

Archival Resources on the Web

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Putting LGBTQ History on the Map

*By Miranda Rectenwald, CA, Curator of Local History,
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Mapping LGBTQ St. Louis (<http://library.wustl.edu/map-lgbtq-stl>) is a digital project that uses maps to explore the region's lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer communities from the end of World War II in 1945 through the passage of St. Louis's first gay- and lesbian-inclusive civil rights ordinance in 1992. Over 800 points are geocoded throughout the metropolitan area, mapping everything from marches in the streets to sporting events in the park and corner bars.

The project aims to document the history of people whose sexual and gender nonconformity has often meant that their stories have gone unheard, unrecorded, unarchived, and unremarked. It also intentionally highlights the role of race and racism—a topic that influences all aspects of life in St. Louis. Its goal is to put this intersectional history literally, and metaphorically, on the map.

Conveying information on a map provides viewers an easily relatable connection to history. It grounds past events with present locations and literally shows that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people's history is interwoven through our entire region. The digital representation was a necessary tool, as in only rare instances do buildings still exist in these locations. This is mainly due to St. Louis's extensive pattern of "urban renewal" through building and neighborhood demolition, coupled with a previous lack of attention to LGBTQ history.

The idea to use geography to understand LGBTQ history was inspired by pioneering work done at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California Libraries, called "Queer Terrains" (<https://one.usc.edu/queer-terrains>). In 2015, a St. Louis project was proposed and received funding through a Divided Cities grant by the Washington University Center for the Humanities. I joined the team in 2016 and since then have worked in close collaboration with Andrea Friedman, professor of history and women, gender, and sexuality studies in

the College of Arts and Sciences, as well as my library colleagues Jennifer Moore and Mollie Webb, in the GIS/Data Services Department. This combination of skills and disciplines—of historians, archivists, and GIS (geographic information systems)—has resulted in a project truly more than the sum of its parts. Mapping LGBTQ St. Louis first published in October 2017, and, with additional grant funds, a new version of the site went live in spring 2021.

Unlike many digital projects, Mapping LGBTQ St. Louis is not an online surrogate to an analog archives collection. It is a new creation, compiling information from multiple archives and oral histories. Through more than a year of research by the project team, a new collection was created—a sort of digital vertical file—providing basic data about LGBTQ history across St. Louis. And, while the project shares many similarities with digital exhibits (providing users with interpretation), the site also makes available a full set of the raw data allowing further research and adaptive reuse. Consequently, the entire project's files and output are being officially accessioned as collection #wua00474.

The Site

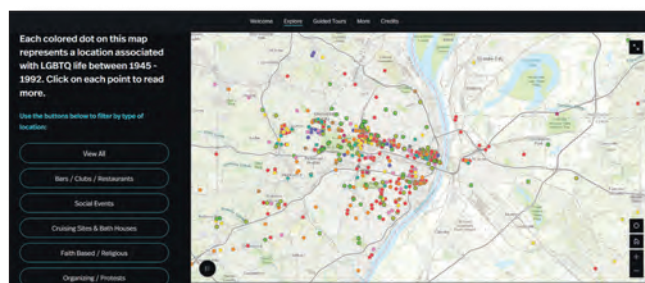
Visitors to the site begin at the page "Explore Mapping LGBTQ St. Louis," which offers options to browse a map or select various "guided tours" that provide curated experiences by topic. Clicking on each mapped dot reveals a box with basic information listing the location, address, dates of known existence, and primary type of space, such as bar, restaurant, social, business, political organizing, or bath house. These color-coded points can be toggled on or off using simple-to-click buttons. A more complex interactive map is also provided, which includes a keyword search and the ability to use geo-location to see historic points near the user's own physical location. Here a table of the location data can also be downloaded as a .CSV file.

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Lauren White, Assistant Editor

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Screen image of the site landing page and interactive map, April 2021

As originally created, the site provided four interpretive essays (“The Impact of Segregation,” “Sex in the City,” “Beyond Gender Binaries,” and “Divided by Violence”) and one visual timeline (“Political Actions and Organizing”). While the topics were well received, anecdotal feedback from users indicated these essays were overwhelming and longer than most people were interested (or able) to read. The timeline format was appreciated, but it was difficult to navigate because it used a completely different template from all other pages.

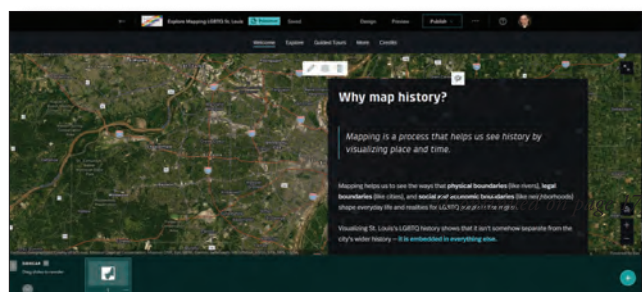
To provide a better experience, updates made in 2020–2021 focused on providing shorter and more interactive pages that incorporate more images and video clips. As of April 2021, contextual information, described as “guided tours,” is offered on five topics: “Connecting the Dots” (how LGBTQ life intersects with St. Louis’s overall history), “Miss Fannie’s Ball” (the area’s longest-running Black drag ball), “Mor or Les” (a lesbian bar destroyed by arson in 1979), “Bill’s Bar & Zebra Lounge” (highlighting the cultural role of Black bars), and “Forest Park” (the city’s largest green space with many connections to LGBTQ history). The political organizing timeline was also redesigned to include more images, links, and an update to the same template.

The original, longer essays are still available, but are now presented as “extended (virtual) tours,” providing an opportunity for a deeper look at how LGBTQ communities and cultures have developed and changed over time.

Digital Platform Pros and Cons

The Mapping LGBTQ St. Louis project is built on Esri’s ArcGIS StoryMap. This program was selected for several reasons. First, Washington University already had a campuswide account making the program

available to the project team. Many students and faculty across disciplines at the university use the platform, and we were able to hire two graduate students already somewhat familiar with the app. Although not open-source technology, ArcGIS is a well-documented system widely used and respected in the GIS field. The StoryMap application is especially designed to provide an interactive experience where viewers access mapping data with accompanying narrative text and images.



Editor view of the ArcGIS StoryMap interface, April 2021

The initial site (2017–2020) was built in the “classic” Story Map¹ application using Cascade templates. In 2021, expanded content and a new landing page were designed using the updated StoryMap interface. This version of StoryMap offers much easier design tools than the original version and greater support for embedded video, audio, and image galleries. The new application displays well on mobile devices and, most important, meets web-accessibility standards.

Esri has made extensive updates to the ArcGIS StoryMap tool since its inception and releases new features on a regular basis. It also offers monthly webinars featuring exemplary StoryMap users and provides a variety of how-to blog posts with tips for effective storytelling.

The chief downsides we have encountered with StoryMaps are the difficulty of archiving the final product and the lack of metadata accompanying images in the narrations. At Washington University, the Julian Edison Department of Special Collections utilizes various digital preservation strategies for born-digital content. Most websites are captured in conjunction with an Internet Archive account. Thus far, capture tools have not functioned well with ArcGIS StoryMaps, although, as this article is being drafted, we are planning to experiment with capturing the pages using Conifer. The lack of metadata for images remains an ongoing difficulty. While StoryMaps provides a caption

and alt text field for every image, these are never required and must be manually added for each image. It is also not possible to view the image file name (if uploaded) or web address (if linked) once inserted into the StoryMap. This makes updating or replacing images difficult and resulted in the need to maintain a separate spreadsheet of information for each StoryMap designed.

Feedback

Our project team is always interested in hearing from users of the Mapping LGBTQ St. Louis site. Do you have history from this time period in St. Louis to share? Have you used the site with students or in a class? Have you noticed corrections needed or do you just have general questions? Please let us know!

You can contact the team on Twitter (@MappingLGBTQstl) or by email (mrectenwald@wustl.edu) or use the linked form (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScqU4wTRO1fxm1YXm4x4i5CUccf-c0KzF4RFspjHWzT-csNjw/viewform?usp=sf_link) on the project site.



Links

“Explore Mapping LGBTQ St. Louis,” <http://library.wustl.edu/map-lgbtq-stl>.

For background, sources and methods, see “About Mapping LGBTQ St. Louis,” <https://arcg.is/1evXKP>.

For updates and announcements, follow us on Twitter <https://twitter.com/mappinglgbtqstl>.

Similar projects at other organizations

“Queer Terrains,” ONE Archives at USC Libraries, <https://one.usc.edu/queer-terrains>.

Mapping the Gay Guides, a nationwide project, <https://www.mappingthegayguides.org>.

Kentucky Queer History, <http://kentuckyqueerhistory.org/queer-kentucky-map>.

An Everyday Queer New York, “The Maps,” <http://jgieseking.org/AQNY/the-maps>.

Note

1. The original version of the program is spelled “Story Map” as two words, while the updated version is “StoryMap” without spaces.

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