UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities Podcast
Season 3, Episode 2: William Dorsey Swann
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TRANSCRIPT

Deb Fowler: Hello, and welcome to *UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities — A Podcast for Teachers*. I'm Deb Fowler, executive director of History UnErased.

We have learned, throughout the course of history, that it is often incidental acts, by everyday people, that prove to be historic, consequential actions. In this episode, Kathleen will introduce you to someone whose story needs to be told, deserves to be told, and for a variety of reasons, especially today.

Take it away, Kathleen…

Kathleen Barker: Imagine a spring evening in Washington, D.C. A crowd has gathered outside a house near the corner of F and 12th Street NW, where a fashionable party appears to be taking place. Suddenly, the police arrive! Partygoers in beautiful clothing and dresses begin running from the house, and some even escape through windows! One person, though, stands their ground, barring the door in an attempt to keep the police out of their house.

Although this sounds like an event that could happen today, it actually happened in April of 1888. And the person who barred the door was William Dorsey Swann. His actions mark the first time in recorded history that a queer activist in the United States fought to secure any community's right to privacy.

This wasn't the first time one of Swann's gatherings was interrupted by police, but it was the first time that William Dorsey Swann actively barred the door in order to protect his partygoers. The raid caused such a commotion that roughly 400 people gathered outside to watch, and some of them even followed the police and suspects back to the station that night.

The following morning, local newspapers were eager to share reports of this interesting event. The Washington, DC Evening Star of April 13, 1888, described the event this way:

> *Last night, a party of colored men gave a ball in a house near the corner of 12th and F Street Northwest. Most of them appeared in female attire of many colors. The dance was in progress between 11 and 12:00 when Lieutenant Amiss, with a squad of officers, appeared, and brought the ball to a sudden termination. The men in female attire began to drop their gaudy costumes of silk and satin, and several of them jumped through the back window and escaped. The officers arrested 11 of them….*

Like the Washington DC *Evening Star,* the *Washington Critic* named the individuals who had been arrested, noting that William Dorsey, who styled himself the queen of the party, was among those taken to jail and charged with being "suspicious characters." In total, 13 men—all black—were arrested. They were ordered to pay a bond or serve 30 days in jail.

The raid and the confrontation in 1888 signaled one of the earliest reported cases in which someone, in this case William Dorsey Swann, stood up in defense of a queer community, which is truly admirable given the place and the time … not to mention social expectations of the day and the potential legal ramifications.

So who was William Dorsey Swann?

Unfortunately, we have no images of Swann. A lot of what we know comes from court records and newspapers. Swann was born William Henry Younker in Hancock, Maryland, in 1860. He was the fifth of thirteen children in the family of Mary Jane Younker and Andrew Jackson (or Jack) Swann, an enslaved wheat farmer and musician.

The Civil War broke out in 1861, and Swann's family was fortunate enough to stay together. When the war ended, Mary Jane and Jack stayed in Washington County, Maryland, and they were able to buy a plot of land to develop a farm of their own. Eventually, when he was old enough, Swann found a position as a hotel waiter to help support himself and his family.

He left home in 1880 and traveled to Washington, DC (approximately 100 miles southeast) to find a higher-paying job so he could better help support his parents and siblings. He found work there as a janitor at the Spencerian Business College. It was here where he learned to read and write in his spare time. Unfortunately, it's also at this point when Swann makes his first appearance in the newspaper.

On September 27th, 1882, the Washington, DC Evening Star reported the following:

> *The officers of the 5th Precinct were recently notified of a robbery of books and other articles from the Young Men's Christian Association building at the corner of 9th and D Street. This morning, Sergeant Boyle and Private Jones arrested two colored ragmen named John Simms and Albert Carlbert, with a push cart loaded with books that they were in the act of selling at a second-hand bookstore on 7th street. The prisoners, with the load of books, were taken to the station house, where it was learned from the ragman that they bought the books from a man named Dorsey Swan. Swan was subsequently arrested. On inquiry being made at the YMCA building it was learned that Swan was employed by Mr Spencer, of the Spencerian Business College, as a servant, and while in the capacity he borrowed a key from the janitor of the building on the pretense that Mr Spencer wanted it, and had a facsimile made from it, by means of which he could enter a room containing a large number of books belonging to the YMCA…. Mrs Spencer has also lost a great many articles which Swan is supposed to have stolen, among them some silver tableware.*

Swan was arrested and jailed in 1882 for stealing several items, including books, silverware, and plates, that he may have intended to use at his parties, or sell to help cover related expenses. A month after his sentencing, however, his employers, Henry and Sara Spencer, petitioned the President of the United States for Swann's release from jail.

The petition is quite generous in describing Swann's character. The couple note that "…he was free from vice, industrious, refined in his habits, and associations, gentle in his disposition, courteous in his bearing…".

The petitioners also note that Swann was likely just trying to improve his education and provide for his family, not truly steal from the college or the YMCA. The petition was endorsed by the judge, and the Assistant US District Attorney recommended the pardon. Unfortunately, the file does not reveal if the pardon was ever granted.

So clearly, William Dorsey Swann began giving private parties for his friends as early as 1882. These were among the first documented drag balls! The first such documented event took place in Harlem in 1867. The Hamilton Lodge No. 710, part of a fraternal organization known as the Order of Odd Fellows, started throwing a charity masquerade gala, the Annual Odd Fellows Ball, in the late 1860s. These balls were styled as charity events, and they were hosted by relatively wealthy, elite African Americans who could get away with things that frankly a poor, formerly enslaved janitors could not.

Swann hosted the parties adorned in fabulous gowns, made by his brother Daniel, and calling himself "the queen of drag" — well before the term "drag" was being used much outside of theaters. It's also long before the term "drag queen" became popular in the 1920s.

At the balls, Swann and guests participated in singing, dancing, and what came to be known as the "cakewalk," where participants competed for a prize awarded to the best dancer. The cakewalk originated as a dance performed by enslaved people in the United States, where they mimicked the walks and actions of their enslavers. Resistance and rebellion remained the core of this art form, even after the Civil War. Attendees would gather to dance, perform their best cakewalks, and dress in their most glamorous outfits.

Held in secret, these balls provided a safe space where attendees could experiment with gender expression and identity. But these parties were not without risk.

Beginning in the 1850s, a number of cities and states across the United States passed new laws that banned cross-dressing. Collectively referred to as "masquerade laws," they were used to control gender expression and "encourage" conformity.

Some examples include an 1845 state of New York law, which declared it a crime to have your "face painted, discolored, covered, or concealed, or [be] otherwise disguised…[while] in a road or public highway."

An 1848 law passed in Columbus, Ohio, forbade a person from appearing in public "in a dress not belonging to his or her sex."

In Chicago, a law forbade people from appearing in public places "in a dress not belonging to his or her sex, with intent to conceal his or her sex." Such a person could be fined anywhere from $20 to $500 for each offense.

These and the anti-drag laws were applied selectively and inconsistently until the mid-twentieth century.

Swann, and his companions, did not have the luxury of being able to publicly congregate in bars, but the House of Swann was a space where they could socialize with one another without facing public hostility or the fear of arrest. Unfortunately, the police raids interrupted this privacy. Newspaper evidence tells us that Swann's invitation-only festivities had become known to local police by 1887.

In January of 1887, Washington, D.C. Police raided another of Swann's drag balls, and we know that party goers included both black and white invitees. Several of those same people were arrested again during the 1888 drag ball, including Swann.

The day after the ball, the front page of the National Republican included an account of the ball and the police raid. *The "Queen" Raided. Unexpected Interruption to her banquet and ball. Her majesty shows a fight with a policeman–in the contest her handsome dress was torn off–all landed in the station house.*

The reporter or editor of this particular news story clearly did not have a very high opinion of Swann or his parties:

> *It has always been considered that the locality mentioned was as respectable as any in the city, and both for homes and business purposes was a chosen section. Doubtless not one of the citizens ever knew that on F Street's busy thoroughfare there was such a place as that raided by the police or that human beings could be found who would lower and disgrace themselves as had those who were placed under arrest and taken to the first precinct station house.*

Swann and his guests were arrested on a charge of being "suspicious persons." This clearly didn't stop Swann from hosting another ball the following year. Unlike this raid, by 1888, Swann was prepared to fight back. When police arrived at his door in April 1888, he was ready, blocking the door so that all but 13 attendees could flee the house. He told one of the officers: "You is no gentleman," before police ripped off his dress and took him to jail. Swann's bravery and the actions he took to protect his community are a shining example of LGBTQ activism.

As one of my History UnErased colleagues commented, a trans woman threw the first brick at Stonewall in 1969, but a drag queen barred the first door in 1888.

Unfortunately, Swann was arrested one more time, in late 1895, and charged with "keeping a disorderly house." This was coded language for running a house of prostitution. As the Washington, DC *Evening Star* reported on January 13, 1896, that:

> *A number of men, white and colored, were found in this place, which Judge Miller characterized as a 'hell of iniquity.'*

Swann pleaded not guilty, but the court handed down a ten-month sentence on January 1, 1896. When handing down the sentence, the judge stated that he wished he could have imposed a ten-year sentence

and told Swann: “I would like to send you where you would never again see a man’s face and would then like to rid the city of all other disreputable persons of the same kind.”

After serving three months of his sentence, Swann filed a petition for his release directed to President Grover Cleveland. In a show of support, 30 of Swann’s friends signed the document, which can now be found in the collection of the National Archives.

Though Swann and his friends were unsuccessful in convincing President Cleveland of granting him a pardon and to clear his name, nonetheless, this historic action marks the first time a queer activist in the U.S. took an action in his defense and the defense of his community for the right to peacefully and privately congregate without fear or the threat of criminalization.

William Dorsey Swann retired from hosting drag balls around the year 1900. He passed the responsibility to one of his younger brothers, Daniel Swann, the same brother who had crafted so many of William’s amazing ball outfits.

Daniel, a tailor by trade, continued to craft and distribute women’s clothing to drag artists in the Washington, DC, community until his death in 1954.

William Dorsey Swann died at the age of 65 in December 1925.

In 2023, the Washington, DC Council voted unanimously to officially designate “Swann Street NW,” between 14th Street NW and 19th Street NW, in honor of William Dorsey Swann. Mayor Muriel Bowser signed the bill into law on May 24, 2023.

I wonder what William Swann would think about today's drag culture. I hope he would be excited to know that artists no longer have to party in secret, but can celebrate their art at public events and venues, and even on television. I’m sure he would also have something to say about attempts to ban events like Drag Story Hour, but that’s a story for another podcast…

DF: Kathleen Barker is History UnErased’s program director and is a library and information specialist and public historian with 20 years of experience as a museum and library educator.

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Our theme music is “1986” by BrothaD via Tribe of Noise.

I’m Deb Fowler. Thanks for listening.