

Case Study: Is William Dorsey Swann a Civil Rights Pioneer?

I. Historical Background and Context

In Washington, D.C., William Dorsey Swann—a formerly enslaved person¹—created an underground network of elaborate drag balls that operated from approximately 1882 to 1900. The “House of Swann” took place in private homes, with Swann calling himself “the queen of drag” decades before the term became widely used. Swann’s brother Daniel, who worked as a tailor, supplied the elaborate costumes that made the balls possible. These invitation-only parties brought together Black and white participants in an era of increasing racial segregation, creating spaces where attendees could experiment with gender expression and build community and connections across racial lines. At these balls, attendees participated in the “cakewalk”—a dance competition that originated as a form of resistance among enslaved people who would imitate and satirize the formal movements and mannerisms of their enslavers.² This performance art maintained its rebellious spirit even after emancipation and the Reconstruction era, offering both entertainment and satirical social commentary.

Swann’s balls took place in rented homes near the intersection of F and 12th Street NW, an area described by contemporary newspapers as “respectable” and chosen for “homes and business purposes.” This location choice was most likely strategic, since the neighborhood would have provided both accessibility for working-class attendees and a degree of anonymity.

However, these celebrations occurred during an era when “masquerade laws”³ across the United States criminalized cross-dressing and gender non-conformity. Cities like New York, Columbus, and Chicago had passed legislation making it illegal to appear in public “in a dress not belonging to his or her sex.” Washington, D.C.’s approach to regulating gender expression relied on broadly written “suspicious persons” statutes rather than explicit anti-cross-dressing laws. This legal strategy allowed police considerable discretion in determining what constituted suspicious behavior, while newspapers used coded language, such as “disorderly house,” to reference presumed immoral or deviant behavior without explicit accusations.

The economic vulnerability of Swann’s participants becomes clear when examining arrest records: people faced fines of \$20 to \$500 (equivalent to \$600 to \$15,000 today) or 30 days in jail. For some, these penalties could have devastating financial consequences, including job loss and/or homelessness.⁴

Between 1887 and 1896, Swann was arrested multiple times for “keeping a disorderly house” or for

¹ Joseph, Channing Gerard. (2017). *The Black Drag Queens who fought before stonewall*. [Truthdig](#).

² Baldwin, Brook. The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality on [JSTOR](#).

³ Gilfoyle, Timonhly J. The Moral Origins of Political Surveillance: The Preventive Society in New York City, 1867-1918 on [JSTOR](#).

⁴ [About the Book House of Swann \(Forthcoming\)](#). Channing Joseph: Historical Research and Discoveries.

being a “suspicious character.” In 1888, Swann physically barred his door against police raiders, with the Washington DC *Evening Star*⁵ and the *Washington Critic* naming the individuals who had been arrested and noting that “William Dorsey styled himself the queen of the party,” and that he 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. In 1896, after serving three months of a 10-month sentence for “keeping a disorderly house,” Swann submitted a petition for a Presidential Pardon* and organized 30 supporters to sign the petition to President Grover Cleveland in support of Swann’s pardon request.⁶ Swann’s petition marked the first documented instance of organized Queer advocacy and the first queer person to have fought to secure any community’s right to privacy.

In 2023, Washington, D.C. officially named "Swann Street NW" in his honor, recognizing his groundbreaking activism.⁷

**Swann worked as a janitor at the Spencerian Business College, where he taught himself to read and write in his spare time.*

Important Note: No verified photographs of William Dorsey Swann exist. Researchers have identified at least one image from France showing performers doing the cakewalk that has been mistakenly attributed to Swann in some sources, highlighting the importance of careful source verification in historical research. Images often mistaken for William Dorsey Swann are found here: Series of Postcards: [Gods and Foolish Grandeur: "Les Nègres" in Paris - Jack Brown and Charles Gregory, postcards publicizing their engagement with the Nouveau Cirque, 1902](#)

⁵ Colored Men in Female Attire. Police Raid a Dancing Party. [Washington DC Evening Star, April 13, 1888](#). Chronicling America. Library of Congress.

⁶ Petition to President Grover Cleveland, 1896, Record Group 204, [National Archives](#).

⁷ Financial Impact Statement (FIS) of [William Dorsey Swann Street Designation Amendment Act of 2023](#).