways in which gay people were discriminated against in the United States at the time Frank Kameny was dismissed from the U.S. Army Map Service.
2. What major policies did Kameny challenge in his activism and in what ways did he challenge them? How did his actions lead to changes in public policy?
3. What major shift did the Stonewall riots cause in the gay rights movement? How did Kameny respond to this shift?

ACTIVITY: Strategizing Change

The people listed below are prominent figures in the movement for gay rights or the movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights generally. Several of them were also involved in other movements and civic campaigns, such as women’s rights, Black civil rights, or serving in political office. With a partner, research one of these people. Create a slide presentation or other digital presentation that:

- 1) identifies the person, their role in civic campaigns or rights movements, and where in the United States they did their advocacy work;
- 2) describes any policies this person challenged (whether regarding LGBT rights or another issue) and what methods the person used; and
- 3) describes how the person’s actions contributed to changes in public policy.

Josephine Baker (1906-1975)
Michael Huffington (b. 1947)
Harvey Milk (1930-1978)
Bayard Rustin (1912-1987)

Barbara Gittings (1932-2007)
Marsha P. Johnson (1945-1992)
Jim Obergefell (b. 1966)
José Julio Sarria (b. 1922 or 1923)

Steven Craig Gunderson (b. 1951)
Billie Jean King (b. 1943)
Sylvia Rivera (1951-2002)

Standards Addressed

A Jury of Your Peers

California History-Social Science Standard 12.2: Students evaluate and take and defend positions on the scope and limits of rights and obligations as democratic citizens, the relationship among them, and how they are secured. (1) Discuss the meaning and importance of each of the rights guaranteed under the Bill of Rights and how each is secured. . . . (3) Discuss the individual's legal obligations to obey the law, serve as a juror, and pay taxes.

California History-Social Science Standard 12.5: Students summarize landmark U. S. Supreme Court interpretations of the Constitution and its amendments. (1) Understand the changing interpretations of the Bill of Rights over time, including interpretations of the . . . equal protection of the law clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. (4) Explain the controversies that have resulted over changing interpretations of civil rights. . . .

California History-Social Science Framework, Ch. 17, p. 434: As this course progresses, students will learn about the responsibilities they have or will soon have as voting members of an informed electorate. They consider the following question: What rights and responsibilities does a citizen have in a democracy? . . . They will learn that all citizens deserve equal treatment under the law, safeguarded from arbitrary or discriminatory treatment by the government. . . .

National Civics Standard 18: Understands the role and importance of law in the American Constitutional system and issues regarding the judicial protection of individual rights. High School (4): Knows historical and contemporary illustrations of the idea of equal protection of the laws for all persons (e.g., Fourteenth Amendment . . .). High School (5): Understands how the individual's rights to life, liberty, and property are protected by the trial and appellate levels of the judicial process and by the principal varieties of law (e.g., constitutional, criminal, and civil law). High School (8): Knows historical and contemporary instances in which judicial protections have not been extended to all persons and instances in which judicial protections have been extended to those deprived of them in the past.

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California History-Social Science Standard 11.10: Students analyze the development of federal civil rights and voting rights. (4) Examine the roles of civil rights advocates

California History-Social Science Framework, Ch. 16, p. 411: Hysteria over national security extended to homosexuals, considered vulnerable to blackmail and thus likely to reveal national secrets. The public Red Scare overlapped with a Lavender Scare. Congress held closed-door hearings on the threat posed by homosexuals in sensitive government positions. A systematic investigation, interrogation, and firing of thousands of suspected gay men and lesbians from federal government positions extended into surveillance and persecution of suspected lesbians and gay men in state and local government, education, and private industry. Students may debate whether such actions served national security and public interests and consider how the Lavender Scare shaped attitudes and policies related to LGBT people from the 1950s to the present. Ch. 16, p. 421: Students may consider figures such as Alfred Kinsey, Harry Hay, Jose Sarria, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, Frank Kameny, Sylvia Rivera, and Harvey Milk. By the mid-1970s,

LGBT mobilization led to successes: the American Psychiatric Association stopped diagnosing homosexuality as a mental illness; 17 states had repealed laws criminalizing gay sexual behavior; 36 cities had passed laws banning antigay discrimination; and gay-identified neighborhoods had emerged in major cities.

National U.S. History Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States. High School (5): Understands major contemporary social issues and the groups involved (e.g., the emergence of the Gay Liberation Movement and civil rights of gay Americans).

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California History-Social Science Standard 10.10: Students analyze instances of nation-building in the contemporary world in at least two of the following regions or countries: the Middle East, Africa, Mexico and other parts of Latin America, and China. (1) Understand the challenges in the regions, including their geopolitical, cultural, military, and economic significance and the international relationships in which they are involved. (2) Describe the recent history of the regions, including political divisions and systems, key leaders, religious issues, natural features, resources, and population patterns. (3) Discuss the important trends in the regions today and whether they appear to serve the cause of individual freedom and democracy.

California History-Social Science Standard 12.9: Students analyze the origins, characteristics, and development of different political systems across time, with emphasis on the quest for political democracy, its advances, and its obstacles. (8) Identify the successes of relatively new democracies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the ideas, leaders, and general societal conditions that have launched and sustained, or failed to sustain, them.

California History-Social Science Framework, Ch. 15, p. 375: . . . Meanwhile, climate change has contributed to political and economic upheavals that are changing patterns of human migration and fueling regional conflicts. Elsewhere, countries such as Brazil have broken out of former patterns of Cold War subservience and economic dependency to become dominant regional and, increasingly, global powers. The present global scene now appears less predictable, less hierarchical, and—potentially—less stable than in past centuries.

National World History Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability, and peace in an interdependent world. High School (5): Understands the role of political ideology, religion, and ethnicity in shaping modern governments (e.g., the strengths of democratic institutions and civic culture in different countries and challenges to civil society in democratic states; how successful democratic reform movements have been in challenging authoritarian governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America . . .).

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