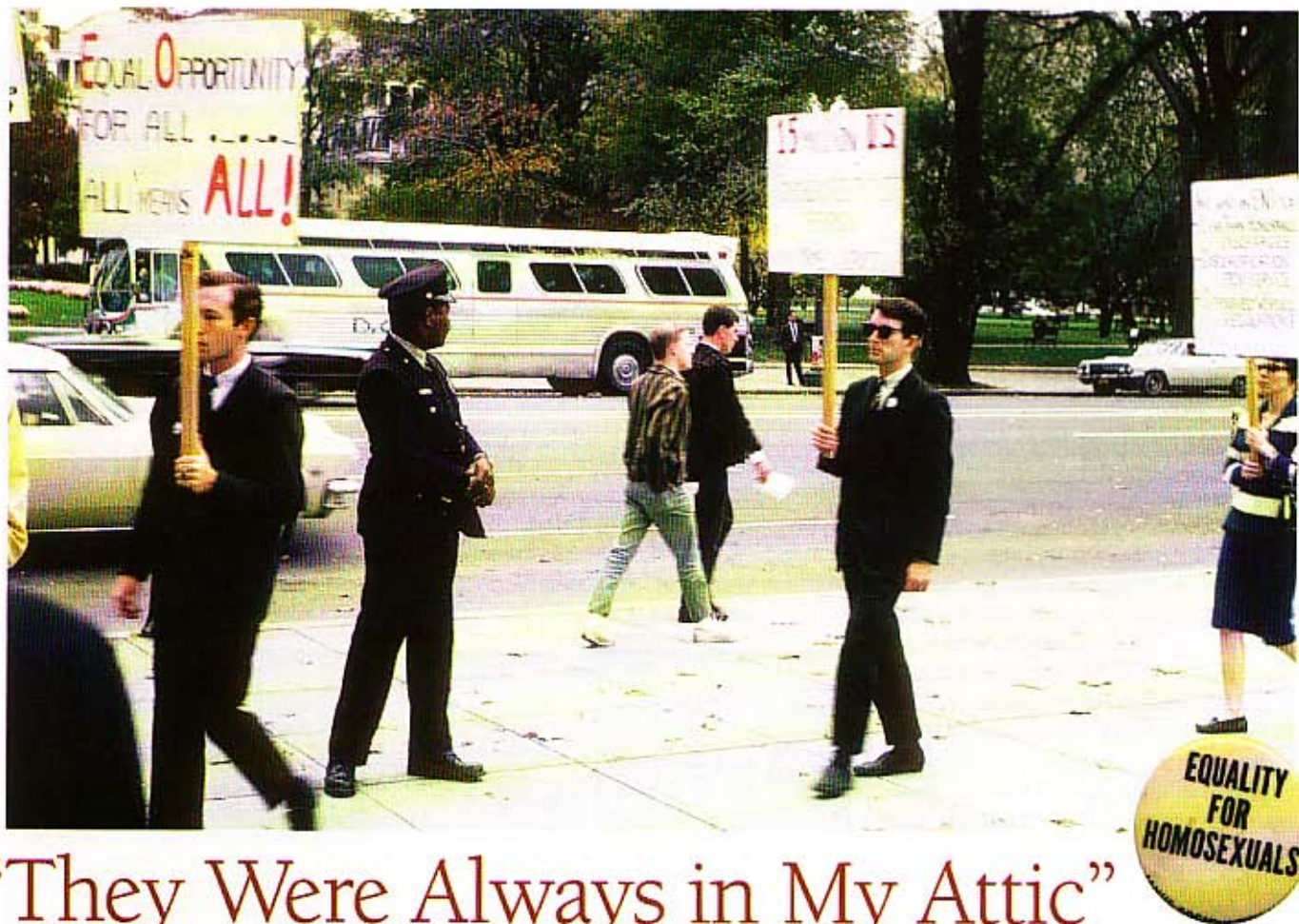


HISTORY NOW



“They Were Always in My Attic”

THE SMITHSONIAN GETS A REMARKABLE NEW ARCHIVE

DO YOU WANT CONSTITUTION AVENUE OR INDEPENDENCE?” asks 81-year-old Frank Kameny, from the passenger seat, as he guides the much younger man who’s driving to the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History from Kameny’s modest brick house in northwest Washington. Kameny was already living in the house in 1957 when he got fired from his job as an astronomer with the Army Map Service and began an 18-year campaign, finally successful, to end the U. S. Civil Service Commission’s ban on the employment of homosexuals.

A few weeks ago Kameny’s papers were transferred to the Library of Congress, but today is about artifacts, not documents. The Smithsonian will be acquiring a dozen protest signs that Kameny and others carried outside the White House on several occasions in 1965. “We decided to give no public notice,” he recalls, when they first showed up on April 17 of that year. “We simply appeared at the southwest corner of Lafayette

Park, and to our pleasant surprise a policeman ushered us across the street to a spot to picket. A little over a month later we did it again.” Everyone followed the shirt-and-tie, skirts-for-the-ladies dress code that Kameny imposed: “If we’re picketing to be employed, we have to look employable,” he’d argued.

The museum is closed these days for renovations, but Harry Rubenstein, chair of its Division of Politics and Reform, is around to accept the signs. From the underground parking lot Kameny himself carries in the only one of them that’s still attached to its wooden picket: FIRST CLASS CITIZENSHIP FOR HOMOSEXUALS. Rubenstein has explained that the signs can be more easily protected and accessed if they’re

put flat inside the sliding drawers of the division’s storage cases. He pulls out a poster, just so preserved, that once advertised the 1963 civil rights March on Washington. “Oh, I was at that,” says

Homosexuals picket the White House, October 1965; a 1963 button sets forth the movement’s goal.

Kameny, as if it were a rally from earlier this political season.

The astronomer often tried to locate arguments for his own cause in the writings of the Founding Fathers. THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS AN INALIENABLE RIGHT FOR HOMOSEXUALS ALSO, reads one of the signs being donated, and Rubenstein is able to show Kameny that it will now be stored not far from a metal cabinet currently containing the wooden writing box on which Jefferson handwrote the Declaration of Independence.

As Rubenstein carefully lifts each newly arrived sign from its pile, Kameny offers a running commentary. SEXUAL PREFERENCE IS IRRELEVANT TO EMPLOYMENT: "If that were done 10 years later, it would have said 'sexual orientation.' The nuances of semantics got going later." HOMOSEXUAL CITIZENS WANT TO SERVE THEIR COUNTRY TOO: "Now there's the one issue of all the ones I fought for that remains unresolved. 'Don't ask, don't tell.'"

Standing close by is Charles Francis, the Washington public relations man who organized the effort to buy Kameny's papers from him, for \$75,000, and then give them to the Library of Congress. (Half the money came from Michael Huffington, the bisexual former Republican congressman.) Francis is a longtime friend of the President's family. His brother chaired George W. Bush's first Texas gubernatorial campaign, and in 2000 he himself arranged for Bush to meet with a dozen gay Republicans. The presidential candidate said he was "a better man" for what he heard in the meeting. Francis went on to found the Republican Unity Coalition, a kind of gay-straight alliance within the party; its members included the late President Gerald Ford

and the former senator Alan Simpson. "We felt homosexuality should be a non-issue," says Francis. "To our chagrin it became *the* issue, and the Republican party stopped wanting to build any bridges to gays." The organization, he explains, "is now in a sort of frozen state, like Walt Disney's body. It'll come back someday. We're waiting for a better time." Until such time arrives, he's made a wistful retreat into the gay movement's early history.

Rubenstein explains that these days members of the Smithsonian staff make a point of attending large demonstrations in order to collect placards that would otherwise get thrown away. Asked if he saved his signs with an eye on history, Kameny shies away from any grandiosity. "I tend in general not to throw things away," he says; the signs were saved so that they could be used over and over. But yes, he at last admits, he did have some vague sense of their historical significance when he brought them up to the top of his house. "They were always in my attic, and I kept the roof in good condition."

Rubenstein invites Kameny to don a pair of cotton gloves so that he can lift the lid of an inkwell that Abraham Lincoln may well have used while drafting the Emancipation Proclamation. The curator also shows him the "Jailed for Freedom" pin that the suffragist Alice Paul wore after her release from prison in 1918. The pin prompts Kameny to ask Rubenstein if the museum would be interested in a collection of gay protest buttons he has. Rubenstein assures him that it would. Kameny says he'll send them over; they're still at home, in his closet.

—Thomas Mallon