

Title: Early Efforts for Legal and Social LGBTQ+ Equality: An Analysis of the Mattachine Society's Activism

Presenter: Taylor Joseph Cantarini, Saddleback College

Mentor: Margot Lovett

Despite FBI investigations of the Mattachine Society's leaders' communist affiliations and harassment by charging its members with violations of unjust obscenity laws, the society strategically worked towards expanding legal and social rights for the LGBTQ+ community from its founding in 1950 to its national dissolution in 1961. The Mattachine Society (MS) brought members of the gay community together to give them a sense of belonging and "realize the potential ability to offer a worthwhile contribution" to society (Hay 83). To accomplish this, the Society dispersed leaflets stating that gay people had the same right to human dignity as any other citizen. MS also provided services such as legal assistance for members charged with violating obscenity laws and psychological counseling. After the national society dissolved, the Mattachine Society of Washington DC campaigned for gay rights through public demonstrations in front of the White House and Pentagon. This made them a target for increased government surveillance. "Aware that the congressmen who governed Washington did not view the new organization favorably, and that the city's police department was keeping a close eye on its activities, the Mattachine Society kept a low profile" (Bonds 20). While MS activities did not immediately lead to greater rights for the gay community, it gave activists greater confidence in their mission for equal rights. In a leaflet from the Mattachine Society of New York is a statement that affirms the Society's position: "Homosexuals are different but we believe they have the right to be."

Works Cited

- Bonds, Peter. Stonewall on the Potomac: Gay political activism in Washington, DC, 1961-1973, 2016, James Madison University Master of Arts in History Thesis. 455.
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/master201019/455>.
- Hay, Harry. "Mattachine Society Missions and Purposes." *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*, Beacon Press, 1996, pp. 130–132.
- Mattachine Society Inc. of New York Ad, c. 1960. ""Homosexuals Are Different ... but ... We Believe They Have the Right to Be.""
https://www.reddit.com/r/lgbt/comments/7tvdk1/homosexuals_are_different_but_1960_prolgbt_poster/
- Roscoe, Will. "Gay Liberation: The Birth of an Idea." In *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*, by Harry Hay and Will Roscoe, Beacon Press, 1996, pp. 3–14.