In Search of Gay Preservationists

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The Belgians and Greeks do it,
Nice young men who sell antiques do it.
Let’s do it, let’s fall in love.
—a Noël Coward version of a song by Cole Porter

GAY RIGHTS PIONEER HARRY HAY observed that history knows much about gay men that it doesn’t know it knows. There are many reasons for this. In some cases someone who was in fact gay is not known to have been gay. Or he is known or believed but not generally acknowledged to have been gay. The label gay may be declared unsuitable because, as the litany goes, it’s a contemporary term of European origin, therefore not appropriate to use in relation to individuals of earlier times or other cultures; from what we know about the person in question, it appears that he did not self-identify as gay and would not have wanted to be so labeled; we don’t know enough about his sex life to justify such a label; he was bisexual; he was married to a woman, fathered children, was a devoted family man, and so forth. All these barriers to identifying someone as gay make it difficult to do queer history because one faces the necessity of reaching conclusions that are sure to annoy or offend someone for one reason or another.

Contemporary gay identity does not translate easily across cultures or time periods. There is no transhistorical or cross-cultural uniformity in the understanding of concepts such as sex, gender, sexuality, gender identity, and self-identity, all of which go into defining gay. Some argue, then, that it’s inappropriate to apply the term to an American Indian berdache who lived a century ago, or to an Italian artist who lived five centuries ago, or even to a celibate Irish priest living today. I do not agree.

One of the most harmful aspects of homophobia is its equating gay identity with sex alone: that is, gay tends to be understood quite narrowly as a synonym for homosexual. For this reason, it’s not an ideal term to use when looking at a person’s nature beyond the scope of his sexual orientation per se. But what’s the alternative? Resisting the urge to coin a new term for my kind across time and cultures, I’ve decided to make do with the familiar word gay and explain what it means to me: a male who is gender atypical (psychologically and perhaps physically androgynous or effeminate) and decidedly homosexual in orientation if not in practice. Thus, my use of the term gay encompasses both gender identity and sexual orientation. It is not synonymous with homosexual.
This definition frees me from needing “proof” of sexual activity when I identify a historical figure as gay. His sex life is not what I’m talking about. Many gay men, perhaps most of them through history, have had sexual relations with women, often marrying and rearing children. A gay male’s sexual activity may be hetero, bi, auto, or non. Again, this is because gay identity does not hinge on homosexual activity but on being androgynous and predominantly same-sex oriented, though this gender variance may be invisible or greatly repressed, and the homosexual inclination may never be acted upon.

Undoubtedly some gay men will object to the gender-atypical part of this definition of gay. “I’m homosexual,” they will protest, “but I’m not effeminate.” In a culture that devalues females and so-called feminine traits, especially when they are expressed by males, the term effeminate is an epithet. It suggests a swishy, limp-wristed prissiness. Some gays manifest these traits without reserve; others stifle them, especially in public. But these protostereotypical characteristics are hardly the most important part of the effeminacy that shapes male androgyny. Here’s a better definition of effeminate: having qualities or characteristics generally possessed by girls and women. These traits may be highly external and visible in one gay male—his styles of speaking, gesturing, walking, and so on. In another his effeminacy may be little or not at all apparent in these ways but may be manifested more internally in his interests, aptitudes, values, emotional constitution, and communication style. The fact that a gay man is able to appear straight without special effort does not mean that he is not at all effeminate. Rather, he expresses his effeminacy differently than do his more swishy peers. Edward Carpenter, that singular nineteenth-century Englishman, understood gay men as “intermediate men”—“men with much of the psychologic character of women.” Carpenter’s conception of the intermediate tribe, of which he was a member, included those who could pass as straight and those who never could.

Given the longstanding gay tradition of camouflage, my efforts to identify preservation-minded gays from the past have required extensive reading between the lines. I scoured the antiques, architecture, and interiors sections of libraries and bookstores. I immersed myself in the archives of the deceased. And I simply stumbled onto some wonderful revelations: a book on the pioneering Chicago preservationist Richard Nickel, for example, came to my attention when I was scavenging for something to read at a gay-owned bed-and-breakfast in that city.

In examining a given man’s life, I determined how well he fit the gay pattern through a process that was deliberative but inevitably subjective. As
my friend John Anders reminded me, “Intimations can come from the slightest suggestions, what Walt Whitman calls ‘faint clues and indirections.’” Considering a variety of sometimes nebulous questions, I paid attention to a constellation of indicators: In childhood and adolescence, was the individual unusually interested in doing things typically associated with females, such as diary and scrapbook keeping, and homemaking activities, such as cooking, food preservation, flower-arranging, sewing, needlework, interior decorating? Was he or could he have been described as androgynous, effeminate, sensitive, emotional, artistic, musical, or fastidious? Was he strongly engaged by religious practice? By family or community history? By theatrical activities? Was he generally averse to sports? Were his mother, grandmothers, and other females key influences in his growing-up? Did he ever marry? Did he stay married? Were there children? What kinds of relationships did he have with his wife and other women, and with other men? Was he or could he have been described as never married, a bachelor, a lifelong bachelor, a confirmed bachelor, eccentric, or in similar terms? After digesting the answers to such questions, I had to make a decision that was not always clear-cut: Was he likely gay, or not? Thus, I may have included some individuals who don’t belong and excluded some who do. But though the lives presented here have significance individually, it’s the composite portrait that’s most important. I am confident of its integrity.

The most richly revealing part of the research has been collecting and analyzing autobiographical profiles from preservation-minded gays of today. I recruited more than sixty men as interview subjects and received written responses from about twenty more. Several of these men I knew personally; some I identified as likely prospects in periodicals or books. For example, I combed through back issues of selected magazines: Preservation, Old-House Journal, Old-House Interiors. Perusing back issues of Victorian Homes, I found that five of the six issues in a recent year featured restorations by quite obviously gay couples or individuals. I then obtained the addresses of many of these individuals and sent them the following notice.

I am doing research for a book on the extraordinary and pioneering involvement of gay men in historic preservation. My working definition of historic preservation includes not only the saving of buildings but also the saving of smaller objects and documents, as well as the compilation of family and community history. I expect that getting acquainted with the activities of contemporary preservationists will complement my historical research.

What I invite you to do, if you are a gay man, is to think about your own involvement in historic preservation: In what ways have you engaged in preservation? When did your interest begin and how
has it been manifested? What have been your inspirations? Who have been your role models? Is preservation a major, minor, or middling part of your life? What do you consider to be its significance for you? For others? Do you have any thoughts about how your engagement in preservation might relate to your sexual orientation?

If you would be interested in responding to these kinds of questions, I hope that you will get in touch with me. If you are inclined to write, an informal letter or narrative would be fine. If you would rather talk about it, I would welcome a conversation. Should you decide that you have nothing in particular to say on the topic, perhaps you know someone to whom you can pass this letter along. Still, I hope that you will lodge these questions in your mind, carry them around for a while, and let me know if any thoughts emerge later.

If I were to end up quoting you or citing your experience, there would be no need for you to be identified. So, I hope you won’t let concern about seeing your name in print, or being otherwise identifiable, prevent you from communicating with me on this. This is not an “outing” project. On the other hand, I would welcome your willingness to be identified by your real name.

The gay-preservation grapevine assisted my publicity efforts. I connected with it most significantly by attending the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s 1998 national conference, where I distributed my project notice by various avenues, including a session on “gays and lesbians in preservation” (where men outnumbered women nine to one) and a nearly all-male reception for “gays, lesbians, and friends in preservation.”

Using interview transcripts and autobiographical writings, I shaped personal narratives for about three dozen individuals from throughout the United States. Each of these men was involved in reviewing and revising his profile. I have organized the material by geographical region because of the primacy of place in preservation, and because each region of the United States offers distinctive cultural and historical backdrops against which these men’s preservative enterprises can be more richly understood.

It has been illuminating to hear these men describe how their passion to preserve has been expressed, often beginning in childhood, and what they make of it, including how they think it relates to being gay. The point of this book is not so much what these culture-keeping gay men have accomplished, but why they have felt compelled to do these things. This book is not intended as a Who’s Who of gay preservationists, nor as a chronicle of degrees received, awards won, things acquired. Neither is this book about gay men
who focus on the preservation of gay history, though a number of these individuals are so engaged. That is a rich subject in itself.

The preservationists profiled in this book range from accomplished professionals to impassioned amateurs. Their focuses range widely. But they all have two things in common: each is gay, and each manifests a singular passion to preserve. In examining the connection between these two traits, I have sought a fuller understanding of what it means to be gay. Even more than culture keeping, that’s what this book is about.

In the decades following World War II, the American imagination was exceptionally antipreservation. Tearing down the old and erecting the new became something of a national obsession. “Historic preservation was sissy stuff,” recalled an Omaha architect and founder of that city’s preservation group. “Real men build. They don’t fix up. They start over and leave their mark.”

Sissy stuff, indeed. It has been enlightening to ask gay men what they think about the extraordinary involvement of their kind in the largely female arena of historic preservation and its related professions: architectural historians, restoration architects, antiquarians, art historians, museum curators, conservators, archivists, state and local historians, landscape architects, interior designers, color designers. One gay preservationist joked about there being little need for a gay professional group within the American Society of Architectural Historians, since there seem to be so few in the organization who are straight. Surely it must have been one of the architectural historian tribe who first described a Victorian house that put all its decorative goodies up front as having “a Queen Anne front and a Mary Ann behind.” Philip Johnson, a gay man who was an architectural historian before he was an architect, was a 1960s pioneer in preservation activism, railing against the demolition of New York City’s Pennsylvania and Grand Central Stations and helping to save the Glessner House in Chicago.

Most of my subjects acknowledged the extraordinary involvement of gays in preservation. However, many of them attributed the phenomenon to sociocultural factors rather than to gay men’s essential qualities. One common view holds that gays often have more disposable income, no children to consume their time and energy, so they can more easily immerse themselves in costly and laborious restoration projects and buy expensive antiques. Further, childless gays can more easily move into derelict properties in neighborhoods where safety and school quality are marginal or poor.

Conversely, some suggest that it is the cheapness of living in run-down old houses that attracts gays to buy, furnish their rooms with cast-offs, and rehabilitate: with only modest incomes and a lot of work, they can eventually
have magnificent homes. Another line holds that perhaps, lacking children, gay preservationists are attempting to create something that will live beyond them. There's also the theory that it's because gay men are socially stigmatized and marginalized that they take on the “marginal” work of preservation: by taking something degraded and making it whole and beautiful again, they are trying to prove themselves worthy of society's respect and move up the social ladder. Their redemptive work is really a quest for self-redemption, a pursuit of acceptance, legitimacy, validation.

These explanations collapse under scrutiny. What about the frequent manifestation of preservation impulses in childhood, often years before the individual has any conscious awareness of his gayness and its implications for his life path, his social stature, his chances of having children? What about the gay men whose culture-keeping impulses are undiminished by fathering children or by modest finances? And how to account for the relative absence of lesbians in historic preservation, despite their being subject to similar sociocultural forces? Further, if one is childless and looking to leave one's mark in the world, why take on the enormous task of restoring an old building when there are many ways to be remembered after death that are easier, cheaper, less messy, and longer lasting? And on what grounds is preservation deemed “marginal”? It seems that those who do the work of perpetuating cultural memory and identity are doing a job that is at the very center of their society's life, akin to religious work.

If one is disposed to read between the lines, the literature of preservation in the United States reveals that gay men have long been allied with women in this arena and that this natural partnership continues. According to a gay preservationist with the National Park Service, “the historic preservation movement in the United States traditionally dates itself from the founding of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association in the middle of the nineteenth century. Women were very much in the forefront of this sort of activity, and I'm sure there have always been gay men who have gotten involved in working with the ladies.”

In the 1870s, the decade of the nation's centennial, patriotic women and bachelor gentlemen collaborated to sustain the memory of the nation's preindustrial golden age. A half-century later, these same types of civic-minded ladies and artistic men spearheaded efforts to save old neighborhoods from the destructive incursion of the automobile and its accoutrements: gas stations, service garages, parking lots, and wider streets. In the 1970s new generations of these natural allies—“little old ladies in tennis shoes and sensitive young men in tight jeans,” as one gay man put it—were trying to block the destruction wrought by freeway building, urban renewal, and
suburban sprawl. A cartoon in a 1978 issue of the *New Yorker* shows a woman and a man holding placards that read “Save Radio City Music Hall.” The man says to the woman, “Haven’t we met someplace before? Penn Station? The Metropolitan Opera House? The Villard Houses?” Here they are, observed but unrecognized: the gay male preservationist and his straight female ally.7

Grasping the role of gays in preservation in the first half of the twentieth century requires some audacious conjecture. Ideally one could establish the gayness of, say, Leicester Holland—chairman in the 1930s of the American Institute of Architects committee on the Preservation of Historic Buildings—without having to infer it from a subjective cluster of “gaydar” indications, including a photo that shows him wearing a ring on only the little finger of his left hand.8 Holland championed the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), which created jobs for many otherwise unemployed architects during the Depression, producing documentary records of all types of old buildings.9

In the 1920s gays appear to have been well represented among those planning the meticulous restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. The group of draftsmen who assembled there became the first school of architectural restoration in the United States. Most of those young men were from northern and western states and were eager to learn about the architecture of Tidewater Virginia. They were a happy, convivial, and dedicated bunch that tended to keep to themselves, often devoting weekends to searching the countryside for eighteenth-century structures to measure and photograph. Walter Macomber, the resident architect under whose supervision they worked, had a very good eye for architectural detail and proportion, but no knack for the nuts and bolts of engineering design.10 In this more aesthetic orientation to architecture, Macomber no doubt resembled his students. Indeed, architectural practice has long been a refuge for artistically inclined men in search of respectable work. Within the field architectural history and restoration hold a special attraction for gays.

Preservation pioneers in many cities and small towns around the United States were inspired by the work at Williamsburg. It seems that the more picturesque a place was, historically and aesthetically, the more attractive it was to gay men and consequently the more likely it was to sprout early preservation initiatives. The French Quarter in New Orleans was one such place. The first Vieux Carré Commission was formed there in 1924, two years before the start of the Williamsburg restoration. In 1931 Charleston, South Carolina, became the first city in the nation to adopt a historic-district zoning ordinance; in 1944 it became the first to publish an inventory of its historic buildings. Whatever his own nature may have been, architect Albert
Simons exudes a strikingly gay ethos in his foreword to that inventory volume, *This Is Charleston*: “No Charlestonian can be expected to speak or write about his city objectively, for it is so much a part of the background of his mind and emotions that detachment is never possible. The lovely and the shabby are all woven into the same warp and woof of the familiar scene. The stucco façade of some old house, its chalky colors weather faded, its surface mapped with earthquake patches and crumbling at the windows, through a sort of empathy assumes a character akin to an aged face looming out of one of Rembrandt’s later portraits, infinitely world-weary yet infinitely enduring and wise in human experience.”

Charleston benefited from being picturesque and, it would seem, from having a large naval presence. Gay naval officers may also have figured prominently in efforts to restore the old section of Annapolis. Despite the city’s abundant architectural treasures, early preservation in Richmond, Virginia, did not fare as well—perhaps because there weren’t enough dedicated women to make up for the lack of a critical mass of house-hugging gay men. The gays may have been drawn away to nearby Williamsburg or to the greener pastures of the Washington, D.C., area. The rehabilitation of Georgetown, once a slum, began early in the second decade of the twentieth century, and Alexandria was reborn in the rarefied orbit of Mount Vernon.

New England offers still another narrative. Through the 1920s and 1930s, descendants of old New England families drifted out of Boston’s Back Bay. Property values fell, and the district attracted a new mix of residents, including antique dealers and artists. Conservative Brahmins winced as the area’s bohemian flavor blossomed. “Beacon Hill is not and never can be temperamental,” one tradition-upholding resident warned in 1923, “and those seeking to find or create there a second Greenwich Village will meet with obstacles in the shape of an old residence aristocracy whose ancestors have had their entries and exits through those charming old doorways for generations.”

In the 1930s and 1940s, “temperamental” gentlemen propelled the preservation of two charmingly defunct mining towns in Colorado. Central City and Georgetown were close enough to Denver to attract tourists and new residents from the city and to enable gay men with Denver connections to be involved in their restoration. Central City’s preservation was sparked by a visit by the director of the New Orleans Little Theater, a group that had been active in French Quarter preservation since the early 1920s. Seeing the derelict Central City Opera House, the New Orleans director was impressed with the old theater and recommended its rehabilitation. Some of those who attended musical and theatrical performances at the restored opera house ended up buying houses in the town and restoring them. The rejuvenation
of Georgetown, Colorado, was prompted by a group of men who acquired several buildings in the business district and restored them as restaurants and shops, gave tours of the town, brought in artists, showed movies, and promoted the restoration of the town’s fine Victorian houses.

In the 1950s the activities of the recently founded National Trust for Historic Preservation began to encroach on the National Park Service’s preservation turf. In the queer-baiting spirit of that era, one Park Service administrator reacted to this incursion by attacking the rivals as sexual deviants: he circulated a memo that referred to the National Trust’s directors as a bunch of “tea-sipping eunuchs.” Perhaps he was truly unaware that the Historic Sites and Buildings branch of his own agency was also well staffed with so-called perverts, many of them wearing the de rigueur camouflage of marriage.

During the 1950s and 1960s, gays were well represented in local “hysterical societies” that were undertaking the new or renewed rehabilitation of urban neighborhoods, places like College Hill in Providence, SoHo in New York City, Beacon Hill in Boston, the Vieux Carré of New Orleans, the Battery District of Charleston, the old section of Savannah, and the Pacific Heights district of San Francisco. Gays were pioneering revitalizers in Philadelphia’s Society Hill and South Street neighborhoods. “I moved there in 1967, when South Street was not a place you wanted to be,” said one gay man. Asked why gays were drawn to rehabilitating these neighborhoods, another Philadelphia gay man said, “Because gays like things nicer, just have better taste. It happens everywhere. Gay boys move in, there goes the neighborhood, there goes the real-estate values.” A gay man who moved into an apartment in central Philadelphia in the 1950s found that most landlords liked to rent to gays: “And the reasons of course were because they were clean and they would fix the place up . . . and they would be great neighbors,” he said. Moving into a new place, he and his friends were known to say, “This apartment’s going to be great. I’m really going to fag it up.”

Other than a few savvy landlords, most did not see gay men as a positive part of the urban mix. In her 1961 book, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs blamed gays and misguided city planners for turning one of Philadelphia’s historic squares into a “pervert park.” “Some things have changed in the past forty years,” observes gay writer Herbert Muschamp. “A pervert park! How quaint! Today, it almost goes without saying that the survival of cities like Philadelphia had already come to depend on the denizens of that pervert park, and many other pervert parks, on the contributions of people who, forty years ago, were meant to see themselves as socially undesirable. Us perverts served the city and saved the city. We were nurtured by it, and we gave something back.”
The gay contribution to preservation has been largely obscured, if not obliterated from the record. Many historic sites and house museums carry on the tradition of concealing and denying the gayness of the men who have had so much to do with the preservation of those places—promulgating what a gay preservationist with the National Trust calls the “bachelor uncle” description of those men. As in the religious arena, with its extraordinary gay involvement, gays themselves have generally been inclined to cover their own tracks. Consider, for example, preservation dynamo William Sumner Appleton, founder in 1910 of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Most of his personal papers were destroyed following his death. In light of Appleton’s voluminous scrapbook-making penchant from childhood and his visionary archive building as an adult, it’s hard to imagine such destruction being committed for any reason other than “straightening” his biographical record. Perhaps Appleton himself decided that his professional accomplishments should be the sole basis upon which his contributions are judged. And so, in his case as in many others, one must read between the lines.

The Antiquers presents biographical sketches of pioneering American antiquarians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of the nearly forty individuals profiled in the book, almost all were male, many of them fastidious dressers and artistic homemakers who never married, some sharing homes with their mothers for as long as their mothers lived. Published in 1980, the book goes no further in its exploration of these antiquarians’ natures than to describe them as colorful, eccentric, “some of them slightly ‘shady,’ all of them unusual.” In their love and pursuit of old-fashioned things, many of them were no doubt members of what gay historian John Loughery calls “a silent brotherhood . . . a hidden society of kindred spirits . . . made up of men who were always able to recognize one another.” Traces of this brotherhood are evident in the neat inscription on the front flyleaf of a copy of The Charm of the Antique, a chatty collector’s guide: “Harold, from Dick and Jack, 1924.” Several decades later, a copy of The Book of Antiques was similarly inscribed: “To my friend Oscar.—Judd.”

This silent brotherhood crowds the pages of Collecting: An Unruly Passion. Although nearly all the cases in the book are males, many quite likely gay, the author ignores the connection except in the obliquely winking way. As a very young boy one man showed a strong inclination toward certain foods, flowers, and colors. Another collected dolls and statuettes of saints as a child and, at the launch of his short-lived marriage, insisted on spending his honeymoon in antique shops. Rare books and manuscripts rather than attractive young ladies enchanted one twentieth-century collector, just as they captivated a monkish but flamboyant manuscript copyist and collector in the early fifteenth century.
Until recently being gay was considered to be of such devastating relevance to one’s essential fitness as a human being that it was absolutely not talked about. Unfortunately, some have now fled to the other extreme, declaring it utterly irrelevant: being gay has nothing to do with one’s ability to do anything, they argue, so it should not even be acknowledged. This view informs a letter from a highly accomplished preservationist of national reputation, a gay man in his sixties, in response to an invitation to be interviewed for this book. “My generation always put a high premium on the separation of one’s professional life from one’s private concerns, and I have worked hard at this all my life. This posture appears to be the antithesis of current attitudes, which seem to dictate just the opposite. Although a gregarious individual by nature, I am in the final analysis a person who has always highly valued my personal privacy. It follows therefore that I am less than comfortable with your project, as worthy as it may be, and must respectfully decline your invitation. I have labored fervently in the vineyard of my professional career for whatever I have achieved. That professionalism and its results should be the sole basis upon which history judges my contribution to society.”

Another prominent gay preservationist of about the same age and opinion informed me through a third party of his desire to be left out of this book. Numerous preservationists from all parts of the United States did not respond to my inquiries. Several others made an initial reply, then became unavailable. I respect the desire of these men to maintain their privacy; I understand that their reserve may be informed by negative life experiences. But unfortunately their caution serves to perpetuate the idea that whatever they have contributed to the culture has been accomplished despite their gayness rather than because of it. I’m grateful that many men have lent their names and unabashed voices to undermining that pernicious view.