

Diagnosis: Homosexuality

St. Elizabeths Hospital and the federal assault on LGBT Americans

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The Mattachine Society of Washington, DC

Introduction

As “archive activists” in search of the evidentiary history of federal persecution of LGBT Americans, members of the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C. visited the National Building Museum exhibition: “Architecture of an Asylum, St. Elizabeths 1852-2017”. The exhibition, which ran through most of 2017, was described as an anodyne exploration of “the architecture and landscape architecture” of St. Elizabeths Hospital which covers an enormous 300 plus acre complex of 19th and 20th Century ruins in Anacostia. Opened in 1855 as the Government Hospital for the Insane, St. Elizabeths evolved over the years into a vast federal asylum housing almost 8,000 patients committed behind locked doors, living there in 1961.

The “Asylum” exhibition, in fact, was about more than architecture and landscape. It focused on the impact of the design and psychiatric philosophy as well as the treatments administered at St. Elizabeths. Exhibits told the story of how this federal institution dealt with racial segregation (a “Colored Wing” for African American patients) and the story of abuses at the “Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians” in South Dakota. The exhibition displayed photographs of patients undergoing electro-convulsive therapy and other bizarre treatments. To the astonishment of the Mattachine visitors, there was no mention of the queer insane nor photographs or text boards about homosexuals or transgender patients committed to St. Elizabeths for treatment and “cures” of their homosexuality. The erasure was so complete, the question was posed to the Curator, “what happened to the gay and lesbian experience at St. Elizabeths?” The visitors were referred to a slice of an etiological diagram, an early 20th Century drawing of circles depicting the etiology, or cause, of an alcoholic woman’s mental illness. Identified as “Alcoholic Woman #2”, there were two slight mentions of her problem: “Repressed Homosexuality” and “Homosexual Tendencies and Phantasies”. That was it: “Alcoholic Woman #2”.¹

Inspired by the evident erasure of homosexuals or homosexuality at the National Building Museum exhibit, the Mattachine Society began an investigation that took us from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. to the Dr. Benjamin Karpman Archive at the Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies

¹ “Patient Diagnosis, St. Elizabeths”, Slide, mid-20th century, National Museum of Health and Medicine, from “Asylum”, National Building Museum

at the University of Minnesota and the artifact storage facility at the U.S. Army Forest Glen base in Silver Spring, Maryland.

An Intellectual “Headwaters” for a medical assault

Reviewing thousands of pages of documents and photographs, we were confronted with stark evidence that St. Elizabeths Hospital not only was a center for confinement and barbaric treatment of homosexuals, but evolved into a “headwaters” of federal policy formation dealing with homosexuals over decades. At St. Elizabeths prominent psychiatrists like Dr. Benjamin Karpman and administrators like Superintendent Winfred Overholser shaped major policies such as the military ban beginning in the 1940s and national conversations about the “problem” of homosexuality in American life. In addition, at St. Elizabeths, federal government investigators from the U.S. Civil Service Commission were granted access to homosexual patients undergoing treatment for investigatory interviews to “name names” of other homosexuals working in the federal government.

St. Elizabeths, as an institution, played an independent role alongside the FBI and the U.S. Civil Service Commission in the federal assault on LGBT Americans for decades. One can almost think of St. Elizabeths Hospital as a shadowy think tank of psychiatry and policy behind much of the bad science, barbaric treatments, “cures” and investigations of an era.

According to its founder, Dorothea Dix, St. Elizabeths founding mission in the mid-Nineteenth Century was to provide “the most humane care and enlightened curative treatment of the insane of the Army and Navy of the United States and the District of Columbia”.²

“By 1946 however, neither the Army nor the Navy sent its members to St. Elizabeths. The number of civilian patients nonetheless continued to increase, and during its peak in 1961, St. Elizabeths held 7,993 resident patients.³ Most troubling,” according to a Mattachine Society white paper report prepared by the law firm McDermott Will & Emery, “under DC’s “sexual psychopath” law, LGBT individuals could be indefinitely committed to St. Elizabeths “simply for publicly expressing an interest in others of the same sex.”⁴ While the law itself painted homosexuals as dangerous, mentally ill, and predisposed to commit crimes, their institutionalization at St. Elizabeths reinforced the government’s view that homosexuality was an illness that required a psychological cure. “

² Genny Beemyn, “A Queer Capital: A History of Gay Life in Washington, D.C. 135 N.19 (2014)

³ “Architecture of an Asylum, St. Elizabeths 1852-2017, National Building Museum exhibition text (2017)

⁴ “The Pernicious Myth of Conversion Therapy: How Love in Action Perpetrated a Fraud on America”, McDermott Will & Emery, page 6 (2018) at stopconversiontherapy.org

“Sexual Psychopaths” and St. Elizabeths

The DC Sexual Psychopath Act of 1948 was essentially an anti-gay law that provided “the Court shall appoint two qualified psychiatrists to make a personal examination of the patient and thereafter to file written reports, including conclusions as to whether the patient is a sexual psychopath”. The law was developed by The Senate Committee on The District of Columbia.⁵ The Act legitimized and codified gay conversion therapy. What makes the DC Sexual Psychopath Act unique among many other such laws across the country is the fact that it was tied directly to St. Elizabeths, a federal institution. According to the Act, “If the patient is adjudged a sexual psychopath, he must be committed to St. Elizabeths Hospital and confined until released in accordance with the act. He is released when the Superintendent of the Hospital finds that the has sufficiently recovered so as not to be dangerous.”⁶ According to research conducted by the Mattachine Society of Washington, the Act decimated the District’s gay community. In the first year of the law’s passage, there were 96 indictments, nearly half for sodomy, with three sent to St. Elizabeths. Further, the Act provided police the tools to raid, assault, and entrap the District’s gay community in conjunction with the Sexual Perversion Elimination Program.⁷

At the Karpman Papers archive at the University of Minnesota, we reviewed the coded/anonymous case of one homosexual arrested in a movie theatre masturbating, sentenced to time at St. Elizabeths where the diagnosis was “Homosexuality”, “Narcissism”.⁸

The Superintendent

Once committed to St. Elizabeths gay and lesbian “patients” were placed in an institution under the control of Superintendent Dr. Winfred Overholser who testified in favor of the DC Sexual Psychopath Act: “Some of these perverts are potentially dangerous. The rest are terrible nuisances. In either event, they should be dealt with and not allowed to remain at large.”⁹ With this testimony, Dr. Overholser played a dual role demonstrating how St. Elizabeths generated the demand for its services, provided those services and developed the policies themselves. Professional psychiatry was generating demand for its own services! Here begins the role of St. Elizabeths as a hybrid “think tank” (with coercive power)

⁵ “D.C. Sexual Psychopath Act of 1948”, Report for the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C. by Ryan Harman, George Washington University Law School (2017)

⁶ The Washington, D.C. Sexual Psychopath Act of 1948, Sec. 206, “Hearing; Commitment to Saint Elizabeths Hospital

⁷ Beemyn, id

⁸ Karpman Archive, Tretter Collection, University of Minnesota

⁹ Papers of Dr. Wilfred Overholser, National Archives, Record Group 418: Records of St. Elizabeths Hospital

to control or eliminate the expanding gay and lesbian presence in post-War Washington, D.C.

Ice Pick Lobotomies

“St. Elizabeths was also the scene of barbaric and physically invasive surgical procedures aimed at “curing” gay individuals.¹⁰ Dr. Walter Freeman, father of the “ice pick lobotomy”, or the transorbital lobotomy, performed numerous lobotomies on LGBT patients and others in an effort to cure mental illness.¹¹ As part of the lobotomy procedure, “an instrument was inserted through the eye socket to detach the frontal lobe of the brain from the hypothalamus, believed to be the source of irrationality.”¹²

Insulin Shock Therapy and the U.S. Civil Service Commission

One of the most egregious examples of harmful medicine and treatments for schizophrenia, depression and homosexuality administered at St. Elizabeths was an ongoing course of coma-inducing insulin shock therapy sessions by injection. It was believed these comas would heal or provide relief to a depressed or bi-polar or schizophrenic homosexual. Upon regaining consciousness, the patient would be in a fully “relaxed” kind of “zombie state”¹³ and open to any and all suggestion including interrogation. This was the fate of one Thomas J. Tattersall, committed to St. Elizabeths in 1953 following his dismissal from the Department of Commerce for homosexuality under the Eisenhower Executive Order 10450. Tattersall had been found guilty of “sexual perversion” under the Eisenhower Order that would result in untold thousands of investigations.¹⁴

The Administration of St. Elizabeths Hospital actually provided government investigators access to Tattersall while he was undergoing insulin shock therapy. Newly discovered documents reveal how the U.S. Civil Service Commission, now the Office of Personnel Management, used Tattersall as an homosexual informant to identify homosexual suspects. In 1955, Tattersall signed an affidavit, “I Thomas Tattersall...make the following statement....During the course of an interview conducted by investigators from the Civil Service Commission...I was shown the

¹⁰ McDermott Will & Emery white paper, id.

¹¹ Tom Waidzunas, “The Straight Line: How the Fringe Science of Ex-gay Therapy Reoriented Sexuality”, 45 N. 39 (2015)

¹² Andrew Giambrone, “LGBTQ People Suffered Traumatic Treatments at St. Elizabeths Hospital for the Mentally Ill”, “Washington City Paper”, May 31, 2018

¹³ Giambrone, id.

¹⁴ See David Johnson, “The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government”, Chapter 7, N 23, U.S. Civil Service Commission Memorandum (2004)

picture of a man that I identified as being homosexual.”¹⁵ U.S. Civil Service Commission investigators routinely worked with informants such as Tattersall. CSC agents serially interrogated Tattersall at St. Elizabeths beginning in 1955 as an informant by “numerous government agencies and (executing) affidavits which result in the dismissal of government employees.” Even so, another Civil Service Commission document states that the government knew that “Tattersall is mentally deranged”¹⁶.

Federal policy formation

The U.S. Civil Service Commission investigators could never have gained access to St. Elizabeth patients without the approval of Superintendent Winfred Overholser who ran St. Elizabeths from 1937 to 1962. Overholser was “instrumental in arguing that homosexuals should be separated from the military and undergo clinical therapy and was the chief architect of policies that “lumped LGBTQ people into a cabal of sexual degenerates....during the period following World War II”, writes journalist Andrew Giambrone.¹⁷ Superintendent Overholser wrote about “a small group of people stuck in “the homosexual level” of psychological development who would “resort to violence to compel submission to their demands” and another group of “homosexuals who engage in their chosen sexual activity with others of like tastes.....Members of the former group should face punishment, while those of the latter should not, Overholser wrote.¹⁸

Dr. Winfred Overholser helped “create military guidelines for the psychiatric examination of draftees during World War II, advising officials on how best to prevent gay men from entering the service and how to deal with those who did. ...During the 1940s and 1950s, he frequently authored the sections on forensic, administrative and military psychiatry in the “American Journal of Psychiatry’s annual Review of Psychiatric Progress.”¹⁹ Dr. Overholser had served as President of the American Psychiatric Association; and also Chairman of the Committee on Neuropsychiatry of Congress’ National Research Council. Overholser and his colleagues recommended replacing military prosecution with psychiatric evaluation and either a dishonorable discharge or for “ineptitude”. . Even so, “Overholser and his colleagues remained deeply complicit in the reinscription of negative social attitudes toward same-sex sexual conduct.”²⁰

¹⁵ Memorandum from M.S. Mileski to W.H.L. Sullivan, June 24, 1955 re Robert J. Richards, Plaintiff v. Milton S. Mileski et al., Defendants (1983) U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia; Papers of Lou Chibbaro, Special Collections, George Washington University

¹⁶ Richards v Mileski id.

¹⁷ Giambrone, supra id.

¹⁸ Giambrone, id.

¹⁹ Matthew J. Gambino, “Mental Health and Ideals of Citizenship: Patient Care at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C. 1903-1962, Doctoral Thesis (2010)

²⁰ Gambino Doctoral Thesis id.

“Some of these perverts are potentially dangerous. The rest are terrible nuisances. In either event, they should be dealt with and not allowed to remain at large”, pronounced Winfred ²¹Overholser. We can only wonder how this quotation could not have found its way into the National Building Museum exhibition on the “Asylum”.

The Chief Psychiatrist and America’s homosexual “problem”

An important breakthrough in understanding the power of St. Elizabeths to shape and enforce policies toward homosexuals, is the remarkable discovery and opening of the papers of Dr. Benjamin Karpman, Senior Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist at St. Elizabeths who worked there from 1922-1961. Last year, the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota opened Karpman’s papers and records for our review. Karpman wrote, “I would say that 90% of the cases at St. Elizabeths have many problems centered on some sexual difficulty”. Karpman played a major role in pathologizing homosexuality as both an individual illness and a broader social issue.

Benjamin Karpman “believed that homosexuality represented a fixation or distortion of psychosexual development at an immature stage”²². In his book, “The Sexual Offender and His Offenses (1954) Karpman “equivocated on the social implications of homosexuality, suggesting at one point that those who willfully transgressed sexual conventions were more likely to violate other social rules.” ²³

“In a memorandum addressing the ‘ultimate scientific opinion with respect to homosexuality as a social problem,” Dr. Karpman begins with the premise that homosexuality poses an immediate danger to society, likening it to a contagious disease.²⁴ For Karpman, homosexuality “involves the danger of ‘corrupting other individuals and the danger of interfering with their normal sexual development.”

Dr. Karpman takes an aggressively expansive view of his role as St. Elizabeths Chief Psychiatrist, propounding theories on how to deal with the social “problem” of homosexuality. Here again we see St. Elizabeths morphing from a hospital/asylum to a fully independent “headwaters” of federal policy discussion and formation.

Dr. Karpman acknowledges that **“chasing all of the homosexuals out of one city (even assuming such a thing were possible) would not solve the problem of homosexuality, any more than chasing all of the thieves out of one city would solve the problem of dishonesty....If he cannot be eradicated, what is to be**

²¹ Dr. Benjamin Karpman papers, Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies, University of Minnesota

²² Gambino Doctoral Thesis id.

²³ Gambino Doctoral Thesis id.

²⁴ “Washington City Paper”, Giambrone id.

done with him? Psychiatry should take time out from discussing homosexuality as an individual ‘disease’ and offer a constructive plan for dealing with it as a social problem”²⁵

Karpman wrote an article entitled “The Normal Pervert” where he likened homosexuality to a “psychological handicap” like a physical handicap. ²⁶

Even gay civil rights pioneer Dr. Franklin E. Kameny went to Dr. Karpman in 1958 for a letter to Kameny’s Commanding Officer stating that Kameny was not homosexual and that “his conduct will remain, as it has been, inoffensive to fellow citizens, to his co-workers and superiors and to the Government”. ²⁷ Karpman’s letter did not do its intended job. Kameny was fired and went on to found the original Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C.---without Dr. Karpman’s help!

St. Elizabeths psychiatrists like Doctors Karpman and Overholser “shared a cautious middle path in debates on homosexuality, maintaining that same-sex desires signified deep psychological maladjustment even as they protested policies criminalizing consensual sexual contact between adults”. ²⁸ The consensus view at St. Elizabeths: homosexuality represents a deep psychological maladjustment and mental illness. This assessment was enough to undergird the coming decades of federal discrimination and untold damage to LGBT Americans.

The Magic Lantern

The most disturbing discovery was at the U.S. Army’s Forest Glen artifact storage facility and archive adjacent to the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Silver Spring. It took us thirty days to complete the process of gaining access to the facility. Here we were excited to find—and shocked---by some 70 vintage glass “magic lantern” slides of the homosexual and transgender patients at St. Elizabeths. They had been saved and transferred to this Army archive.²⁹ Most of the slides were produced between 1900 and 1940. They are teaching slides of etiological diagrams and haunting, nameless photos, some nearly a century old, of pathological (sick by definition) and criminal homosexuals and transgender men and women. Sodomy being a felony, these people were all criminal by definition, in addition to whatever landed them at St. Elizabeths. One magic lantern slide is entitled “Acute Homosexual Panic”. “Homosexual panic” research was conducted at St. Elizabeths by psychiatrist Edward J. Kempf. A well known criminal defense, “panic due to the pressure of uncontrollable perverse sexual cravings”, was the subject of Kempf’s research at St.

²⁵ Benjamin Karpman, Notes and Essays, Karpman Papers, University of Minnesota

²⁶ Karpman, id.

²⁷ Kameny Papers, Library of Congress, Karpman to Commanding Officer, Army Map Service, 1958

²⁸ Gambino Doctoral Thesis, id.

²⁹ Otis Historical Archives, National Museum of Health and Medicine in Silver Spring, Maryland

Elizabets. There is a magic lantern slide of celebrity transgender Valerie Arkell-Smith. Another slide is a mandella-like diagram of “Homosexuality/Masturbation/Incest”, a triad of pathology taught at St. Elizabeths. There is a “Female Homosexuality” slide that features “guilt”. Most of the drawings reflect an Americanized, disturbing set of theories of homosexuality linked to criminality initially published by the Austro-German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing on sexual pathology.³⁰ The St. Elizabeths psychiatrists “laid the groundwork for the postwar hysteria they sought to contain, treating homosexuality as diagnostically equivalent to a variety of sexual perversions and crimes”.³¹ One Magic Lantern image “is plain eerie”.³² Entitled “Homosexuality, Many Crimes of sexual motivation”, it is a black and white photograph of a white man with a high white collar whose eyes have been redacted.

As revealed in most all of the slides, American psychiatrists “were not only prescribing sex normative prescriptions for the world around them, but were also devoutly religious. (The powerful Menninger brothers are a case in point.) They claimed “scientific objectivity”, but they were clearly being influenced by their strong belief in “morality”.³³

“Colored Wing” to the “Hiawatha Asylum” and an LGBT erasure

With confidence in what we now know about the commitment, treatment, interrogation and “cure” of homosexuals at St. Elizabeths, as well as the institution’s prominent role in federal policy formation confronting the homosexuality “problem”, we turn to the elephant in the room. How could there be no mention of homosexuals at St. Elizabeths Hospital in the National Building Museum’s “Asylum” show? The curator of the exhibition explained, “We tried to do a lot, but if museums can do anything, they should encourage people to explore more on their own”.³⁴

As archive activists, we gladly accept the curator’s challenge. We will continue to ask questions about St. Elizabeths and file document requests under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) working with our team of fifteen volunteer lawyers at the international law firm McDermott Will & Emery. If not explicitly rewriting history, has LGBT history itself been erased by the federal government at St. Elizabeths? Today, erasure or deletion of history by the federal government is a real concern. We do know that “sexual psychopaths” under the old DC law, written by the District’s Congressional overlords, were housed in a wing of their own. Would that not constitute a “design” issue, the same as the “Colored Wing” at St. Elizabeths or the relocation of the “Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians”? Like the folks in the

³⁰ Krafft-Ebbing, “Psychopathia Sexualis”, 1892

³¹ Gambino Doctoral Thesis, id.

³² “Washington City Paper”, Giambone, id.

³³ Chris Babits, Department of History University of Texas at Austin, email to the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C., January, 2018

³⁴ “Washington City Paper”, Giambone, id.

Colored Wing and the Insane Indians from South Dakota, LGBT Americans endured being committed to St. Elizabeths for being who they were as a patient identity group. One can read it in the DC Sexual Psychopath Act, Section 206.

The newly opened Karpman Archive at the University of Minnesota reveals in Dr. Karpman's own words that St. Elizabeths actually began federal conversion therapy. Karpman wrote: "I will not overstep my modesty when I say there are a number of cases on record who are cured and have stayed cured since they have been discharged from St. Elizabeths".³⁵

Many questions remain unanswered, and some aspects of this history will never be recovered among the surviving records scattered across Washington and archives in other states. Many of the stories will never be told in order to rightfully protect the privacy of patients and their families. Our historical research project was conducted to make a simple point: as painful as it is to confront this erasure, archive activism reveals how LGBT Americans living in Washington, D.C. were medically treated, traumatized and stigmatized by our unique hometown federal asylum.

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For more about The Mattachine Society of Washington, DC,
www.mattachinesocietywashingtondc.org and www.stopconversiontherapy.org

For the Mattachine Society of Washington, DC white paper report prepared by our pro bono legal counsel McDermott Will & Emery, "The Pernicious Myth of Conversion Therapy", stopconversiontherapy.org

³⁵ Dr. Benjamin Karpman, "The Sexual Neurotic and Psychopathic Sexual Problems", pp 7, Tretter Collection.