

# Pride in Prison:

Voices from the incarcerated Queer community



# Melding Pride and Juneteenth

## America's first 'drag queen' was a former slave

By Floyd Smith  
Death Row Contributor

His name was William Dorsey Swann, but to his friends, he was known as "The Queen."

Let's liberate some facts in recognition of both Pride Month and Juneteenth:

In the current "Don't say gay" climate, a journalism professor at the University of Southern California is changing the political landscape by teaching Black Queer people to be empowered by history.

When I first read Channing Gerard Joseph's work, "The First Drag Queen Was a Former Slave," I couldn't wait for one of my peers — a heterosexual prisoner who considers himself an expert on Black homosexuality — to tell me there were never any gay slaves in America.

One day, like clockwork, that so-called expert began to speak against Marsha P. Johnson.

"Marsha 'P' is where you start your history," he said, "because you can't name no other Black Queer person in history that got off on the police and kicked off resistance."

I paused and said, "William Dorsey Swann — 1887."

He didn't believe me.

"Come on now, you're making stuff up, brotha," he said. "How come I ain't never heard about this?"

At that moment, I realized that all of our great Black educators either didn't know — or *did* know, and chose to leave people like me out of Black history.

So I recited a report that appeared in *The Evening Star* in 1887, taken from the Library of

Congress:

"A 'drag party' raided this morning — John Smith, Jacob Bayard, William Dorsey, who by the way was the "Queen" ... were charged in the police court with being suspicious characters. Last night, attired in handsome silks and satins, each in complete feminine costume, they indulged in a "drag," in a quiet-looking house on the south side of "F" Street, near 12th. The "party" was raided by Lt. Amiss and the officers of the First Precinct."

That night, when a cop ripped the Queen's dress during the scuffle, the Queen said, "You is no gentleman."

Channing Gerard Joseph's research has given us historical facts we might never have known otherwise.

"William Dorsey Swann, born circa 1858, into the enslaved ownership of Ann Murray on her plantation in Hancock, Washington County, Md. On June 19, 1865, which marks the day the last enslaved Africans living in Texas were notified about the abolishment of slavery in America, Swann was about 7 years old. Swann endured racism, police surveillance, torture behind bars, and many other injustices."

Beginning in the 1880s, Swann not only became the first American activist to lead what we would today call a Queer resistance group. In that same decade, he became the first known person to dub himself a "queen of drag," or, in current parlance, a drag queen.

Wait, there's more: Swann had an "intimate" friend, Pierce Lafayette, who was also born enslaved in Georgia. Lafayette was owned by the vice



Wikipedia

president of the Confederate States of America, Alexander H. Stephens.

Channing Gerard Joseph writes, "It's interesting to note that Lafayette's prior relationship with Felix Hall, a male slave dubbed 'Lafayette's negro mistress,' is the earliest documented same-sexed romance between two enslaved men in the United States."

Additionally, two of Swann's younger brothers attended balls dressed in women's clothing. The balls featured folk songs and dances, including the wildly popular "cakewalk," so named because the best dancer was awarded a hoecake or other confection.

House parties, dance battles, underground safe spaces, police raids, incarceration, societal rejection, and being put on blast for simply enjoying the company of the culturally kindred — sound familiar?

Yes, we are still here.

# The history of 'homosexuality'



Wikipedia

Journalist Karl-Maria Kertbeny, who coined the term 'homosexuality,' grew up with a close friend who was gay.

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SAN QUENTIN NEWS

In an era of anti-trans laws, "Don't Say Gay Bills," and a growing number of physical, verbal and cyber-attacks, open displays of contempt for queer people all over the world have become a clear trend.

To avoid trying to explain how all of this lands on gay people who are incarcerated, I'd rather spend Pride 2022 and Juneteenth building the morale of our incarcerated soulmates with a few facts that are affirming and grounded in history. These are reminders of why we all must continue to say "gay."

"The command of self-respect and human dignity should never exist in the same company with a plea for empathy." — *Paralaxboi*

The word "homosexual" did not come from the science community, nor did it come from the medical sector of society. And no, the word did not come from American religious institutions. The word "homosexuality" was coined by a journalist named Karl-Maria Kertbeny (Feb. 28, 1824 - Jan. 23, 1882). As a young person working as a bookseller's apprentice in Berlin in 1868, this Austrian born Hungarian had a close friend who was gay. This young man killed himself after being blackmailed by an extortionist. Karl said it was this tragic episode that drove him into what he called an "instinctive drive to take issue with every injustice."

While most people focus on the word's prefix, homo — from the *Greek* meaning "same" — Karl-Maria Kertbeny also knew that in *Latin*, homo also means "human."

In 1868, Karl coined the word "homosexual," which he would later use in a couple of pamphlets where he argued that the Prussian sodomy law violated the "rights of man." He also advanced the classic liberal argument that consensual sex acts in private should not be subject to criminal law. Re-

calling his young friend, Karl argued that the Prussian law allowed blackmailers to extort money from homosexuals and often drove them to suicide. The word did not appear in the English language until 1892.

Karl-Maria Kertbeny did something else amazing. He first used the words "homosexual" and "heterosexual" in a private letter on May 8, 1868, advocating for a different system for classifying sexual types. He wanted to replace the pejorative terms "sodomite," and "pederast," from the German and French speaking world of his time. Just a thought to remind gay youth of today how powerful they are as they fight against the "Don't Say Gay Bills" in America: yeah kids, hatred runs deep in history.

When we juxtapose these dates with what was going on in America at the same time, we find that Karl-Maria Kertbeny created the word "homosexual" in Germany three years after the last enslaved Africans in the State of Texas learned about the end of slavery on June 19, 1865. American enslavers did not create the word or the act.

I'll close with yet another matter about Karl-Maria Kertbeny. Along with Heinrich Hessli and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, he was among the first writers to put before the public that many of the great heroes and heroes of history were gay.

*Crash version* — While some people focus on the gender part and others focus on the sex part of the word "homosexual," nobody focuses on the human aspect even though the word "homosexual" was created to confront bullies and to expose the injustices of blackmail and extortion, abuse, mistreatment, and discrimination caused by fellow humans who supremacize themselves over others, and that is a liberated fact.

—Floyd Smith

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