The Activists:

The early days of the LGBTQ+ Movement in Baltimore

a gay little history zine number six

the activists
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by ben

These stories come from research I did for a statewide LGBTQ+ history study with the organization Preservation Maryland, and the presentations I've been doing with some amazing colleagues ever since. This **gay little history zine** is my attempt to provide an accessible way to read and learn about the history of LGBTQ+ people in Maryland and occasionally in other, less interesting places.

People in our community rarely get an opportunity to learn our history, so I want it to be as available as I can make it. I also want to make it fun, a lot of this history is really ridiculous in a sort of melodramatic, campy way.

If you want to get into the nitty-gritty, if you want nuance, and you don't mind reading something a little more serious and dry, you should check out my website at www.mdhistory.gay, it has longer, boringer, more academic articles I adapt these from. If you like it, please let me know! If you don't, well, you can't say I didn't warn you

If you have questions about these stories or queer history in general, I can be reached through my history Instagram:

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The Activists:

The early days of the LGBTQ+ Movement in Baltimore

By Ben Egerman January 2026

Welcome to the last zine in this series! This one's a little different. Unlike the others, which pull mostly from newspapers, letters, and books, this one mostly comes from conversations I've had with activists who helped make queer Baltimore what it is today. Many of these interviews are recorded and available online, but you have to know where to look. Which is the website Digital Maryland, under the title "Maryland Rainbow Oral History Collection." There, now you know where to look, so check it out and hear it directly from the activists themselves.

This zine is about the formation of some of Baltimore's earliest LGBTQ+ activist and community organizations. Our local history is unique in a lot of ways, some good, some bad. Baltimore was late to the game, for one. Our first stable gay rights organization didn't form until 1975, well after similar groups existed in most other East Coast cities.

But we were also significantly more diverse than the rest of the gay movement at the time, and benefited tremendously from a wealth of Black leadership that organizations in other cities lacked. The lesbian community was significantly more organized than in many places. And many of the bitter ideological splits that tore apart organizations in other cities either passed Baltimore by or played out with much less damage.

To understand what happened here, we need to zoom out for a moment and look at what was happening nationally.

In 1968, there were somewhere between one and two dozen organizations advocating for gay rights in America. The most visible LGBTQ+ organized political action was a yearly protest in Philadelphia where several

dozen conservatively dressed men and women held signs saying "Sexual preference is irrelevant to employment" and "homosexuals are citizens, too." But by the mid-1970s, there were hundreds of LGBTQ+ groups nationwide, in cities big and small, organizing marches, dances, rallies, publications, and community services. What changed?

The shortest answer is Stonewall. The sight of hundreds of queer and trans folks, mostly kids, fighting back against the cops *and winning* certainly inspired people and led to a new, more confrontational sort of queer politics embodied in groups like the Gay Liberation Front. A core part of this was a shift from demands for privacy to the idea that LGBTQ+ people should be able to publicly live as they wish, and a call for queers to liberate *themselves* by "coming out" and living openly. That last part proved particularly effective.

But Stonewall wasn't the whole story. What was really happening was a generational shift. Earlier gay activists had drawn heavily from labor and civil rights movements, framing their arguments around privacy, citizenship, and respectability.

Younger activists were influenced instead by the Black Panther Party, the anti-war movement, student organizing, and women's liberation. Their politics were more militant and unafraid to be radical. Gay liberation grew directly out of this mix.

Meanwhile, the women's liberation movement was bringing tens of thousands of young women together to connect about their shared experiences of gendered oppression. As they did this, many lesbians began to recognize each other and started becoming more visible in the movement. The mainstream women's movement wasn't thrilled—in 1969 Betty Friedan, then the head of the National Organization of Women, infamously described lesbians in the movement as "the lavender menace."

In response to exclusion, many lesbians

began forming their own groups and viewing their lesbianism as a personal expression of their fight against patriarchy, articulating what's referred to as lesbian feminism, and its offshoot lesbian separatism, which held that lesbians should break from the rest of the women's movement and *exclusively* work with other lesbians. This was known as the "gay/straight split" in many women's liberation groups in cities across the country. This often manifested in projects like DC's influential, short-lived and extremely chaotic Furies Collective, who aimed to create a model for lesbian revolutionaries, while proving that collective living is pretty hard when everyone hates their roommates.

So what did all of this look like in Baltimore?..

First Starts:

Many modern LGBTQ+ institutions in Maryland trace their roots back to the 1975 founding of the Baltimore Gay Alliance (BGA), the first gay activist group here to last more than a few months. But it wasn't the first attempt, or the first explicitly gay organization in the city.

In 1972, Baltimore's first two openly queer organizations formed: the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), a church for and by LGBTQ+ people, and Diana Press, a collectively run lesbian publishing and printing house.

The MCC was especially important for many Black gays and lesbians, for whom faith and community were deeply intertwined. Many Black LGBTQ+ leaders were involved with the church, including Rev. Delores Barry and Elder Louis Hughes. Religious institutions offered many Black activists a space to build themselves and each other up as leaders.

Diana Press reflected a growing lesbian community centered in Waverly and Charles Village, which like other cities was emerging from Baltimore's women's liberation scene. The city was a hub for socialist feminism, home to the influential magazine *Women: A Journal of Liberation* and the Women's Union of

Baltimore, which focused on organizing working class women. These existed alongside projects like the Women's Law Center, Women's Growth Center, and the People's Health Clinic—a collaboration involving feminist groups, the Black Panthers, and others.

Within these spaces, queer women began organizing explicitly lesbian projects. Diana Press came first, followed in 1974 by the Lesbian Community Center, which ran a phone line, published a calendar and newsletter, and hosted women's dances.

But the "gay/straight split" that rocked women's organizations in so many cities never quite manifested the same way here. This was in part because of the socialist politics of these groups. While the tensions between straight women and lesbians were just as present in Baltimore as elsewhere, a shared commitment to socialist politics and the needs of women workers pushed activists to work through tensions rather than walk away. As a result, lesbians shaped and had a visible and powerful influence in things like *Women: A Journal of Liberation.*

The Baltimore Gay Alliance

As I mentioned, the BGA was not the first attempt to start a gay activist group in Baltimore, it was simply the first one that stuck. The first had been an attempt to start a Gay Liberation Front in the city in 1969. It was started and run by a small group of gay "counterculture types" who were living together as a collective. They collectively drafted a list of priorities and demands and collectively ran the organization. Then a few months later, they collectively decided to move to San Francisco together. That was the end of the GLF.

In 1972, Joseph Carroll, a part-owner of an after-hours gay club, attempted to start a chapter of the Gay Activist Alliance (a less radical offshoot of GLF). He was probably not the best person to be doing this for a few reasons. Like his possible connections to drug traffickers. And formerly being a leader of the neo-Nazi National States Rights Party. And being convicted of inciting a race riot in 1966. Anyway, a few months after he started the GAA, he was found dead in the trunk of his car, likely killed by the son of a gay bar owner, likely over heroin. And that was the end of the GAA.

They say that the third time's the charm.

In 1975, flyers appeared at Leon's and other gay bars advertising a meeting to create a new gay political group. This time it wasn't a collective of flaky gay hippies or a reformed neo-Nazi/drug trafficker. Instead it was held exactly where you would expect to find such a meeting: the house of a heterosexual ex-nun from Philadelphia. Her name was Shawn Dougherty, and she had reached out to prominent Philly gay activist Mark Segal and asked his support to create a "straights for gays" group (a la PFLAG). He responded by suggesting, "lets try a 'gays for gays' group first."

About a dozen people attended, and got to work. After that first meeting, they met for three years afterward in activist Dana Rethmeyer's apartment at 928 N Charles St. What's important to know about this—it literally has come up in every interview I've done with people who were there—is that it was really, really, really small. At first people were crowded onto Dana's bed due to lack of seating. Eventually, as the group grew, the bed was propped up against the wall to make more room on the floor.

There's one other thing that comes up in every interview I've done with anyone who was there is the sense of excitement, of exhilaration, and of pure joy that people felt coming out of these meetings. People often get rightfully excited by the political legacy of gay liberation—its alignment with the Black Panthers, anti-capitalism, and critique of patriarchy—that they forget how powerful the personal and emotional aspect of liberation was. These activists weren't just starting an organization—they were imagining a future where they could live openly in Baltimore without shame and lifting a huge weight and burden from their future.

The activists named the organization, wrote up bylaws (of note here is Jim Becker, who was a law student and wrote most of the language), and elected a president: Paulette Young, a Black lesbian who had participated in the LCC and had experience in local civil rights, women's liberation, and anti-war movements. At a time when the gay and lesbian movement was well-known to be dominated by white men, the Baltimore Gay Alliance stood out with a wealth of Black leaders early on like Paulette, Louis Hughes, Silas White and Andre Powell, and lesbian activists such as Kathy Valentine, Gail Vivino, and Debbie Kachelries.

Paulette Young

This isn't to say that the organization didn't struggle with the same issues around race and gender as other groups did. Baltimore's gay community was even more segregated then than it is now, and the gay com-

munity that the BGA was organizing in was the predominantly white part of it. Tensions around some gay male activists' attitudes towards women came up frequently. But having a more diverse leadership meant that these tensions were generally better handled and less severe than they were in other cities.

The first few months of the BGA's existence were a whirlwind. Before their second meeting, they had started a 24/7 phone line to help queer people who didn't know anyone in the community or needed resources. It's important to note that both they and the earlier LCC did this as the very first order of business, because it was an essential service. Calls came from isolated queers in rural Maryland, people in crisis over their faith and their sexuality, lesbian mothers fighting custody battles in a hostile and openly homophobic court system, all needing resources and community support. This work mattered.

In those first few months, they started a newspaper and had a visible presence at public events. They organized the city's first Pride celebration, a small gathering around the Washington Monument in Mount Vernon Square where they released balloons

The first Baltimore Pride, 1975.

saying "Baltimore Gay Love." They hosted dances and social events. And they were consistently surprised by how enthusiastic the response from the community was.

In 1978, the BGA split its work in two, creating a separate community nonprofit: the Gay Community Center of Baltimore, again led by Paulette Young. With grant funding secured by Gail Vivino, they opened an STI clinic. Over time, the center evolved into today's Pride Center of Maryland, while the clinic became Chase Brexton Health Care.

With much of the group's work now being done in the community center, the BGA itself turned toward anti-discrimination legislation. Three attempts were made, with failed attempts in 1980 and 1984, before finding success under newly elected mayor Kurt Shmoke in 1988. For years BGA activists and their broader coalition, called the Baltimore Justice Campaign, lobbied city counselors, published articles, attended hearings, and held protests.

They consciously pursued an "inside-outside" strategy to pressure lawmakers, allowing the more and less confrontational sides of the movement to build off each other. The "outside" group was the radicals, the guys in leather, and other "rabble rousers." The "inside" group were the more respectable activists, who would demand the same things as the outside group, but present themselves as the voices of reason to the politicians, saying, as activist Richard Oloizia once put it to me, "You want to deal with us because if you don't deal with us, then you get to deal with them. And they, as you can see, are much nastier and more confrontational."

After the anti-discrimination ordinance was passed, activists quickly pivoted towards getting a similar measure passed at the state level. Together with activists from across Maryland, they fought for another decade to get the state on board. Once again, they faced open hostility and condescension. State politicians would turn their chairs and face the wall when queer people testified at hearings. Maryland finally passed protections in 2001.

The organization that came out of these efforts reorganized as Equality Maryland, and in 2016, merged with the Free State Legal Project to create Free State Justice, our state's LGBTQ+ legal advocacy organization.

The Coalition:

BGA wasn't the only historically significant LGBTQ+ group to come out of Maryland in this era. In 1978, at the Columbia apartment of ABilly Jones-Hennin, Black queer activists from Baltimore and DC gathered, including Baltimore activists Louis Hughes, Rev. Delores Barry, and John Gee. These activists recognized that many in their communities would only feel comfortable working with groups or events that were clearly Black-identified.

ABilly Jones-Hennin, Louis Hughes, and Rev. Delores Berry

And they recognized the urgent need for a Black-identified LGBTQ+ organization that could confront homophobia in Black communities *and* racism in gay communities.

So they made one.

Initially known as the Baltimore-DC Coalition of Black Gay Men and Women, the group became the National Coalition of Black Gays—later the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays—the first national organization of its kind.

Their first major project was the Third World Gay/Lesbian Conference, held the

same weekend as the first Gay and Lesbian March on Washington in 1979. Hosted at Harambee House, a Black-owned hotel near Howard University, it drew hundreds to the first ever conference explicitly for LGBTQ+ POC. Keynote speaker Audre Lorde announced to a standing-room-only crowd: "I have waited my whole life for this moment!"

The day of the march, participants marched through the predominantly Black Shaw neighborhood before meeting the main procession, and were surprised at the positive reception they got. In the conference's wake, dozens of groups for LGBTQ+ people of color came together and the Coalition started growing beyond Baltimore and DC, with chapters forming in Detroit, Minneapolis, Atlanta, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

The Coalition recognized their importance in advocating for anti-discrimination protections, particularly in majority Black cities like Baltimore and DC, to dispel the idea that gay rights were a 'white thing,' and sent speakers to say as much in hearings. They helped queer students form gay student groups at

HBCUs, created a newspaper, *Black/Out,* and worked to support the local efforts of different chapters. Prominent members included poets Audre Lorde and Essex Hemphill, and pioneering feminist Barbara Smith.

In both DC and Baltimore, the Coalition worked to combat discrimination in gay bars, primarily focused on practices around carding. Particularly before photos were on Maryland licenses, Black and female patrons at certain bars would be told that they needed two or more forms of identification before getting admitted or served, while white male patrons were not. This could be egregious—Louis Hughes recalls trying to bring his 60-year-old mother to the Hippo once and being told she needed a second form of ID to verify that she was old enough to drink.

To prove the issue to the city and potentially courts, they worked with the Baltimore chapter of Black and White Men Together, a group for men in or interested in interracial relationships. Taking on two bars in Waverly, the Office (located in the current home of Red Emma's) and the Porthole, a number of times they got several couples together and sent in white

partners first, and then Black partners, all well-dressed, and showed that groups of Black gays were being singled out for this treatment. The city's Human Rights commission promptly sued both bars, sending an extremely clear message to other bar owners.

The Coalition was one of the first, if not the very first, queer organization to mention bisexuals and trans people in their founding documents. Trans folks took active roles, such as Tammy Carnes Ball, who was the president of the Baltimore chapter of the Coalition.

The Coalition rejected the single-issue politics of the major gay rights groups, maintaining that the rights of Black LGBTQ+ people couldn't be protected without combating racism and sexism, fighting for prisoners and immigrants rights, economic transformation, and an end to US imperialism. They set up letter exchanges with Black LGBTQ+ prisoners and championed the cause of Simon Nkodi, a gay South African activist who was jailed for organizing against the Apartheid regime.

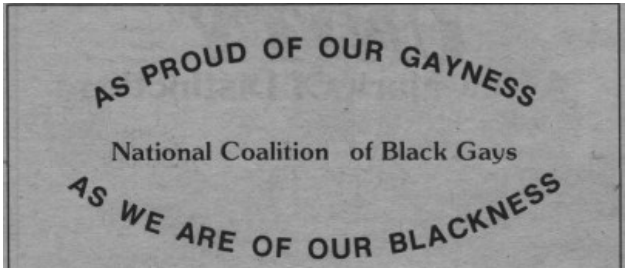
It's important to recognize that there

were Black LGBTQ+ activists who weren't really interested in the Coalition. There was definitely some friction between Louis and the other Coalition activists and both Paulette and Silas, who preferred to work only with the BGA and community center. But again, this wasn't a split—almost everyone involved in the Baltimore Coalition continued to work in the community center or BGA.

Ultimately, the decimation of the Black middle class under Reagan and the horrible toll of the AIDS epidemic meant the organization's funding base had disappeared by the late 1980s, and it dissolved in the early 1990s. In its wake, however, were the hundreds of Black queer activists in cities across America who had built their own confidence as organizers and leaders with the group.

And that's how a group of activists in Baltimore and DC formed the first ever national organization for Black LGBTQ+ people and created a much-needed voice for some of the most underrepresented members of the community. It was a groundbreaking thing, to be willing to challenge homophobia in the Black community *and* racism in the gay community, and assert

that they had every right to be full members of both, just as they are. It was exemplified in the group's motto:



This is an extremely abridged version of the stories of these three groups and the incredible people who helped build them. There are many more individuals and groups who aren't in here because that's like a lot of work and it would be 100 pages long and I don't want to pay that much for paper and you can't make me.

There's plenty of lessons and things left to say about the movement for queer and trans rights in Baltimore. A lot of them aren't positive—things have hardly been smooth for the community center since its founding. But there are positive lessons, and two things deserve mention:

First and foremost: Baltimore has a fifty-

year-long tradition of Black LGBTQ+ leadership, one that continues to this day. It's clear that the best successes of the early movement in Baltimore have been in building and supporting Black leaders and activists in a deeply segregated, majority-Black city. This tradition continues in numerous organizations today, and needs to be celebrated and supported.

Baltimore activists also tended to be—well—chiller? There was real skepticism toward rigid separatism or ideological purists. There was a willingness to work together despite disagreements or conflict that's been a source of pride for several people I've talked to. That's obviously not to say that there wasn't drama and conflict, there was plenty.

I've asked why this was to about 7 different people involved in these groups, and gotten 7 different answers. Some said it's Baltimore's working-class heritage, others the culture of the mid-Atlantic, and Paulette just told me, "I've been trying to figure that one out for forty years." I like a recent explanation I heard: that people in Baltimore just don't take themselves so goddamn seriously. Whatever the reason, it's a lovely part of their legacy and of our community's history.

I used to ask these folks what lessons they would have for today's activists. I got a lot of different answers, most of which you can hear online. But these days, I feel like those questions miss the point. The main lesson to take away is this: these activists succeeded because they saw the problems their communities faced and mobilized those same communities to solve them. We face new problems today, and our community is different, larger, and more diverse than ever. We can take lessons from the past, but it's up to us to adapt them to the struggles of today and the modern LGBTQ+ community. Instead of lessons, I think they can remind us that our greatest strength is each other and our communities, and that building and mobilizing those communities is how we fight back.

So that's where it started, the LGBTQ+ movement in Baltimore. There are far more stories to be told about what's happened since. We haven't even gotten into the HIV/AIDS years. Those are stories that someone else may tell, or that I may want to tell later. But this is a series of zines where I've tried to show how queer and trans people have lived in Maryland long before modern language

around sexuality, before there were any legal protections, when queerness was completely taboo and completely illegal. So this certainly seems like a fitting end to that set of stories, with activists celebrating the 1988 passage of the anti-discrimination ordinance, a crowning achievement of many of Baltimore's early LGBTQ+ activists:

Celebrating the passage of the Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights Bill at the Hippo, 1988. At front are Richard Oloizia(left), Ann Gordon (center), and Goldie Mason (right).

If you have any questions about these stories or queer history, hit up my history insta:

@mdhistory.gay

Zines, articles, and other resources can be found at

www.mdhistory.gay/zines

about me:

Ben Egerman is a librarian in Baltimore. That's it. That's all you're getting.

Front: Silas White, Gail Vivino, Paulette Young, and Louis Hughes at New York Gay Pride Day, mid-1970s

Above: Participants at first Baltimore Gay Pride celebration hold "Baltimore Gay Love" balloons at Mt. Vernon Square, 1975.