The Historic Dimension Series

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That Building's Queer Now:
A look into LGBTQ Preservation

by Sharon Merten **Fall 2020**

"True Community is based upon equality, mutuality, and reciprocity. It affirms the richness of individual diversity as well as the common human ties that bind us together." — Pauli Murray

As we walked through a rainbow-painted street, my sister once commented to me "all the rainbows must make you feel really accepted here." I thought, did they? As a queer person, did I feel more accepted in a community when it was covered in rainbows? How much does a pride flag or a rainbow-painted street matter to a queer person? What makes queer people feel genuinely comfortable and accepted in the spaces they occupy?

These questions have recently flooded preservation efforts and sparked the National Park Service's recent initiative to preserve more LGBTQ historic sites. The city of San Francisco in 2004 was one of the first cities in America to initiate the call for more representation of LGBTQ historic sites. It makes sense considering San Francisco historically has been a stronghold for marginalized groups, specifically gender and sexual minorities. Following San Francisco's footsteps, the National Park Service in 2016 completed its first LGBTQ theme study, a big step for a service that significantly lacks diverse historical sites. Cities around the United States have taken this theme study and San Francisco's actions as the go-ahead to create their own templates for identifying LGBTQ historic sites.

Yet, such efforts among preservationists must be met with careful reflection. Most LGBTQ historic sites will face some challenges with interpretation and the integrity of the physical structures. Saving LGBTQ historic sites takes a lot more work than simply adding a rainbow flag and calling a building queer. The preservationists' effort to preserve LGBTQ history must expect some physical sites to be in complete disarray because marginalized communities have historically been targets of demolition and redevelopment. In addition to the condition of the physical properties, documentation of queer history can be complicated. Even when LGBTQ sites have a plethora of queer sources, the site's interpretation still must grapple with the particularities of historical interpretation. Finally, a significant challenge within LGBTQ preservation is the level of homophobia and transphobia that exists today, which greatly impacts the identification and interpretation of queer sites. This brief will attempt to show the importance of LGBTQ historic sites for American history. It will also unmask some of the challenges LGBTQ historical sites present using the Pauli Murray family home in North Carolina and a few other significant LGBTQ historical sites to emphasize these challenges.

Why It Matters

For a group that feeds off acceptance and community, the lack of representation of LGBTQ historic sites in America's landscape is troubling. Unlike most minority groups, queer people do not grow up surrounded by other queer people. I point out this level of isolation queer people experience because it makes the work of preserving and honoring LGBTQ history even more important. People look at the world around them to get

Fig. 2: Revitalized Pauli Murray Family Home, Durham, NC

a sense of who they are and where they belong. If queer people cannot find their sense of self and belonging by looking at their family or friends, then they are all the more dependent on the outside world to show them this sense of belonging and identity. At its core, preservation is about the safekeeping of places to ensure people and communities know where they are, who they are, and where they belong. The LGBTQ community needs preservation to show queer people physical representations of their existence throughout space and time.

Queer people need LGBTQ historic sites but so do heterotypical individuals. For much of history, heteronormativity has dominated mainstream society. It is a narrative that fuels the construction of heterosexual marriages and families. It has given us our conforming gender roles of females and males. Queer history is heteronormativity's antidote. It says it is okay to defy that tight transgressional line drawn because so many queer people throughout history have. LGBTQ sites need to be celebrated for their historical value and used to educate those who are not part of the LGBTQ community and signify to society that people can live as they wish. Telling the history of LGBTQ people shows us that gender roles, sexuality, and identities do not have to follow societal norms and, quite often, they do not.

Current LGBTQ Work

Even in historically conservative states like North Carolina, proposals for LGBTQ historic sites have begun to develop. One of the Raleigh Historic Development Commission's (RHDC) work program items in 2020 was to identify, prioritize, and recommend historic properties

Fig. 3: Exhibit installation at Pauli Murray site, Durham, NC

and landmarks for designation. After a citizen request about LGBTQ representation and a thorough look at existing historical sites, Raleigh's committee determined the LGBTQ community was underrepresented. Following this realization, the RHDC hired historian Jeffrey "Free" Harris as a consultant to help identify and recommend LGBTQ historic sites. Harris is well established in the preservation field and wrote one of the chapters in the NPS's LGBTQ theme study. Unfortunately, Harris's work for Raleigh was put on hold in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, I had the pleasure of speaking with Harris over a video call to discuss his research and project in Raleigh.

Thus far, Harris's work is still in the beginning phases. Harris is gathering local support and insight from the LGBTQ community in Raleigh and making a list of some possible historic sites Raleigh might nominate. He already has a few on his list of historical LGBTQ sites that could benefit the Raleigh commission's project and contribute to the city's LGBTQ history. He suggests that one such place could be the gay night club Flex, which helped ease tensions when North Carolina tried to ban Drag performances in 1990. The nightclub produced a film called Camp, which featured two rival Drag Queen Groups coming together to stop the ban. The film was a success and helped to destigmatize Drag performances. Another historic site Harris suggests is the White Rabbit Books and Things, a local book and print shop responsible for printing Raleigh's first LGBTQ newspaper. It

Fig. 4: Cemetery behind Pauli Murray's Family Home

was also a spot where young queer people could gather who were often restricted by age from LGBTQ bars. Any of the places listed by Harris could serve Raleigh's initiative well and give the City of Raleigh a better understanding of its history.

Pauli Murray Historic Site

Whichever site Raleigh chooses to nominate as a historical property or landmark it will not be the first LGBTQ historic site in North Carolina. Most would be surprised to learn that North Carolina holds the first-ever historic landmark of an African American woman and LGBTQ site. The Pauli Murray historic family home is special because of its openness with the interpretation of Murray's life. Raleigh and other preservationist councils looking to save LGBTQ historical places should take note of the Pauli Murray historic site because it embodies some of the best practices, and it has undergone some challenges many LGBTQ historic places experience.

The establishment of the Pauli Murray Family Home landmark started with community documentary projects created by Duke University. The project was meant to work with communities around Duke's campus to tell community stories residents felt were important. The project immediately prompted feedback from the West End neighborhood where Pauli Murray's family home stood. Residents expressed to project members how vital the Murray house was to the community. Despite the Murray site's significance to the residents, the family home was set for demolition to be turned into a park-

Fig. 5: Pauli Murray Family Home prior to restoration

ing lot. However, the community was able to purchase the house in 2011 through an affordable housing tool created by Southwest Central Durham's Quality of Life project. The tool gave funds to the community to acquire the Pauli Murray home. Quickly after this purchase, a nonprofit organization was set up to steward the historic site's future; thus, was born the Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice. The Pauli Murray Family Home was established as a National Historic Landmark on December 23, 2016 (see Figure 2 and 3). The site's goals were clear: to uplift the legacy of the civil rights activist Pauli Murray and to become a platform for engagement through the history of Pauli Murray's life and ties to the LGBTQ community.

Integrity Challenges

A house largely neglected and vacant for years; the Pauli Murray site presented challenges for preservationists from the beginning. The site is located at the bottom of a steep hill. On the hill is a cemetery (see Figure 4) which, for years, had a drainage problem and had been funneling water into the backrooms of the Murray house. Ultimately, the water drainage eroded the foundation wall of the house (see Figure 5). The drainage affected Murray when they lived in the house too. For years drain-age from the hill would get into Murray's wells making the water undrinkable.

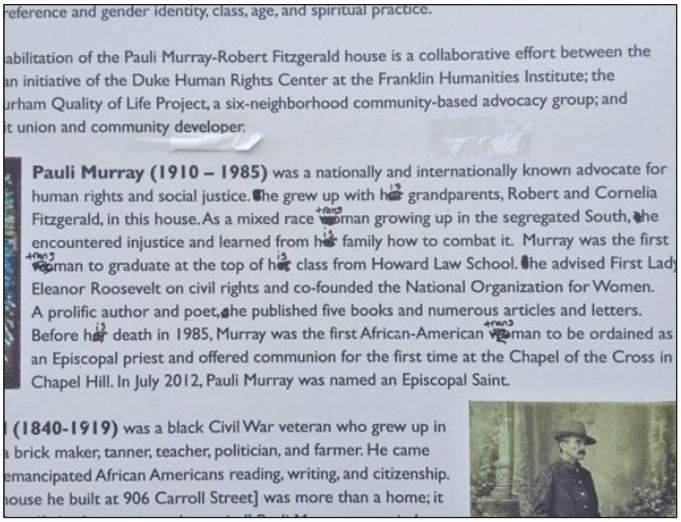
The site was able to get the City Manager, Thomas Bonfield, to add repair of the drainage problem to the City budget, which was then passed by the Mayor and Council. Unfortunately, the Murray site's structural damage is often the case for places that belong to historically marginalized groups. Preservationists need to ask themselves, in these cases, what level of physical integrity is necessary to save these sites. In San Francisco's 2015 context state-ment, the organization clarified that the primary aspect of integrity must come from the historic site's association with the LGBTQ community's social history. If the Pauli Murray site had not first started as a community initia-tive project by Duke University, the home likely would not have been

Fig. 6: Image of Pauli Murray circa 1960-1964, display panel at Murray site

saved due to its near demolition. The home's association and relationship with the community gave it meaning and ultimately led to its recognition as a national landmark.

However, many LGBTQ historical places are not as fortunate as the Pauli Murray Family Home. For example, the Michels-Carey house in San Diego while in the process of applying for landmark recognition was demolished by commercial developers in 2016. The Michels-Carey house was special to San Diego residents because of its ties to the creation of the first LGBT community center in the city in the early 1970s. Like Murray's house, the Michels-Carey house was a simple building; no one would have ever looked at it and thought much about it. Often the significance of a structure is determined by a community and its association to a history. This is especially the case for the LGBTQ community, whose history often took place in marginalized areas.

Preservationists need to realize that groups like the LGBTQ community cannot solely rely on buildings' physical structures to tell their stories. Rarely do queer stories take place in traditional buildings or in structures that still exist. And if they do, the sites are often like the Mur-


eference and gender identity, class, age, and spiritual practice.

abilitation of the Pauli Murray-Robert Fitzgerald house is a collaborative effort between the n initiative of the Duke Human Rights Center at the Franklin Humanities Institute; the urham Quality of Life Project, a six-neighborhood community-based advocacy group; and t union and community developer.

Pauli Murray (1910 – 1985) was a nationally and internationally known advocate for human rights and social justice. She grew up with her grandparents, Robert and Cornelia Fitzgerald, in this house. As a mixed race woman growing up in the segregated South, she encountered injustice and learned from her family how to combat it. Murray was the first woman to graduate at the top of her class from Howard Law School. She advised First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt on civil rights and co-founded the National Organization for Women. A prolific author and poet, she published five books and numerous articles and letters. Before her death in 1985, Murray was the first African-American woman to be ordained as an Episcopal priest and offered communion for the first time at the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill. In July 2012, Pauli Murray was named an Episcopal Saint.

(1840-1919) was a black Civil War veteran who grew up in brick maker, tanner, teacher, politician, and farmer. He came emancipated African Americans reading, writing, and citizenship. ouse he built at 906 Carroll Street] was more than a home; it

Fig. 7: Public feedback on one of Murray site display panels

ray home on the brink of being turned into a parking lot or, worse, demolished by developers like the Michels-Carey house. Preservationists must redefine integrity to match the needs of queer history so we can save these places.

Interpretation Challenges

Quite a few LGBTQ sites experience interpretation challenges like the Pauli Murray Center. The Reverend Dr. Pauli Murray was a civil rights activist, a women's rights lawyer, an author, an Episcopal priest, and an African American (see Figure 6). Murray's identity intersected with so many parts of society, it is impossible to give Murray any definitive place in society, and the historic site's interpretation embraces that fact. Although Murray's historic home is listed as an LGBTQ historic site, Murray never actually identified as Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, or even Queer in their lifetime. Furthermore, if Murray had identified as lesbian, Murray's experiences as an African American would have been entirely different from those of a white lesbian woman.

The historic site is recognized as a part of the LGBTQ community, regardless of how Murray identified. However, with this recognition, we must realize the variety of communities that make up the LGBTQ community from Latinx, Black, White, Rich, Poor, etc. There is no one experience for any member of the LGBTQ community. The Pauli Murray site must tell Murray's story with all their identities that shaped them while showing Murray's ties to LGBTQ history.

Murray was a strong advocate for women's rights, coining the term "Jane Crow" and becoming one of the founding members of the National Organization for Woman (NOW). Despite Murray's clear support for women, Murray had a long history of playing with gender. Named by birth as Anna Pauline, Murray, early in life, changed their name to Pauli, a more gender-neutral one. Murray, throughout their life, played with the concept of gender. Murray was ambitious, outspoken, and preferred to dress in pants, all

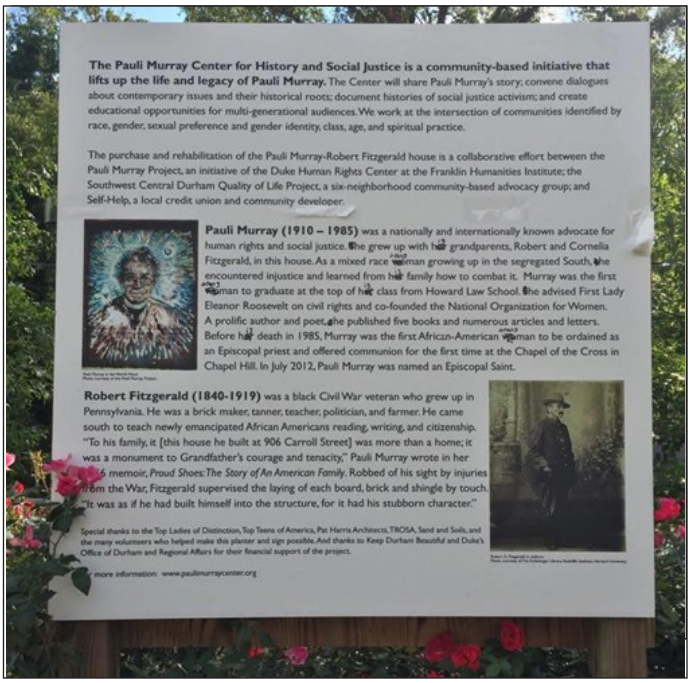


Fig. 8: Additional view of public feedback on display panel

characteristic Murray associated with the male gender. Earlier in Murray's life, they sought hormone treatment to become a man. However, Murray later seemed to embrace their womanhood, becoming a feminist and strong advocate for women.

Due to the unclear nature of Murray's gender, the historic site's interpretation engages thoughtfully with pronouns by playing with both genders, as Murray did. The site refers to Murray mostly in the female pronouns because Murray used she/her pronouns later in life and in written works. But the site is very open about Murray's gender nuances and devotes a lengthy interpretive page on their website to the discussion of Murray's pronouns. The site publicly acknowledges their interpretations are subject to change and have tried to present Murray in the fullest way without fitting Murray neatly into a box. As the site states, no one knows what Murray's preferred gender pronouns would have been today if Murray were alive. It would be easy for the site's interpretation to label Murray a female and move on, but instead, the interpretation attempts to deal with these uncertainties. The site allows visitors to decide who Murray is for themselves because Murray can and did repre-sent so many faces throughout their life. As a historian, I myself prefer to use the gender neutral pronoun, they/them for Murray, because Murray was gender nonconforming.

As historian Susan Ferentinos notes in her chapter contribution to NPS's LGBTQ theme study, "admitting uncertainty may be new territory for seasoned interpreters accustomed to taking a more definitive stance when sharing the past with visitors" (p. 31-15). LGBTQ history requires a change in thinking for interpreters because it often does not fit neatly into cultural tropes about

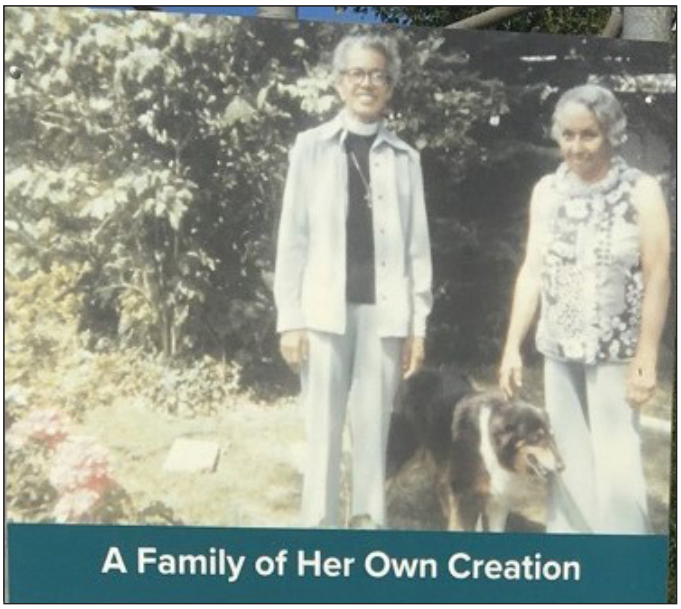


Fig. 9: Exhibit display panel with photo of Reverend Dr. Pauli Murray and Irene Barlow

gender and sexuality. Following the example of the Pauli Murray site's interpretation, preservationists need to be willing to admit the uncertainties regarding LGBTQ history. Doing so will open the site's story as not just a collection of facts but as a place where audiences can see the work of historians, and the evidence presented so they can make their own interpretations.

The Pauli Murray site's interpretation has not come without criticism, though. Initially, when the site's interpretive panels opened to the public, some individuals responded by crossing out the female pronouns and replacing them with he/him (see Figures 7 and 8). Such vandalism is surprising considering how open the historic site has been with its interpretations of Murray's gender. When I asked the Pauli Murray Center's Director, Barbara Lau, over a phone interview about the vandalism, she said she did not even consider it vandalism. She felt the act instead was a clear sign the site needed to have places for visitors to give their feedback and make their voices heard. The historic site plans to set up panels for visitor feedback as soon as they are fully open to the public in the fall of 2021.

Even with open interpretations, preservationists should expect criticism for any LGBTQ site—this goes for both sides of the spectrum: LGBTQ allies and foes. It is no secret, especially with bills like North Carolina's HB2 passed in 2016, that close-minded and even outright homophobic viewpoints still make up much of America's culture. However, many LGBTQ preservationists would argue criticism is vital to the interpretation of queer history because it opens the opportunity for more discussion. Suppose we are going to be able to discuss more complex topics in our society. In that case, we need to start by presenting such complex issues as sexuality and gender more openly and honestly. The Pauli Murray site, despite the controversy and uncertainties around

Fig. 10: Hull House Museum, Chicago, Illinois

Fig. 11: Photo of Jane Addams and Mary Rozet Smith

Murray's preferred pronoun, unabashedly continues to ask questions and create a dialog with the public about society's nuances with gender.

Source Challenges

Fortunately for the Pauli Murray site, preservationists had plenty of material to link the civil rights activist to the LGBTQ community. Although Murray never publicly identified as a member of the LGBTQ community, Murray's written works show their struggle with gender and talk openly about their partner Irene Barlow (see Figure 9). Murray referred to Irene as a spiritual mate and the closest person in their life. The two were together for 17 years and are buried under the same headstone in New York per Murray's request. Murray never openly identifying with the LGBTQ community in their life is a common trend for many historical figures in queer history.

In some cases today, the terms we know, such as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual, would have been seen as derogatory. Queer terms and beliefs have not always existed the same way we think of them today. In fact, the concept of sexual orientation as a character trait simply did not exist until the twentieth century. Sexual acts with the same gender was an action, something you did rather than a defining characteristic of your identity. Men had sex with other men; women had sex with other women without the slightest concern that the act meant some-thing about their identity. However, in Pauli Murray's time, sexual identity was very much on the minds of people nationally, with the famous Stonewall riot taking place in 1969 when Murray was 59 years old. Murray had every reason to "come out" but chose never to publicly identify with any terms related to sexual orientation. Despite this, preservationists publicly identify the Pauli Murray home as an LGBTQ historic site.

Preservationists were fortunate that the Pauli Murray site had the documentation to undoubtedly certify it as an LGBTQ site. Some historic sites are not so fortunate as to have an abundance of sources linking a site to queer history. Take for example, the Hull House. Most would never expect in a visit to the landmark home of Jane Addams in Chicago, Illinois, to find a queer interpretation (see Figure 10). Yet the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum makes it well known to visitors, upon entering the famous reformist's bedroom, that Addams shared a bed with her life-long companion Mary Rozet Smith (see Figure 11). However, the site significantly lacks any queer source materials that undeniably link Addams and Smith to having an intimate relationship.

The lack of sources related to Addams is partly because Jane Addams was born in 1860, 50 years before Murray, a time when the words Lesbian and Gay would have meant something very different. In Addams's time, it was not uncommon for women to live together and have lifelong partnerships, often referred to as a Boston Marriage. However, Hull House lacks queer sources because, before Addams died, she burned most of her corresponding letters with Smith. Was it to hide the sexual nature of her relationship with Smith? Or did Addams just need kindling for her fireplace? We do not know, and the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum does not claim to know either. Even with minimal queer source materials, the Hull House site has solidified itself as a place of queer history. If preservationists want to save more LGBTQ historical sites, they will have to look at a site's source material with an open eye and a willingness to search for queer documents. Queer history is all over American landscapes; preservationists just need to look more closely to see it.

Conclusion

Hopefully, more LGBTQ historic sites will be added to the National Register and granted National Landmark status. Preservationists need to find strategies to cope with LGBTQ historic sites that lack physical integrity because most of these sites suffer from years of neglect and historically poor socioeconomic resources. This will

mean preservationists must establish a site's integrity based on its association with the LGBTQ community's social history. Preservationists need to ensure these sites have interpretations that are open with the public about uncertainties and criticisms that will likely ensue. New and existing sites will need to look closely at their source materials for a queer narrative because, often, these narratives are discrete and hard to find.

Finally, LGBTQ historic sites will need to take an intersectional approach as they did in the Pauli Murray house by fully covering the occupant's identity from race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and disability. Places like the Pauli Murray Family Home and Hull House show us that preserving LGBTQ history is not easy or straightforward. However, these sites also show us how it can be done effectively and have a significant impact on the queer community and the whole of American culture, showing us that our history is complex, diverse, and a little bit queer.

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Figure 11: Courtesy of Jane Addams Collection, Swarthmore. College Peace Collection

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