

Schoolgirl Smashes, David-and-Jonathan Relationships, and Champagne Friendships: Mining the Archive for LGBT History

By Cornelia S. King and Don James McLaughlin

To paraphrase the late gay, activist Harry Hay (1912–2002), history knows more about gay people than it knows. The practice of defining people in terms of their sexual relationships, as the words “lesbian,” “gay,” and “bisexual” do, is a relatively recent phenomenon, accompanying a shift in cultural perceptions of same-sex relationships that began in the latter part of the 19th century and became especially pervasive in the 20th. When mining the archive for LGBT history, one of the key strategies is recognizing the various words and phrases that had coded meaning before the 20th century. In her novel *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870), Louisa May Alcott describes her fictional characters Rebecca Jeffrey and Lizzie Small as living together and taking care of each other “in true Damon and Pythias style,” an allusion to a special friendship in classical antiquity. Close same-sex relationships could be called “David-and-Jonathan relationships,” referencing a special friendship in the Bible. Schoolgirls could have “smashes” on each other, and adult women could be in “Boston marriages.” The poet Walt Whitman used the phrenological term “adhesiveness” (meaning the love of siblings) to mean the love of “comrades” in *Leaves of Grass*. Other terms such as “tom-boy,” “dandy,” and “fop” could characterize individuals as not conforming to traditional gender roles. It is worth noting that the individuals who might be called lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender today grew up in heteronormative environments, with their own heteronormative assumptions. In the time before the LGBT lexicon, young men and women often formed romantic friendships with members of

the same sex while also maintaining the expectation that they would eventually marry a member of the opposite sex, and often did. Especially in the 19th century, close same-sex relationships were a norm, and such relationships were hallmarks of good character. In 2014, the Library Company of Philadelphia showcased an abundance of American sources that shed light on same-sex relationships and deviations from gender norms in the exhibition *That's So Gay: Outing Early America*. The authors, who collaborated on *That's So Gay*, have now mined the historical record to show the potential for the study of Pennsylvania LGBT history.

Consider, for example, what archival sources reveal about the highly successful 19th-century American actress Charlotte Cushman (1816–76), who performed in many roles, male and female, at a time when actresses often appeared on stage in male (or “breeches”) parts. In particular, she played the part of Shakespeare’s Romeo as early as 1837 in Albany, New York, and reprised the role on numerous occasions, both in the United States and abroad. Cushman took great pains to promote her career in the legitimate theater at a time when burlesque performers often used cross-dressing to appear more risqué. In October 1844, to advance her career, Cushman travelled to England, where critics praised her performance as Romeo opposite her sister Susan as Juliet. In October 1844, when Cushman left Philadelphia, she had been managing the Walnut Street Theatre as well as performing in both Philadelphia and New York. She was also in an intimate relationship with Rosalie Sully (1818–47), the daughter of the Philadelphia painter Thomas Sully.

In the months before her departure for England, Cushman recorded details about her romantic friendship with Sully in her diary, now at the Library of Congress. Charlotte gave Rosalie a ring in June, and early the following month she wrote that they had “married.” During the voyage, she wrote repeatedly about the pain of their being separated. A portrait miniature that

Rosalie Sully painted on ivory for Cushman in 1844 accompanied her to England. At the time, giving a portrait miniature was a romantic gesture. The recipient presumably would examine it in private to maintain a connection with the donor when the two were apart. In this case, Sully presented Cushman not with a portrait of herself but with a portrait of Cushman. The romantic gesture is hidden: set behind glass on the reverse are intertwined locks of the two women's hair. Sadly, Cushman and Sully were never reunited, in part because Rosalie Sully died before Cushman returned to the United States in 1849.

In the historical record, references to celebrities such as Charlotte Cushman can be located easily. Material about lesser-known individuals can be harder to locate but remarkably rich in detail. The circumstances revealed in two 18th-century Philadelphians' diaries, who referred to each other by nicknames, suggest an especially intimate relationship. John Fishbourne Mifflin (1759–1813) chose the nickname Leander, after a Greek youth who loses his life while pursuing his beloved. In his diary, Mifflin repeatedly wrote about missing his friend James Gibson (1769–1856), while the younger man was away at college. Gibson used the nickname Lorenzo, possibly a reference to the pleasure-loving character in Edward Young's poem *Night Thoughts*. In the Leander and Lorenzo diaries, the modern reader finds unmistakable evidence that the two men were emotionally involved with each other in ways that seem sentimental, even romantic. There are suggestions of physical intimacy in another source; Gibson's roommate at Princeton (then known as the College of New Jersey) noted that when Mifflin came to visit, Gibson went "to the Tavern to sleep with Mr. Mifflin."

Throughout the 19th century, elite young men typically studied in sex-segregated environments and participated in a multitude of sex-segregated leisure activities. So did some young women; in 1882, Bryn Mawr College's founders explicitly sought to create an institution

of higher learning for women that would provide opportunities equal to those at elite men's colleges. M. Carey Thomas (1857–1935), the second president of Bryn Mawr, particularly opposed the institution of marriage because it limited women's freedom. Thomas, who maintained relationships with female partners, was nothing if not a militant feminist who fashioned Bryn Mawr as a bastion of intellectualism that postulated the radical notion of women living together.

Amateur theatricals, especially on college campuses, often relied on cross-dressing for humor. In fact, cross-dressing was a key source of humor for the “Wiggers” of the University of Pennsylvania’s Mask and Wig Club, an all-male performance group founded by a student named Clayton Fotterall McMichael in 1889. The club staged performances annually and eventually bought a clubhouse in 1894 that still stands on Quince Street in the “Gayborhood” of Center City Philadelphia. By the final decades of the 19th century, Philadelphia’s Mummers Parade provided an opportunity for working-class white men to cross a number of social boundaries. Mummers could dress as women, Native Americans, African Americans, animals, devils, or any number of other disguises they fancied, each year on January 1. An 1888 article in *Harper’s Weekly* characterized the event as a “joyous explosion” and the release of a “safety-valve.” In its play with gender and racial categories the parade negotiated the fine line between exposing the artifice of social categories and allowing white men to perform their social dominance over marginalized groups. The restriction of cross-dressing to New Year’s Day alone ensured that social hierarchies remained in place. Students in college theatricals could enjoy the transgressive act of impersonating individuals of the opposite sex for an evening, and adults could be mummers for a day. Yet these figures differed significantly from other individuals who transitioned for extended periods, some for the majority of their lives.

Many who formed intimate same-sex relationships relocated to cities. Charlotte Cushman eventually settled in the culturally vibrant expatriate community in Rome, where she lived in an all-female household. Similarly, author Willa Cather left Nebraska soon after she graduated from college. In 1896, she moved to Pittsburgh to work as editor of the new magazine *Home Monthly*; ten years later, she moved to New York City to work for *McClure's Magazine*. Cather went on to live in New York with Nebraska native Edith Lewis for nearly forty years. Perhaps drawing on her own experiences, Cather employed the theme of escaping small communities with narrow views in many of her works. Her characters, who are often male, ultimately suffer because of their enduring emotional ties to the communities from which they had sought freedom.

During her Pittsburgh years, the woman in Cather's life was the young socialite Isabelle McClung, whom she met in 1899. By 1901, McClung, four years Cather's junior, had invited Cather to move into the McClung family home. They became intimately attached and traveled extensively, twice to the American West and once to Europe. According to biographer Hermione Lee, McClung was Cather's most important relationship. The two remained close until McClung (then Mrs. Jan Hambourg) died in 1938.

Of the fiction Cather wrote while in Pittsburgh, her story "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament," has become her best known. A Pittsburgh high school student, Paul is part dandy, part bad boy. Suspended from school due to "various misdemeanors," he nevertheless maintains a sophisticated appearance. Noteworthy flourishes include "an opal pin in his neatly knotted black four-in-hand, and a red carnation in his buttonhole." In the evenings, he ushers at concerts at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall. "It was at the theatre and at Carnegie Hall that Paul really lived," the narrator explains. However, his restlessness swells, his reputation worsens, and at last he makes a break for New York, the quintessential city of escape. Immediately on his arrival,

Paul goes shopping, buying a “frock-coat,” a “new street shoe,” “silk underwear,” and a “new scarf pin” from Tiffany’s. Soon thereafter, he falls in with “a wild San Francisco boy, a freshman at Yale,” who shows him “the night side of the town.” An evening spent in “the confiding warmth of a champagne friendship” leaves Paul feeling “thirsty and dizzy” the next morning. Reading the Pittsburgh papers, he learns that his disappearance is being “exploited with a wealth of detail.” In a tragic ending, Paul decides he has lived his dream to the extent he can and leaps in front of a train to his death.

McClure’s published “Paul’s Case” in 1905, in the wake of sensational media attention on sexually transgressive behavior. Most famously, Oscar Wilde had been convicted of “gross indecency” and sentenced to two years’ hard labor in 1895. Like Wilde, the fictional Paul was marginalized by his community in part because of his feminine behavior and interests. Yet “Paul’s Case” is also interesting because of its inverse relationship to Cather’s own biography. Whereas Paul loses himself too soon, Cather went on to flourish in New York, while also keeping her most intimate friendship in Pittsburgh intact long after her departure.

Willa Cather’s obituary in the April 25, 1947, *New York Times* stated that she was survived by four siblings. Her New York partner Edith Lewis (1882–1972), with whom Cather lived for nearly four decades, was not mentioned. As if to fill the void, the obituary ends with the words “For many years her publishers have been Alfred A. Knopf.” Similarly, Leon Edel’s biographical entry on Cather in *Notable American Women* is mute on the subject of her relationships with women, despite the fact that Lewis was Cather’s literary executor. These choices may easily have been the choices that Cather would have wanted, but they effectively draw a curtain over her personal life and thwart ready access to basic data that usually appears in

obituaries and biographical dictionaries. In the study of LGBT history, such silences are important evidence.

One of the most consistently cited meetings in 19th-century narratives of homosexuality occurred just east of Philadelphia, across the Delaware River in Camden, New Jersey. There, in 1882, Oscar Wilde managed to steal time during his lecture tour on aestheticism for two visits with his hero Walt Whitman. Notably, Whitman turned down the invitation to a dinner at the home of the Philadelphia publisher George W. Childs and his wife, claiming ill health. However, he agreed to meet Wilde at his home in Camden that same day. Their meeting on January 18, during which the two shared a bottle of Whitman's sister-in-law Louisa's homemade elderberry wine, has become legendary. Philadelphians learned of the meeting the next day. On January 19, an article appeared in the *Philadelphia Press* titled "Wilde and Whitman: The Aesthetic Singer Visits the Good Gray Poet," offering the latter's perspective on their encounter. In the interview, Whitman divulges a special fondness for the "great big, splendid boy." "Yes, Mr. Wilde came to see me early this afternoon," he explained, "and I took him up to my den, where we had a jolly good time." He went on, "I think him genuine, honest and manly." It is reported that on the ferry ride back to Philadelphia, "Wilde was very silent, and seemed deeply affected by the interview." Whatever transpired between them in private is left mostly to the imagination. At a later date, however, Wilde famously disclosed to the homosexual activist George Cecil Ives: "I have the kiss of Walt Whitman still on my lips."

In its brevity, the Wilde-Whitman meeting is not unlike the chance encounters made possible by archival collections. Much too short—their illuminations partial, constrained by language, and inopportunistly abridged—they nevertheless manage to foster invaluable

connections to an LGBT past. Many more affinities lie in waiting. Further work in the archive will reveal an ever-expanding sense of LGBT history, in Pennsylvania and beyond.

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