

Hiding Out in the Open: Discovering LGBT Family History

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You heard family stories about a relative who was “different” or perhaps you’ve discovered someone who simply “disappeared.” Have you considered the possibility that you could have a gay or lesbian relative in your family tree? LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered) people can be found when researching genealogy, but the search syntax, keywords and strategies are very different. By understanding the basics of “gay history” as well as how LGBT folk lived, worked and socialized, you’ll not only locate these relatives, but realize the importance of preserving their stories.

With the advent of the Internet and use of social media, tracing family history has become easier for most of us. Websites such as Ancestry.com, MyHeritage, and FamilySearch provide access to billions of records via easy-to-use search engines. Yet, despite all these online tools, as well as greater access to records at national and regional archives, documenting the lives of LGBTQ people can be challenging.

LGBT Relatives: Why Their Stories Are Important

Does it really matter that you know more about a LGBT ancestor and that person's activities? What value could such information add to the overall information about that ancestor? For those of us seeking an entire picture of the ancestor using genealogy-related records, details as to sexuality and lifestyle do matter, especially if they had an impact on major life decisions including employment and relationships.

I believe the pursuit of such information is valid for another reason: future generations of genealogists may become so accustomed to personally knowing self-identified LGBT folk; they also may take the existence of same sex marriages for granted, etc . . . and they won't know what to look for when it comes to older records. Even now, the younger generation seems to take much about LGBT lifestyles for granted. Often they don't understand what it was like to live and act and talk in “Code” as a means of survival or that there were life and death consequences to being “outed.”

If you are committed to serious research involving a possibly gay ancestor, take time to consider how you'll use the information and how the information will be shared. I don't necessarily believe there is a proper way to “out” a gay aunt or bisexual uncle; in fact, I think it is a matter of presentism creeping into one's research that makes many believe a relative would identify themselves as homosexual if they were alive today. Unless you yourself identify as a LGBT person, it is difficult to understand all the issues involved with daily life “in the closet” or the impact of “coming out.” Outing your gay ancestor may not be the best way to preserve that person's memory, let alone share family history with your living relatives.

Understanding Gay History in the United States

Before you try to research various records, either in person or online, do some basic background reading on the history of LGBT people in the United States. Many people—even members of the gay community—are unaware of “queer history” and how it shaped their community and impacted the history of the United States. Here is a glimpse at some more recent history:

- World War II played an important role in gay history. During the war, men and women, normally turned away from military service for their sexuality, were pressed into service in order to help win the war.
- Between 1939 and 1945, large numbers of gay men and women who lived in isolation in rural areas had the opportunity to interact with others who were “just like them” thanks to military service.
- Look at current locations with large gay populations: San Francisco, New York, San Diego, Chicago, and Philadelphia. They were all important military installations during World War II. Many in the military saw their service end in these cities and simply stayed there and became part of the community.
- The military witch hunts of homosexuals returned once World War II was over. Pair this with the rise of McCarthyism and the Lavender Scare and you begin to understand why talking and behaving under a “Code” continued to develop as a means of keeping a job or interacting with other LGBT folk.
- In most places, homosexuality was a crime; those suspected of being “queer” or “different” could lose their jobs and be shunned by their families.
- Prior to the 1950s, very few LGBT people lived an “out” lifestyle or were open about a long-time relationship with someone of the same sex. Such information was only shared with a close group of friends, and possibly sympathetic relatives. It is difficult to find evidence of “out” individuals through public records.
- The “bar culture” was a huge part of the social world of gay men and women, and in many cities, such as New York, bars were controlled by the Mafia or other crime syndicates. Gays were often extorted for money or blackmailed. Police officers were paid off to look the other way when it came to gay bars. When a raid did happen, it often resulted in some bar patrons having their names, addresses and occupations published in the newspaper.
- The Stonewall Riots in June 1969 are considered a watershed moment in gay history. Taking place in Greenwich Village in New York City, Stonewall at its core was a rejection of the status quo when it came to how LGBT people were treated by society. Led by a group of drag queens during yet another police raid on the Stonewall Inn bar, the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots is marked annually on the last Sunday in June as Pride Day.

In the post-Stonewall era, the gay rights movement started. Over the subsequent four decades advancements have been made in terms of rights concerning marriage, adoption, and employment for LGBT people.

“Code” and Subcultures: Learning a New Vocabulary

The term “Code” or “The Code” is often used to designate slang, terminology and code words that one learned as they navigated the various subcultures in the LGBT culture. Since homosexuality was illegal and being “outed” had many ramifications in terms of employment and societal integration, a secret language or argot developed among gays and lesbians. For example: *Polari* is a slang language developed in Britain and used by gays as well as performing artists, criminals, prostitutes and others living on the margins of society. *Polari* as a language has roots as far back as the 16th century and is still in use today; many practitioners say it is an “attitude” more than a language, much like the current Drag culture. Today’s “Code” is marked by phrases, vocabulary and gestures some of which have made it into mainstream culture thanks to greater acceptance of LGBT people, especially as portrayed by the media.

As with many underground cultures, various LGBT subcultures developed over time. Studying and knowing the differences between the gay male culture, the lesbian culture, the transgender culture, etc. is vital to “decoding” information, especially in personal letters and diaries. Some of these subcultures, to the outsider, are often seen as “deviant” or tend to reinforce stereotypes about gays and lesbians. Put aside your preconceived notions when investigating a subculture. As with any reference material, take note of items that can later help you locate information about a gay ancestor.

Understanding language related to LGBT life can offer many clues when looking at records or reviewing personal letters and diaries. The same holds true for the various queer subcultures: many had their own Code, their own practices and even their own symbols and forms of dress.

Know Your Gayborhoods

Many of our immigrant ancestors flocked to specific neighborhoods when they arrived in America. The reason? They felt safer with those who spoke their language and kept the same customs as in the Old World. These neighborhoods in large urban areas often had strict dividing lines and offered a “step up” on the path to becoming an American citizen and being successful.

The sense of belonging in a geographical sense was, and to some extent is, still true for gay men and women. Certain districts in cities such as New York (Greenwich Village) and San Francisco (The Castro) are where newcomers would settle in order to be closer to the LGBT culture. Again, don’t fall victim to presentism when it comes to noting the “gayborhood” in which an ancestor may have lived. Research the neighborhood designated as the gay ghetto during your ancestor’s time in that location. For example, The Castro was not a predominantly gay neighborhood until the early 1970s; prior to that time the Polk Gulch area is where you would find bars, bookstores and other LGBT hangouts and where your ancestor may have lived.

Queer Work: Occupations Offer Clues

A recent client noted that her uncle was a hairdresser by trade and asked, “Why are so many male hairdressers also gay?” What may not be apparent to “straight eyes” are the realities of earning a living for many LGBT persons.

Legally, you could be fired for being gay in many locations in the United States up until recently. For that reason many homosexual men and women earned a living as small business owners—florists, hairdressers, etc.—in which they were the boss and knew they would not be fired based on their sexuality. In addition, certain professions, such as working in a barber shop or hair salon, were “portable,” meaning you had little inventory (a good set of barber tools) and could pick up and work in another city if needed.

There were specific professions—in the art and design fields, for example—where you could meet other gay men and women. In department stores, males behind the counter were “salesmen”, but were often called “ribbon clerks” as part of gay slang. Look for bars near these large stores as places for socialization after work. Often on census sheets, you’ll see the general term “artist” used as opposed to “set designer” or “interior decorator” or “fashion designer.”

In some cases, the partner of a gay man or woman might be listed as an employee such as a “private secretary” or “assistant” and listed under the head of household. Also, place of employment would be “in a private home” or “for a private family.”

Looking for Clues in Mementos and Items Left Behind

On rare occasions, I’ve worked with clients who inherited from their LGBT ancestor or relative a group of letters, diaries or even small collections of items such as match book covers and ticket stubs to plays and performances. Read letters and diaries and remember “the Code,” and look for specific occupations as well as geographical locations that were historic gay neighborhoods.

One client who scanned several matchbook covers didn’t realize they were from local gay bars that her uncle may have frequented. “How do you know?,” she asked; I knew from having researched the local watering holes which catered to gay men and women. Many had names incorporating a color and an animal, such as “Black Cat” or “Blue Parrot” which was Code to out-of-town gay visitors that it was a “safe space.” For those unacquainted with the “bar culture” in the LGBT community, realize that these bars were more than just places where you could get a drink and meet someone: they often acted as social clubs and places where gay rights meetings were held and marches or protests were planned.

So what might look ordinary to you when it comes to belongings may require further research with an eye toward LGBT culture, subcultures and history.

Using the FAN Club Research Strategy

The best success in determining that an ancestor may have been gay, bisexual or transgendered is to rely upon the **FAN Club** approach: tracing **Friends, Associates** and **Neighbors** of the person in question. Remember that LGBT folk often lived in the same neighborhood, may have run in the same social circles, and often worked in specific fields and occupations.

And before you ask, no there is no such thing as a “gay record.” Researchers need to build a body of LGBT knowledge to be successful in locating records which may indicate that a person was a homosexual.

- Starting with the 1940 US Census, the term “partner” could be used to indicate someone living in the household that was not a blood relation. More likely you’ll see “boarder” or “roomer” used.
- Look for occupations on military records and census records that represent “queer work” as described above.
- Passenger lists, especially for steamship travel in the early 20th century, may show two people living at the same address.
- Check the address listed in voting registers, city and telephone directories and even census schedules ... does it fall within a traditional gay neighborhood?
- Again, in census schedules, note children of adult age who are unmarried or a married couple showing no history of children.
- Military discharge records, especially if the discharge was less than honorable, can hold important clues as well.
- Passport applications can offer clues. With no children of their own, some gay men and women had more disposable income and tended to travel more. On passport applications check the identity of the person verifying that the applicant is a US citizen and that they have known that person for a specific amount of time. Often, this person has a FAN Club connection to your ancestor.
- Newspapers are a good source of obituary and death notice information. In addition, and unfortunately, any arrests of homosexuals would be detailed, and sadly, as front page news in some communities.

Conclusion: Things Were Different Then

The term homosexual was not in use until 1869 (coined by Hungarian journalist Karl-Maria Kertbeny). What you and I understand in the 21st century when it comes to how LGBT people identify themselves today would likely be foreign to many LGBT people prior to the 1940s.

Living in a “marriage of convenience” was part of being in the LGBT subculture. Working in certain professions was a given. So was knowing “the Code” and passing that knowledge on to others new to the LGBT community. Looking back at how our gay ancestors lived may, in fact, make some of us feel pity for them. We may express sadness in knowing that they took certain actions based on strict societal expectations. Again, we can’t accurately compare how LGBT individuals in the past lived with members of today’s LGBT communities.

What we can do is this: try to accurately research all aspects of their lives and when discovering evidence of a lifestyle outside of the expected norm of their time, preserve the information and determine if it truly adds to the entire picture of their lives. And then add it and make it available for future generations of researchers.

Case Studies: LGBT Research and Records

One of the best ways to illustrate using records which may offer clues to being part of the LGBT culture is to research historical figures either self-identified as gay and lesbian or who are generally accepted by historians as being gay.

- Movie director [Dorothy Arzner](#) (1897–1979) produced several well-known films during the 1930s and 1940s, including Clara Bow's first talkie, *The Wild Party*. Arzner is often linked romantically with choreographer [Marion Morgan](#) (1881–1971). A New York Passenger List dated 5 April 1933 lists both Arzner and Morgan sharing the same home address, [2249 Mountain Oak Drive, Hollywood, California](#).

Number 22

U. S. Department of Labor
Immigration Service

Filed on this blank United States citizens and citizens of insular possessions of the United States arriving at a port of continental United States from a foreign port or a port of the insular possessions of the United States, and such citizens arriving at a port of said insular possessions from a foreign port or a port of continental United States, or a port of another insular possession.

LIST OF UNITED STATES CITIZENS
(FOR THE IMMIGRATION AUTHORITIES)

S. S. "MONARCH OF BERMUDA" Sailing from HAMILTON, BERMUDEA, APRIL 3rd., 1933. Arriving at Port of NEW YORK, NEW YORK, APRIL 5th., 1933

No. of List	NAME IN FULL		AGE	Sex	Mar.	IF NATIVE OF UNITED STATES INCLUDE POSSESSION OR IF NATIVE OF UNITED STATES, GIVE DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH (CITY OR TOWN AND STATE).	IF NATURALIZED, GIVE NAME AND LOCATION OF COURT WHERE BIRTH NATURALIZATION PAPERS AND DATE OF PATENT.	ADDRESS IN UNITED STATES
	Year Bore.	Given Name.						
1	Holmes	Margaret	42	f	m	1891 Baldwin, Ill.		2 N-70th. St., New York, N.Y.
2	Holmes	Jane	17	f	m	1916 Dayton, Ohio.		2 N-70th. St., New York, N.Y.
3	Aitken	Jeanne	50	f	m	1883 Cedarville, Ohio.		1100 E-7th. Ave., Denver, Col.
4	Aitken	Leonard Jr.	24	m	m	1908 Colorado Springs, Col.		1100 E-7th. Ave., Denver, Col.
5	Morgan	Marion	45	f	m	1887 Paterson, N.J.		2249 Mountain Oak Drive, Hollywood, Cal.
6	Arzner	Dorothy	36	f	m	1896 San Francisco, Cal.		2249 Mountain Oak Drive, Hollywood, Cal.
7	Wather	Lorena	57	m	m	1875 Chicago, Ill.		180 Elgin St., Newton Centre, Mass.
8	Wather	Josephine	52	f	m	1881 Chicago, Ill.		180 Elgin St., Newton Centre, Mass.
9	Young	Harriet	21	f	m	1912 Des Moines, Ia.		4221 Harwood Ave., Des Moines, Ia.
10	Carey	Elizabeth	20	f	m	1913 Cedar Rapids, Ia.		2317 Grand Ave., Cedar Rapids, Ia.
11	Wyckoff	Peter G.	18	m	m	1914 New York, N.Y.		455 E-57th. St., New York, N.Y.
12	Duffy	Mildred	28	f	m	1905 Paterson, N.J.		13 Gould Ave., Paterson, N.J.
13	Able	Marion	23	f	m	1909 Clifton, N.J.		President St., Clifton, N.J.
14	Lynch	Frank	32	m	m	1900 Paterson, N.J.		44-13th. Ave., Paterson, N.J.
15	Niellay	Robert J.	34	m	m	1899 Passaic, N.J.		Elks Club, Passaic, N.J.
16	Low	Charles	23	m	m	1910 Plattville, Wisc.		64 Winthrop St., Brockton, Mass.
17	Ellsworth	Duncan G.	34	m	m	1899 Watkins, N.Y.		1 Sutton Place, South, New York, N.Y.
18	Ellsworth	Kathar	28	f	m	1904 New York, N.Y.		1 Sutton Place, South, New York, N.Y.
19	Maxwell	Ernest Mc.E.	34	m	m	1899 Brooklyn, N.Y.		143 Ocean Parkway, Brooklyn, N.Y.
20	Wright	Clifton	39	m	m	1893 Danbury, Conn.		W-Terrace, Danbury, Conn.
21	Cherry	William S.	65	m	w	1867	Naturalized 1907 in the Providence Plantations Court, R.I.	275 Westminster St., Providence, R.I.
22	Lee	Gerard S.	23	m	m	1909 New York, N.Y.		Westbrook, Conn.
23	Van Schmack	Clara	40	f	m	1899 Denver, Col.		323 High St., Denver, Col.
24	Buridan	Jack	17	m	m	1915 New York, N.Y.		62 Middlesex Rd., Buffalo, N.Y.
25	Bellwood	Frank	49	m	m	1883	Naturalized 1920 in the Supreme Court, Mansfield, N.Y.	8 Oceanwide Ave., Hempstead, N.Y.
26	Clarke	Audrey	31	f	m	1901 New York, N.Y.		Hotel Albert, New York, N.Y.
27	McCarthy	Elaine	31	f	m	1901 New Haven, Conn.		640 Witley Ave., New Haven, Conn.
28	Freudenthal	David M.	38	m	m	1894 New York, N.Y.		65 Central Park West, New York, N.Y.
29	Freudenthal	Dorothy	38	f	m	1895 New York, N.Y.		65 Central Park West, New York, N.Y.
30	Freudenthal	Rhoda	9	f	m	1923 Newark, N.J.		65 Central Park West, New York, N.Y.

LINE 4 DELETED AITKEN, LEONARD JR. DID NOT BAIL
LINE 23 DELETED VAN SCHMACK, CLARA DID NOT BAIL

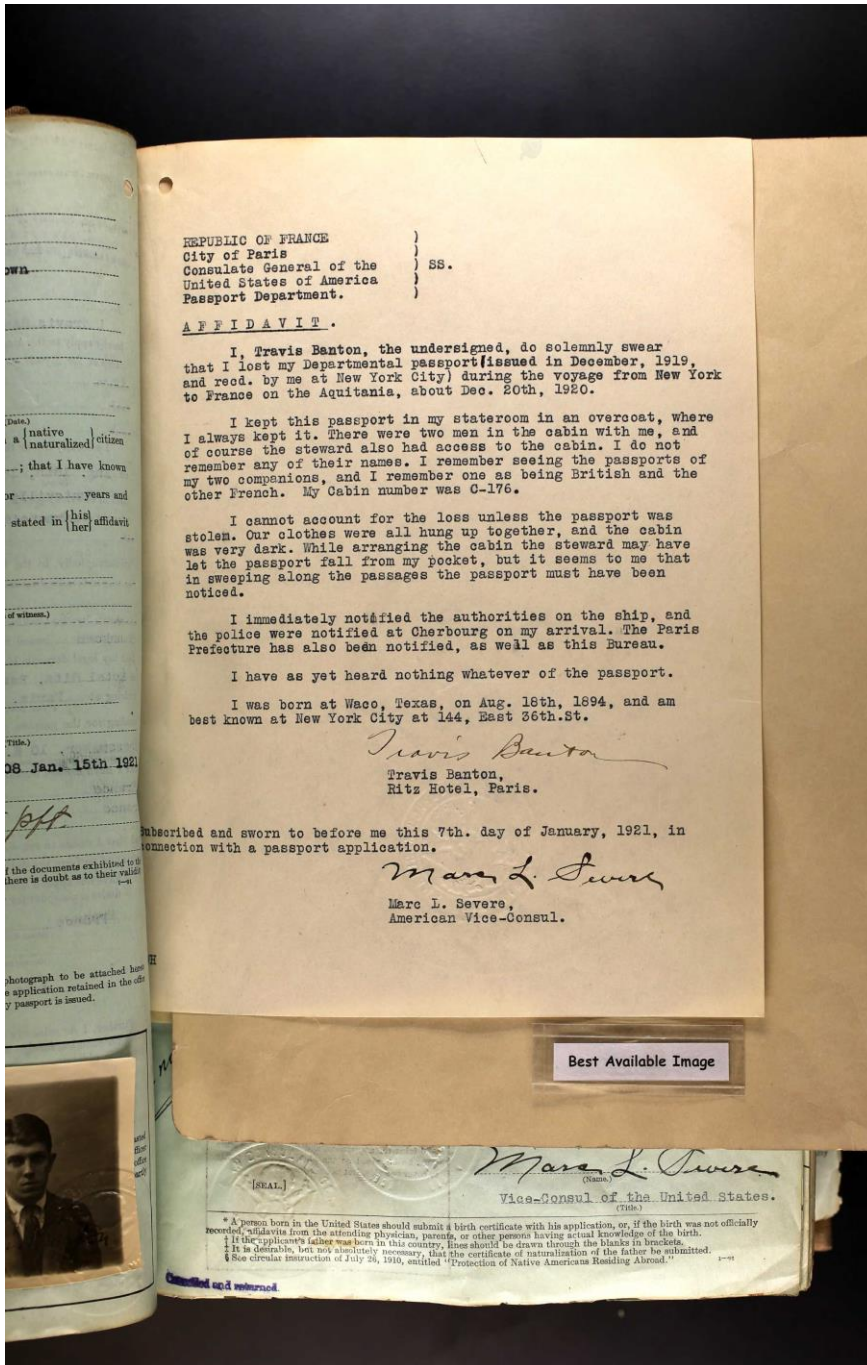
IMPORANT NOTICE.—1. Great care should be taken not to place on this list the name of any passenger who was not born in the United States or who has not taken out final naturalization papers.
2. Where one or more members of a family are aliens, the names of all such members should be recorded upon the alien manifest. Suitable notation may be made upon such manifest opposite the names of those members who claim citizenship.
3. Failure to observe the terms of this notice may result in delay to passengers at the port of arrival.
4. List on this form only United States citizens or citizens of an insular possession of the United States.

Source: Manifest, Monarch of Bermuda, 5 April 1933, List 2, p. 55, for Dorothy ARZNER (age 36), digital images, New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957, digital images, MyHeritage (<https://myheritage.com>: accessed 20 June 2020).

- **Jobyna Howland** was an actress and a model for Charles Dana Gibson's Gibson Girl in the early 20th century. While she was said to have had a lesbian affair with the playwright Zoë Akins, a 1930 US Federal Census sheet shows her living with "friend" Germaine Gerard, a French divorcee, in the Alto Nido Apartments in Los Angeles, California.

Source: 1930 U.S. Census, Los Angeles County, California, population schedule, Los Angeles, Enumeration District 64, p. 37A (penned), dwelling 207, family 493, Jobyna HOWLAND, digital images, MyHeritage (<https://myheritage.com>: accessed 20 June 2020); from National Archives microfilm publication T626, roll 134, image 445.0.

- Costume designer **Travis Banton** was active from the 1920s through the 1950s and created memorable fashions for stars such as Betty Grable, Mae West, Claudette Colbert and more. While no evidence of a long-term relationship with another man could be found, Banton's occupation was always listed as "artist" instead of dress or costume designer. In addition, reading between the lines on a US Passport Application as to how a passport was lost offers clues that Banton may have been a homosexual.



REPUBLIC OF FRANCE)
 City of Paris)
 Consulate General of the) SS.
 United States of America)
 Passport Department.)

A F F I D A V I T .

I, Travis Banton, the undersigned, do solemnly swear that I lost my Departmental passport (issued in December, 1919, and recd. by me at New York City) during the voyage from New York to France on the Aquitania, about Dec. 20th, 1920.

I kept this passport in my stateroom in an overcoat, where I always kept it. There were two men in the cabin with me, and of course the steward also had access to the cabin. I do not remember any of their names. I remember seeing the passports of my two companions, and I remember one as being British and the other French. My Cabin number was C-176.

I cannot account for the loss unless the passport was stolen. Our clothes were all hung up together, and the cabin was very dark. While arranging the cabin the steward may have let the passport fall from my pocket, but it seems to me that in sweeping along the passages the passport must have been noticed.

I immediately notified the authorities on the ship, and the police were notified at Cherbourg on my arrival. The Paris Prefecture has also been notified, as well as this Bureau.

I have as yet heard nothing whatever of the passport.

I was born at Waco, Texas, on Aug. 18th, 1894, and am best known at New York City at 144, East 36th.St.

Travis Banton
 Travis Banton,
 Ritz Hotel, Paris.

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 7th. day of January, 1921, in connection with a passport application.

Marc L. Severe
 Marc L. Severe,
 American Vice-Consul.

Best Available Image

Marc L. Severe
 (Date)
 Vice-Consul of the United States.
 (Title)

* A person born in the United States should submit a birth certificate with his application, or, if the birth was not officially recorded, affidavits from the attending physician, parents, or other persons having actual knowledge of the birth.
 † If the applicant's father was born in this country, those should be drawn through the blanks in brackets.
 ‡ It is desirable, but not absolutely necessary, that the certificate of naturalization of the father be submitted.
 § See circular instruction of July 26, 1910, entitled "Protection of Native Americans Residing Abroad."

Source: Affidavit attached to an Emergency U.S. Passport Application, dated 7 January 1921, by Travis BANTON made at Paris, France, U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925, digital images, National Archives and Records Administration, Emergency Passport Applications, Argentina thru Venezuela, 1906-1925, ARC 1244183, Box #4560, Volume #176, p. 217.

Resources

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