

## news



## 25th Annual Queer Issue

**The Great Gay Way**

## A brief history of Christopher Street

by **Wayne Hoffman**

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It was a rural path in 17th-century New Amsterdam, divided into lots and paved in the 1800s. With the construction of a pier at the western end and Jefferson Market at the eastern tip, it blossomed. Ferries left from the dock, elevated trains served both ends of the street starting in the 1870s, and an IRT station came in 1910—the same year Seventh Avenue was widened, better connecting Greenwich Village to the rest of the city. The neighborhood boomed, and so did Christopher Street.

This week's Pride parade, held to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion, will end on Christopher, where it all began. In the years since 1969, this great gay way has been battered, neglected, and challenged by sexier rivals. Its current woes include racial tension between the mostly white residents and the mostly nonwhite crowds on the street. But such conflicts are nothing new on Christopher Street.

Back in the 19th century, a class divide split the bohemian, artistic eastern end and the working-class western end. Race riots erupted in 1932 between striking white longshoremen and black strikebreakers. Social tensions among different ethnic communities often led to street fights.

Homosexuals were already part of this unruly mix. As George Chauncey details in *Gay New York*, they were evident on Christopher Street by the 1920s and '30s,



The strip today: The kids rule the waterfront by night.

photo: Staci Schwartz

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when Stewart's and the Life Cafeteria catered to gay men (and straight gawkers). But Christopher Street was not yet the sanctuary it would become after World War II. Gay life grew more prominent, though, as the shipping industry that dominated the waterfront started to decline in the late '50s, leaving the maritime taverns at the foot of Christopher in need of a new clientele.

- **Pride Events**

"Many of those places that were seamen's bars and longshoremen's bars became gay bars," says historian Allan Berube. "And the piers, as they became vacant and decayed, became a kind of urban wilderness," where men cruised the abandoned waterfront warehouses. Then came the 1960s, when cruising gave the street a visibly gay character. Men walked to the piers—and the trucks parked under the (since demolished) elevated highway—to find sex. "The trip to and from the waterfront created a steady traffic," says Samuel Delany, 62, who recounts his escapades by the trucks in his autobiography, *The Motion of Light in Water*. "What made Christopher Street gay was the fact that the trucks were at the end of it."

As visibility increased, so did harassment and violence. Bob Kohler, who has lived in the Village for more than 50 years, says gay men were regularly assaulted in those days, by bashers and police alike. But Christopher Street and the surrounding blocks continued to draw crowds to newly opened bars and restaurants. "Yes, it was bad, but life was very good," says Kohler, 78. "We lived much more openly than history has recorded it."

When the police raided the Stonewall Inn on June 27, 1969, however, Christopher Street took a dramatic turn, as did gay life everywhere. "I don't think anybody saw a revolution in the air," says Kohler, who witnessed the raid. "But it changed everybody's life. It changed the world." That summer, he recalls, the street "looked like an armed camp." Christopher Park, in front of Stonewall, was fenced off, with cops on duty all night. "Everybody was waiting for the next riot," says Kohler. But it never came. Instead, the Gay Liberation Front formed and within weeks organized a peaceful "stoop-in," where people sat on stoops to claim Christopher Street's sidewalks as gay turf.

Christopher Street soon became the gayest street in America. And it wasn't just for cruising anymore. Traveling from Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he was living in a gay commune, Allan Berube, 57, made his first trip to Christopher Street a year or two after Stonewall. "It was lots of gay-liberation people, men and women," he notes. "A lot of hippies, a lot of radicals, a lot of feminists. It was the counterculture, the movement."

New bars, from the Cock Ring to Uncle Paul's, and stores such as the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop (which moved from Mercer Street after Stonewall) turned Christopher into the heart of a gay commercial district, even as cruising continued to mark the sidewalks and waterfront. The long-standing racial diversity endured, but otherwise the demographics narrowed as gay men came to dominate. "Lesbians did come," Kohler says, "but they didn't walk up and down and up and down like the men did." This sidewalk strolling cemented Christopher Street as gay-male territory.

Trans people got pushed to the background in the '70s, recalls activist Pauline Park, 43. "Christopher Street clones decided to reclaim their masculinity," their mustaches and Levi's creating a uniform look on the street that excluded folks who were trying to challenge gender norms. But the broad-based political legacy of Stonewall persisted. The street became the site of inclusive rallies and demonstrations far beyond the annual commemoration of the riots every Pride Day (originally called Christopher Street Liberation Day).

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Protests against the movie *Cruising* in 1979 began in Sheridan Square, and soon had local store owners closing shops and blocking signs to prevent filming on Christopher Street. After a killer obsessed with gay men sprayed the Ramrod bar on West Street with a semiautomatic in November 1980, killing two and injuring many more, several thousand people, fists and candles raised, took part in a memorial procession down Christopher Street, led by a marching band and a contingent of people who had been bashed in the Village. Every time something dreadful happened—such as a new outrage by Anita Bryant or the Supreme Court—the cry could be heard up and down Christopher: "Out of the bars and into the street."



That was then: Clones on parade  
 photo: Fred W. McDarrah

The shadow of Stonewall gave Christopher an iconic status as the locus of gay activism. But when AIDS started sweeping the gay community in 1981, the street fell ill as well. Businesses closed, cruising declined, voyeuristic straights stayed away, and longtime residents and patrons died by the thousands. "It was like going to a carnival," says Kohler, "and suddenly somebody pulled the plug on the lights."

Yet even in those days of unimaginable devastation, Christopher Street remained a safe haven for many with nowhere else to go. In the late '80s, when Emanuel Xavier was 16, his mother found out he was gay and kicked him out. He spent much of his time on the crumbling piers, hustling. But despite the hardships of living as a teenager on the street, Xavier—now 33 and author of the poetry collection *Pier Queen*—has fond memories: "It was a safe space. You could walk around holding another man's hand or kiss somebody out in public. It was our world."

The street never fully recovered after AIDS hit, but rumors of its death have been greatly exaggerated. Despite the proliferation of gym-pumped

boys north of 14th Street, most of Christopher's longtime constituents have resisted the shift to Chelsea. The pier kids immortalized in *Paris Is Burning* still rule the waterfront after dark, the older and whiter denim-and-flannel set still holds court at Ty's, the Latino go-go boys still strut downstairs at the Monster behind Christopher Park, and black gay men still congregate in a crowded bar—albeit not at the standby Two Potato (now an Italian restaurant), but up the block at a bar called Chi Chiz. Even tourists continue to come. "Only the pretty young white boys have left," notes Kohler.

And they, too, have started to visit since the newly renovated piers opened last summer. But if Christopher Street remains historic, comfortable, and occasionally cruisy, it is admittedly no longer edgy, trendy, or remotely fabulous. Those adjectives have been appropriated by other boulevards.

"Eighth Avenue is gay, gay, gay—there's no way around it," says Christine Quinn, city councilwoman for the Third District, which includes both the Village and Chelsea. "But Christopher Street is a landmark. Christopher Street has history. It has battle scars. No matter how fabulous another street gets, you can't take that away."

And its defenders insist the great gay way still has much to offer. "A lot is still there, and a lot more is still to come," says Xavier. And then he summed up Christopher Street in a single word: not run-down but "legendary."

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