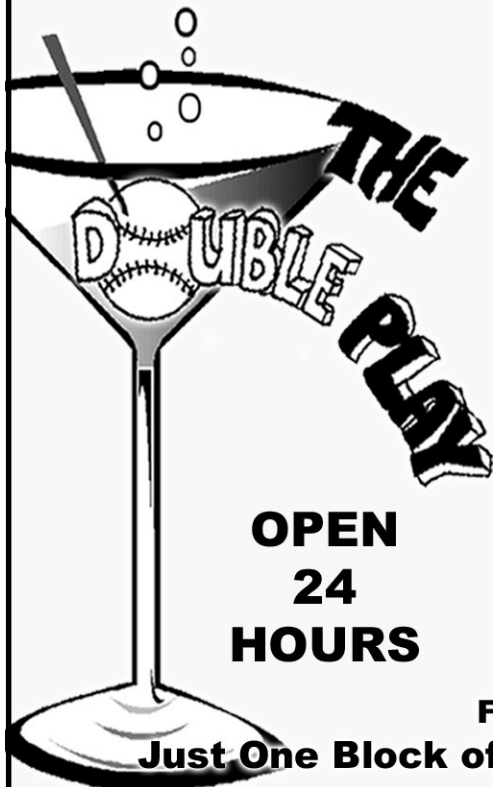


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moments in gay new orleans history

by Professor Frank Perez  
E-mail: [f.perez@sbcglobal.net](mailto:f.perez@sbcglobal.net)  
Photo by: Larry Graham, [GrahamStudioOne.COM](http://GrahamStudioOne.COM)

The 1995 Panel on Lesbian and Gay History in Louisiana

The Louisiana State Museum made history on June 21, 1995, by sponsoring a panel discussion titled "Pride in Our Heritage: Lesbian and Gay History in Louisiana." The forum was the first of its kind.

The idea for the panel was the brainchild of Wayne Phillips, who at the time was Assistant Curator of Exhibits and Programs. Phillips, a gay man himself, is currently the Curator of the Carnival Collection and of Costumes and Textiles. Today, a panel on gay and lesbian history is barely newsworthy, but times were different in 1995. Back then, the notion of the State Museum sponsoring anything gay related was quite controversial—and politically explosive.

Within the state bureaucracy, the Louisiana State Museum falls under the Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, which, in turn, is under the Office of the Lieutenant Governor. In 1995, the Lieutenant Governor was Melinda Schwegmann (D), who, at the time, was running for governor.

One of her opponents, former Governor Buddy Roemer (R), seized on the panel to attack Schwegmann by exploiting the widespread homophobia that permeated the state. The Roemer campaign issued a venomous press release questioning Schwegmann's priorities. The press release states: "Melinda Schwegmann needs to get her priorities straight. I recommend that she go to a Wal-Mart—or a Schwegmann's if she prefers—and listen to what Louisiana's families' priorities are. She'll learn that they are concerned about jobs, education, welfare reform and corruption in government. 'Gay and Lesbian History' is not on their list of priorities."

For her part, Schwegmann distanced herself from the program claiming she knew nothing about it. This claim was a manifestation of political cowardice and contradicted a previous statement from Schwegmann's office, which read, in part, "The State Museum is committed to preserving and presenting the heritage of our state including perspectives of the many diverse groups that make our cultural legacy unique."

Roemer's political attack and Schwegmann's anemic response generated a number of headlines and James Sefcik, Director of the State Museum, weighed in, pointing out that the cost of the program—less than \$200—was being paid not by taxpayers but rather by the Friends of the Cabildo, a volunteer organization that raises money for the State Museum. That still didn't satisfy Roemer, who complained that taxpayers would be footing the bill for electricity and air-conditioning at the Old U.S. Mint, which is owned by the State Museum.

Sefcik responded in a *Times-Picayune* article, telling reporter John Pope, "I look at it as just another manifestation of the diversity of Louisiana, which is one of the things that makes our state so interesting. . . We're not here to keep everybody happy; we're here to tell the history of this state."

In an interview with Patrick Shannon, Phillips added, "I don't look at this as pandering to minority groups. I look at it as giving credence to a heretofore unaddressed area of cultural interest." Sefcik's and Phillips' comments notwithstanding,

the political controversy surrounding the panel generated a lot of publicity and over 350 people packed the event.

The panel featured three speakers. Researcher Roberts Batson spoke on "Telling Secrets: from Ephemera to Anekdotia." Political activist Rich Magill spoke on "The Making of an Ordinance." State Museum historian Karen Trahan Leathern spoke on "Reflections on Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras."

Magill and Leathern's topics were fairly specific, but Batson, who spoke first, spoke in more general terms and, while providing interesting anecdotes, also discussed the challenges the gay historian faces.

According to a condensed version Batson's talk which was reproduced in an *Impact* article titled "Claiming Our Past," Batson also addressed the political controversy surrounding the event by making a case for the preservation of gay and lesbian history, "To be a part of our culture, we must know, and remember." Further, Batson noted, "'With all due appreciation to the museum staff here today who are responsible for this historic panel . . . the public should not look upon this panel as some great, magnanimous act of generosity on the part of our state. Tonight's presentation is exactly the sort of thing they should be doing.'"

Not everyone in attendance agreed. Most of the comment cards were favorable but there were a few notable exceptions. Debra Cox, for example, wrote that the State Museum was "totally out of line hosting a lecture on the sexual orientation of persons contributing to Louisiana history. Sexual orientation, no matter how deviant, is totally irrelevant to history. To glorify sexually deviant behavior as being important to history is wrong."

Despite the factual errors and erroneous assumptions in Cox's comments, most of those attendance responded favorably to the program. Typical of most comments, one anonymous attendee simply wrote, "Thank you for just giving us equal treatment."

The panel discussion was followed by a reception at the newly opened Mint bar.

**NEXT DEADLINE:**  
**Tues., Dec. 27th**  
**504.522.8049**  
[ripna@ambushmag.com](mailto:ripna@ambushmag.com)





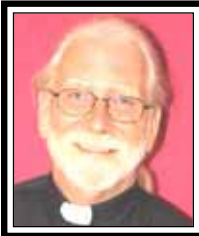
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## a community within communities

by The Rev. Bill Terry, Rector St. Anna's Episcopal Church,  
New Orleans  
Email: [fr.bill@stannanola.org](mailto:fr.bill@stannanola.org)

### The Season of Incarnation: Part 3

Thanksgiving is done and I am bloated and thinking, "How will I lose this weight?" Then, in a moment of despair, I know that the days ahead will make no allowance for a burgeoning belly. So, I guess I will look forward to Lent. Speaking of looking forward it is now **Advent**, at least in our tradition and some others. This is a season of anticipation, this is a time to think about what is to come, where I have been, and how do I prepare myself.

It is vitally important, I think, to shore up our churches, synagogues, and temples that declare themselves to be not only "safe" places but hospitable places for the LGBTQ community. These institutions are built for the times that we live in. They can give "congregational voice" to a world that seems to be turning back the clock on justice. Churches are not, nor should they be, hiding places but places that sound a loud voice and clarion call to justice and full enfranchisement. So, we sing Mary's song with loud voice.

In Christianity we claim that Rabbi Yeshua came into the world to call for justice, peace, love and unity with God. He was so much in love and identified so much with "The Father" that he cannot be identified apart from "The Father/Mother/Creator." The claim is that Yeshua/Jesus became one of us to "take away the sin of the world" and to offer us all a place at "the table." But why? Why do we make this claim and why was it necessary?

In the Jewish tradition and epic stories of God and humanity we encounter a God who desires fidelity and constancy of a people he says that he loves. It is not that he does not love all of humanity but "God's people" know God and therefore can proclaim and profess the God of creation in a way that others only see dimly. According to those epic stories humans did not live in love and fidelity with each other let alone God. We read those stories in Genesis. The flood story, the Tower of Babel story, Cain and Able epic all point to human inclinations. Remember these are not histories they are expressions of faith and religion. They make statements about the condition of humanity and God's involvement. And it wasn't pretty.

The tribe of Israel was intended to be a light in the world for justice, equity, inclusion, and love. Yet, they strayed and so the Law giver came into the picture. You remember that great epic movie "The Ten Commandments.!" Yet, the people still did not rise up to God's expectations. Not only did they add laws but they began interpreting the Law. The Law was supposed to express a certain heart a way of living and being. We can discuss the part about sexuality later but believe me when I say, homosexuality as we know it today was not part of the story. The heat of the law was intended to be equity and justice and indeed fidelity to the Creator.

So, in time Israel got a kind. His name was David. He was a hot mess. Perhaps he had an affair with Jonathan perhaps

not. But they loved each other. David passionately loved God and his people. He ruled, generally, with kindness, respect, and fairness. The people thrived. Of course there was that betrayal and thing with that hot little number Bathsheba. But even then he regretted his choices and loved God and God's people. Then it happened...Solomon! For my money Solomon set the stage for the destruction of God's people – again! He consolidated power and marginalized the poor. By the end of his reign Israel was split in two by his ambitious sons. So, then we had two kingdoms Judah and Israel.

The ensuing kings kept kicking the little folks off of land. They began using the law to hurt harm and marginalize (sound familiar?). Eventually, the tribes of Israel would be destroyed and scattered and soon too Judah would be conquered and so Solomon's great temple would be destroyed. The story at this point is unfolding. Folks did not follow the loving will of God but used his name to hurt and abuse (again sound familiar?). Let me be clear, the leaders and power hungry power brokers were the problem not God. It is like patriotism – such can be used for good or evil. The same is true with God's name and God's authority it can be used for evil, but that isn't God. In the Hebrew Bible that is what all the fuss is about with the so called Prophets. So be skeptical. Have another drink! I haven't come to the point yet.

One of the issues for we humans is that God is not knowable and to some degree not imaginable. The early Jews had a great sort of intimacy with God. They would argue with God, even glimpse just a bit of God, and perhaps even wrestle with God. But they lost that intimacy. God started to become abstract over time. Just like our familiarity and closeness to nature has become abstract. A marsh is a marsh it is no longer thought of as a living part of us.

In a final attempt to bring the light and beauty of God into the world and to atone, to make right all of the sin of the world and to bring cosmic balance into the world for all of the hurt that happened thus far there was only one answer. It is this history this and this understanding of humanity that we recall during Advent. Not that we are total failures as a creation but that there is a cosmic constancy in a love that wants to be known and loved. This is a *yearning force* that desires relationship and love as the binding force of that relationship. This *yearning force* that causes us hu-

[continued on 16]



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