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BEYOND STONEWALL: THE MATTACHINE SOCIETY OF THE NIAGARA FRONTIER AND GAY LIBERATION

Jeffry J. Iovannone



Don Licht (left) and Donn Holley at the MSNF “Meeting of the Mayors Protest” (1972). Photo courtesy of the Dr. Madeline Davis LGBTQ Archive of Western New York, Archives & Special Collections Department, E. H. Butler Library, SUNY Buffalo State.

In December of 1969, Buffalo gays and lesbians gathered in the cramped and dimly-lit back room of a gay juice and coffee bar called The Avenue, located in a dilapidated building at 70 Delaware Avenue, to begin organizing for their liberation. The meeting was called by James “Jim” Garrow, a bar owner and popular fixture of the gay community, whose bar the Tiki, known for its garish Polynesian-themes decor, had been raided and closed by the State Liquor

Authority (SLA). Opened in 1968 and closed by the end of 1969, the Tiki existed during a decade when Buffalo gay bars rarely stayed open for long. Prior to the 1960s, Buffalo had a thriving gay bar scene. Corruption within the Buffalo Police Department allowed bar owners to pay off Bureau of Vice Investigation officers to avoid harassment, liquor license violations, and closure.

Five months after the Stonewall Inn Riots, the Buffalo Bureau of Vice Enforcement targeted the Tiki in a series of raids. Buffalo bar raids were not the dramatic affairs they often were in large cities such as New York where gay bars were equipped with bells or flashing lights to alert patrons of raids and police would theatrically load patrons into paddy wagons as a way to publicly shame those arrested.

Nevertheless, Buffalo gays and lesbians were similarly angered by the Tiki raids. Their frustrations reached a boiling point when, in late 1969, the Tiki's liquor license renewal was denied by the SLA, which cited Garrow's homosexual arrest record as the primary reason for termination. The Tiki raids, and the bar's subsequent closure, prompted Buffalo's gay community to organize for their liberation. Community member Greg Bodekor described the Tiki raids as "Buffalo's Stonewall moment" — not because they ended in a riot, but because they similarly resulted in new forms of organization within Buffalo's gay community.

Jim Garrow brought noted homophile activist Frank Kameny to organize the gay community. Kameny was a former federal government employee for the Army Map Service with a Ph.D. in Astronomy from Harvard University. He was expelled from his job in 1957 when his security clearance application turned up a "vagrancy and lewd and lascivious behavior" charge incurred on a visit to San Francisco. His career derailed, Kameny was radicalized. In 1961, along with fellow gay activist Jack Nichols, he started a Washington, D.C. branch of the Mattachine Society, an early homophile organization, founded in Los Angeles in 1950. Kameny used Mattachine as a vehicle to directly challenge Washington and organized the first protests against the federal government for gay rights, including a picket of the White House on April 17th of 1965 and an annual picket at Philadelphia's Independence Hall.

Mattachine Washington was not formally affiliated with other chapters of the organization, and this allowed Kameny to adopt a more militant theory and practice of gay rights than many of his contemporaries during the early years of the movement. He was therefore a natural fit to help get Buffalo's gay and lesbian community in order. Kameny told those assembled at The Avenue that night to: "Get together, write up a Constitution, put the Constitution in a drawer, and go out and work for gay rights!"

Though Buffalo gays were inspired, in part, by the Stonewall Inn Riots that erupted the previous June, they were primarily responding to immediate concerns within their city. Things changed for gays and lesbians when Nelson Rockefeller was elected Governor of New York in 1959. Rockefeller campaigned, and was voted into office, on a promise to clean up corruption within state police departments. He was assisted in his efforts by Kenneth P. Kennedy, who in 1961 became Captain of the Buffalo Bureau of Vice Enforcement. Kennedy, a devout Catholic who regarded homosexuality as both a moral and public safety issue, systematically targeted Buffalo's gay bars and used the power of his position to enforce his personal views. Don Michaels, a Buffalo-based gay activist and community organizer, described Kennedy as a throwback to the McCarthy Era. During the 1950s, similar to alleged communists, gay and lesbians were viewed as threats to national security and purged from the federal government.

By 1967, a dry spell existed, and virtually no gay bars were operational within the city. The SLA prohibited the sale of alcohol in establishments regarded as "disorderly," and the presence of gay people in bars was considered disorderly by default. When bars catering to lesbians and gays opened, they were singled out. Vice Squad officers forced closures by conducting raids that hurt a bar's business and resulted in SLA violations. The crackdown was further intensified by the race riot that occurred on Buffalo's East Side from June 26th through July 1st of that year. Part of the race riots that swept the country during the "Long Hot Summer of 1967," the East Side riot, which virtually shut down the city and resulted in multiple injuries and fatalities, resulted in increased scrutiny of minority residents by the Buffalo Police Department. Though predominantly white gay bars such as the Ki-Yo Club, which was torched during the riot, existed on Buffalo's East Side, after 1967, gay bars primarily opened west of Main Street.

The Stonewall Inn, a Mafia-owned gay bar located at 53 Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, was similarly targeted. Originally opened in 1967, the Stonewall, owned by Fat Tony Lauria of the Genovese crime family, operated as a private gay club, which allowed Lauria to circumvent SLA regulations. At the Stonewall, gays could be served alcohol and they were allowed to dance. Because the Stonewall was a private club, patrons paid an entrance fee and were asked to sign their names in a register, though many used pseudonyms. Bar owners paid bribes to the New York Police Department (NYPD) and the SLA and were often notified in advance of raids so they could flash the bar's lights or cut the music as a way of warning patrons who were dancing to separate. During the summer of 1969, gay bars were particularly targeted by the NYPD because New York City Mayor John Lindsay ran for reelection on a promise of cleaning up crime within the city.

During the early-morning hours of June 28th of 1969, the NYPD, led by Inspector Seymour Pine of the Moral Conduct Division, conducted a raid on the Stonewall. Patrons, long tired of being subjected to police harassment and violence and having no space of their own, fought back.

Gender-nonconforming people of color and poor street queers, who had little to lose, led the uprising. Those present at the Stonewall that evening, accompanied by other members of New York City's gay community who entered the fray once the riot accelerated, forced the police to barricade themselves within the bar. According to eyewitness accounts, they threw bricks and coins, uprooted a parking meter to use as a makeshift battering ram, and stood their ground against the tactical police force brought in as reinforcement.

The Stonewall Inn Riots are often credited with sparking the modern American Gay Rights Movement. Though the riots have been described as occurring “spontaneously,” they were, in fact, the product of nearly two decades worth of organizing and the cultivation of gay community, such as Buffalo's working-class bar culture. Both the early Homophile Movement and the community networks formed by bar cultures created the preconditions for a mass movement for gay liberation. A liberationist mentality developed in gay communities across the country parallel to the events of Stonewall as gays and lesbians responded to the oppressive conditions of their respective cities and towns.

Barbara “Bobbi” Prebis, a working-class lesbian from Buffalo, said she learned of the Stonewall Rebellion because a friend brought her the papers from New York City. Other members of Buffalo's gay community, she observed, may not have immediately recognized the parallels between bar raids in Buffalo and New York City and were prompted to organize primarily due to oppressive conditions within Buffalo — not direct inspiration from Stonewall. Due to the lack of spaces in which to form community, Prebis had also attempted to organize the Buffalo gay community before Stonewall, but with little success.

Whereas earlier homophile activists emphasized respectability, middle-class values, civil rights, and the integration of gay people into existing social institutions, the philosophy and practice of gay liberation centered on broad social transformation, visibility, redistribution of resources, and dismantling norms of sexuality. As Ellen Broidy, a member of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), explained: “We didn't want a piece of the pie. We wanted to reconstruct the whole damn bakery.”

Liberationists used the more colloquial term “gay” — over the more clinical “homosexual,” with its connotations of illness and shame — to assert their sexualities with exuberance and pride. Localized acts of resistance, which became increasingly politicized, collectively contributed to the change in tone and tempo of the Gay Rights Movement following 1969, not a singular event. That Stonewall was the sole genesis of gay liberation is more myth than it is historical fact. The organizational efforts of Buffalo gays and lesbians are just one example that troubles this narrative.

Frank Kameny energized Buffalo gays and lesbians not only to devise a solid organizational structure but to, most importantly, actively work for their liberation. Yet, the fear of harassment and legal and social condemnation remained ever present. The Avenue was in close proximity to City Hall and the county holding center, and those gathered knew it would be easy for the Vice Squad to conduct a raid if Captain Kennedy learned of their activities.

A second organizational meeting was scheduled for January of 1970 despite a Vice Unit raid on The Avenue that occurred during the early morning hours of Sunday, January 4th. Under the direction of Captain Kennedy, who had placed the bar under surveillance due to alleged complaints from area residents, Bureau of Vice Enforcement detectives raided the premises after an undercover officer paid a 50-cent entry fee and was served an alcoholic beverage. Three people were arrested, including Jim Garrow, who was charged with operating a criminal nuisance and allowing persons to consume alcohol in a public place without a liquor license.

Donald "Don" Licht, an anthropology student at the University of Buffalo, learned of the second meeting from fellow university students. He did not attend the December 1969 meeting, but was awakened to the cause of gay liberation when, earlier that year, the University of Buffalo Law Department sponsored a symposium on gay issues. It was there Licht met Richard Roeller, a closeted photographer who worked for the *Courier-Express*. Licht and Roeller, frustrated by the closure of gay bars in the city, decided something needed to be done. The pair had, in fact, organized a meeting for gay liberation during the summer of 1969, though only 15 to 20 people attended. It was not until Kameny came to Buffalo that the gay community was prepared to take action.

Licht informed his partner, James "Jim" Haynes about the upcoming meeting. "Fine," Haynes said, "you can attend, but I'm not going." Licht and Haynes had met, and become a couple, in 1968. A native of Poplar Bluff, Missouri with a Midwestern lilt to his diction, Haynes was a biology professor at Buffalo State College who specialized in mycology, or, the study of fungus. He came to Buffalo in 1967, after receiving his doctorate from Iowa State University, because he thought that leaving the Midwest, and moving away from his family, would mean he could be gay without fear of scrutiny. He had no intention, however, of becoming a gay liberationist. Haynes had already been granted tenure in the Biology Department and, after some consideration, decided to attend the January meeting because, even if police intervened, he doubted his job would be in jeopardy.



Dr. James “Jim” D. Haynes. Photo courtesy of the Dr. Madeline Davis LGBTQ Archive of Western New York, Archives & Special Collections Department, E. H. Butler Library, SUNY Buffalo State.

Licht and Haynes found themselves in The Avenue’s narrow back room surrounded by 200 to 350 fellow gay Buffalonians, many of whom were chain smoking, and all of whom were demanding “Gay Liberation NOW!” Haynes, who possessed a gentle but authoritative nature, was frustrated by the chaos. He stood up and through the haze of smoke demanded the meeting be brought to order. Though he initially had no intention of actively working for gay liberation or playing a prominent role within the community, he was appointed Parliamentarian on the spot and began to conduct the meeting using Robert’s Rules of Order.

An organization to protest police harassment and bar closures began to take shape. Drawing inspiration from Kameny and his group, they called themselves the Mattachine Society of the Niagara Frontier (MSNF). According to Don Licht, the name “Mattachine” was chosen because “in Medieval Spain ‘La Mattachine’ were court jesters, and they were the only ones who could tell the court the truth without the fear of losing their head.”

In March of 1970, Madeline Romano, a 30-year-old librarian who worked at the University of Buffalo, learned of Mattachine. A self-described “bohemian” and poet, Romano put herself through college by performing as a folk singer in local bars and coffeehouses. She was an out lesbian, but did not see being gay as a political identity. Her family already thought she was a “kook,” so they regarded her lesbianism as just another of her many eccentricities. Though she studiously read *The Ladder* — the first national lesbian magazine published by the homophile organization the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) — and attempted to start a DOB chapter in Buffalo, she saw the magazine as merely literary.



Lee Tracey AKA “Shane.” Photo courtesy of Carol Speser.

Romano's lover at the time, Lee Tracey, who went by the name "Shane," asked if she would curate the small library of gay and lesbian materials in the communal space above The Avenue. Romano agreed and found the job not too difficult because, in 1970, there were few gay and lesbian books. Romano also knew Jim Garrow from performing at the Tiki and began to attend MSNF meetings. It was not long before she became politicized, adopting a gay liberationist mentality, reading the work of radical thinkers, and studying the tactics of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Though she initially attempted to separate her professional life from her work for gay liberation by using different names, Romano soon dropped her former husband's name and became known solely by the name she would use throughout her career as a gay rights activist: Madeline Davis.



Portrait of Madeline Davis (January 1977). Photo courtesy of the Dr. Madeline Davis LGBTQ Archive of Western New York, Archives & Special Collections Department, E. H. Butler Library, SUNY Buffalo State.

The Avenue — which now bore a window sign reading “Mattachine Society of WNY” — was the target of another raid on April 4th. The Bureau of Vice Enforcement, who still had the bar and Garrow under surveillance, was aware the gay community was organizing and as a result, the raid was particularly brutal. Ten officers, led by Lieutenant John J. Breen, entered the bar at 2 AM, arresting 11 persons, including Jim Garrow, and evicting 94 others from the bar and backroom after their names and addresses were taken. Two lesbians, Janice Kish and Shirley Thomas, fought back against the raiders and were badly beaten. Garrow was again charged with unlawful operation of a “bottle club” and criminal nuisance. Haynes, Licht, and Davis were not present for the April 3rd raid, but were concerned for the stability of MSNF due to continued police harassment and Garrow’s growing criminal record.

The Mattachine Society of the Niagara Frontier adopted a constitution, official bylaws, and incorporated as a non-profit organization in New York State by May of 1970. The constitution outlined the goals of the organization within a solidly liberationist, albeit veiled, framework of gay identity, calling for the “re-affirmation of individual pride and dignity; elimination of stigma attached to human self-expression; effective changes of unjust laws concerning one’s individuality and and relationships among consenting individuals; promotion of better physical, mental, and emotional health; creation of a sense of Gay community; and a constructive outlet for members and friends.”

Frank Russo was elected as MSNF’s first president and Bobbi Prebis as vice president. It was atypical for women to occupy prominent positions within gay liberation organizations, which tended to be militant and male-dominated. Prebis’ election evidences the relative gender parity that existed during MSNF’s early years, due, in part, to Buffalo’s tradition of labor organizing. Butch lesbians who were active in labor movements within the steel industry, such as the Bethlehem Steel Company, located in Lackawanna, New York, were some of MSNF’s earliest members, and used their skills as labor organizers to work for gay rights.

Prebis was also issued the organization’s first membership card. While other gay activists often used pseudonyms to separate their public and private selves, Prebis registered under her legal name. Bobbi Prebis wasn’t just an out lesbian — she was a tough butch dyke. Nobody messed with Bobbi, and she had no tolerance for the second-class treatment of gays. A working-class butch who came of age in Buffalo’s bar scene, Prebis fought to defend and maintain public spaces for lesbians. Tough in both personality and appearance, Prebis, unlike others, could not pass as straight. She had been out her entire life, and through her authenticity, she inspired others to come out as well. Now, with Mattachine, she had the opportunity to occupy a more formal position of leadership within her community.

By June of 1970, MSNF disassociated from Jim Garrow due to the embattled bar owner's mounting legal troubles and continued police scrutiny of his businesses. Members also learned that Garrow was having affairs with underage boys in the rooms above The Avenue. Garrow soon skipped town in an attempt to escape his issues. Some members of Mattachine had connections to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo (UUCB), located on the corner of Elmwood Avenue and West Ferry. UUCB's progressive minister and noted civil rights activist, Paul Carnes, allowed MSNF to rent space, and the organization began meeting there bi-weekly.

Like other post-Stonewall organizations, such as New York City's GLF, MSNF worked within committees to accomplish their primary goals of education, social reform, and support for gays and lesbians. MSNF's approach to gay liberation was comprehensive, and they tackled what Dorr Legg of the homophile organization ONE, Inc. referred to as "the four horsemen of the gay apocalypse," or, four key areas of transformation: the social, the scientific, the religious, and the legal.

MSNF, for example, established a speakers bureau to educate university classes, local organizations, and the media. The Health Committee, chaired by Jim Haynes, worked with Crisis Services to devise a telephone counseling service for gays dealing with medical or psychological issues. MSNF further established a liaison service to discuss gay issues with local clergy, and the Political Action Committee, chaired by University of Buffalo political science professor James Zais, worked to put pressure at the local, state, and national levels for legal reform and to increase gay political power.

MSNF's first public event was a Halloween Gala held at the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post in Buffalo. Emceed by Madeline Davis and Jim Haynes, the event featured, among other entertainments, a two-hour choreographed drag show. Fearing a police raid, MSNF invited University of Buffalo law students to serve as observers in case the proceedings went awry and Captain Kennedy intervened.

A bi-weekly news publication, *The Fifth Freedom*, whose name was taken from the five essential freedoms articulated by the Gay Liberation Front in their newspaper *Come Out!* (freedom from want; freedom from fear; freedom of religion; freedom of speech; freedom to love), sought to inform the community of local and national issues and to provide a space for dialogue. In the inaugural issue of [*The Fifth Freedom*](#), published on September 1st of 1970, MSNF President Frank Russo emphasized that local events — not the Stonewall Inn Riots — had given Buffalo gays and lesbians a sense of unity and purpose. "If we can keep the spirit of unity alive," Russo wrote, "great achievements will be realized. Now is the time to define where we are going. Only through unified action toward common goals can we ever attain freedom."



The inaugural issue of *The Fifth Freedom*, published on September 1st of 1970. Image courtesy of the Dr. Madeline Davis LGBTQ Archive of Western New York, Archives & Special Collections Department, E. H. Butler Library, SUNY Buffalo State.

Yet, for all their liberationist sensibilities, MSNF was a predominantly white organization. The group's trepidation to address racial inequality in tandem with gay liberation was not unique

among gay organizations of the time, but was certainly impacted by Buffalo's racial segregation. Ron Brunette, who joined MSNF in 1972, observed that "Gay black people were probably some of the most discriminated against in Buffalo. Because if their friends found out they were gay they were instantly ostracized and black churches were anti-gay totally... In the '70s blacks and whites did not walk down the street together." Gay black Buffalonians often participated in MSNF social events such as dances, but, due to the multiple oppressions they faced and stigma within the black community, it was near impossible to be involved in the public work of gay liberation.

Ann Hubbard, a black lesbian who was a longtime fixture in the Buffalo bar scene, additionally reflected that there may have been little outreach to the black gay community on the part of MSNF. "[Black gays and lesbians] never joined because no one came to tell them," she said. "I only learned these things from having white friends." MSNF, like other gay liberation organizations of the period such as the Gay Activists Alliance, often emphasized a single identity-focused approach that tended to center the concerns of white gay men. Though these organizations were certainly impactful, their approach came at the expense of a more comprehensive vision of social transformation.

Buffalo gays and lesbians were now unified in a common struggle against oppression and were increasingly aware of the obstacles they faced both in their city and nationally as they worked toward liberation. The challenge was now to imagine and achieve a better future for gays in the context of a mid-sized industrial city located on the edge of the Midwest that was predominantly Catholic and where those who came out often paid a steep price. The plant closures that swept the industrial cities of the Great Lakes region during the 1970s would pose additional challenges as the fledgling community sought to transform a city in economic and cultural decline.

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This essay is excerpted from a book Iovannone is writing about gay liberation in Buffalo, New York from 1969 to 1984.