

Announcing the Stonewall National Monument

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Back in 1969, as a turbulent decade was winding down, the Stonewall Inn was a popular gathering place for New York City's LGBT community. At the time, being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender was considered obscene, illegal, even a mental illness.

One night, police raided the bar and started arresting folks. Raids like these were nothing new, but this time the patrons had had enough, so they stood up and spoke out. The riots became protests... the protests became a movement... the movement ultimately became an integral part of America.

So this week, I'm designating the Stonewall National Monument as the newest addition to America's national parks system. Stonewall will be our first national monument to tell the story of the struggle for LGBT rights. I believe our national parks should reflect the full story of our country, the richness and diversity and uniquely American spirit that has always defined us: that we are stronger together, that out of many, we are one.

TOMMY LANIGAN-SCHMIDT (Stonewall Veteran): Having been at Stonewall, being back here, I think I have a kind of survivor's guilt, I could call it because like on the Stonewall picture with Fred McDarrah, I'm probably the only one still alive. Most of them never lived to get to be like 24 or 25 years old.

Back then, I didn't think about it being difficult. You just had to get through it. Most gay people back then, if they had any kind of a job, they were scared to death of even being found out to be gay. We had nothing, so we had to lose. It's like the Bob Dylan song where it says, "When you ain't got nothin', you got nothing to lose."

MELISSA SKLARZ (LGBT Activist): I remember the late 1960s, gay people were victims on a culture that had no respect, no tolerance.

OCTAVIA LEWIS (LGBT Activist): We were being brutalized. We were being murdered. We were being ostracized, in a sense. Stonewall was a safe haven for LGBT people.

EUNIC ORTIZ (LGBT Activist): The Stonewall riots in 1969, I think, obviously was a very pivotal point in our history. It was when we all stood up, and a trans woman of color said, "Enough is enough," and it started a movement. And it started a movement that said, "We're not less than you. We are your equals." When you think about the riots, you think about unity; and that unity is something that we've never lost.

MELISSA SKLARZ: Today we have gay and lesbian elected officials. We see cultural changes in television, in movies. President Obama has been the most proactive president for LGBT people in America. There is no second place.

TOMMY LANIGAN-SCHMIDT: President Obama in his second-term inauguration speech, actually mentions Stonewall. That never happened before. Stonewall is now historically given like a definitive place through a President of the United States.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: "We the people declare today the most evident of truths, that all of us are created equal" is the star that guides us still, just as it guided our forebearers through Seneca Falls and Selma and Stonewall, just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone, to hear King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on earth."