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Queer in Farmville: Then and Now

Introduction

For most of its existence, Farmville, Virginia has been at the crossroads of some of the biggest events in American history. From the deadly battles of the Civil War, to the student protests at the Moton School and the *Brown* decision, Farmville has seen it all. Today, the community is home to a diverse blend of students at Longwood and Hampden-Sydney and locals from all backgrounds. Tradition and history are still alive and well in Farmville, but one piece of the story is still missing. What is the queer history of Farmville, Virginia?

“Queer” is an umbrella term used by the LGBTQ community to refer to anyone whose sexual orientation or gender identity falls outside of heteronormative cisgender labels. Initially used as a slur, the term has been reclaimed and seeks to increase inclusivity without the need for a long acronym.

As a community with a long history in education, Farmville poses a unique challenge to uncovering the queer aspect of its story. Hampden-Sydney College is an all-male school and, until 1976, Longwood was an all-female school. Much of what we would now call queer history is wrapped up in homosocial behavior and the concept of romantic friendships, a common phenomenon between close friends of the same sex (Bronski 40). These friendships were common in the 19th and early 20th centuries when strict social roles made it difficult for men and women to interact and befriend each other. As a result many close same sex friendships formed. The intimacy of these friendships makes it difficult to establish whether two people were straight or queer. With Longwood’s history as an all-female school and Hampden-Sydney as an all-male school it is possible that such romantic friendships were formed but, due to the commonality of these intimate friendships, the lack of explicit evidence of queer identities in these environments confounds research and makes it difficult to establish whether queer history is a part of Farmville’s story.



To explore how the queer community in Farmville has changed, we spoke with Michael Gusset, a local running for town council in the fall of 2022. He shared with us his perspective on the queer community of Farmville in the past, specifically the 1970s and 80s. In addition, we spoke to Dr. Gregg Harbaugh-Shattenkirk, a statistics professor at Longwood University. He is an active member of the Farmville queer community and helped us understand the nature of it today.

For Michael Gusset, the Farmville of the 70s and 80s was very much like the Farmville of the 50s and 60s. “Growing up in Prince Edward County there was no LGBTQ community, there wasn’t even LG” he said. Despite the visibility of queer people elsewhere in the country, Gusset felt that Farmville remained insulated. “When Stonewall happened, that didn’t even trickle down to us,” he remarked. Despite not having a visible community, there was still discrimination. Anyone who was different, especially men, were bullied in schools, the most common insult being slurs. According to Gusset, the queer community, and in many ways, the concept of queer itself, was nonexistent. However, Michael did bring up a small

piece of queer history. “Longwood was considered a safe place for lesbians” As an all-female school Longwood was a place where lesbian women could meet and interact without discrimination (Gusset).

Dr. Allen Gregg Harbaugh-Shattenkirk was introduced to part of the queer community in Farmville during his interview at Longwood. As he and his husband moved into the area, they began to learn about and become part of the Farmville queer community. During the interview with him, he shared that he first came out when he was fifteen years old, and that he didn't shy away from the fact he has a husband in his interview with Longwood (Harbaugh-Schattenkirk).

Dr. Harbaugh-Schattenkirk is just one member of a community which has become more open and visible. Farmville is now home to Farmville Pride, a queer organization which brings together members of the LGBTQ community for fellowship, support, and advocacy. The group provides a sense of belonging for queer people and helps make Farmville more diverse and accepting. Not only does Farmville Pride increase community, but they also volunteer for local non-profits and work to push LGBTQ agendas in Farmville (“Actions and Goals,” n.d.).



Farmville is home to a rich queer history, yet most of it flies under the radar. There is no better way to learn more about something than from those people who are personally impacted. The queer community of Farmville is still relatively new and emerging, and can easily be missed by those who are not a part of it. Harbaugh-Schattenkirk and Gusset's insights into Farmville were eye-opening and illustrated the fact that Farmville has made great strides in its progressiveness and acceptance, yet there is still so much more room to improve. The progress made during their lives is great, but one thing to take from their stories is that there is always more room to improve.

Resources

Actions and goals. Farmville Pride. (n.d.). Retrieved December 5, 2022, from <https://www.farmvillepride.com/the-community/actions-and-goals/>

Bronski, Michael. *A Queer History of the United States for Young People*. 2019. Beacon Press, Boston.

Gusset, Michael. (2022, November 3). Personal communication [Personal interview].

Harbaugh-Schattenkirk, Gregg. (2022, November 6). Personal communication, e-mail [Personal interview].

Photos. Farmville Pride. (n.d.). Retrieved December 5, 2022, from <https://www.farmvillepride.com/the-community/photos/>

The interviews conducted are not available at this time for public distribution.

Suggestions for Educators

Grade Level: 11+

Subjects: History, English, Citizenship courses

Activity: For local students that learn about the great history of the Moton Museum in Farmville, it would be a great opportunity to introduce Farmville's queer history as well. Following the lesson on the Moton with a lesson on intersectionality and using that to introduce queer history is a great way to propose the topic. This will teach the students that many world problems are not solved in an easy way, and that intersectionality is something we face in many aspects of the world. This will teach the students to be better citizen leaders and members of society.

Grade Level: 11+

Subjects: Math

Activity: For students taking statistics courses in high school or college, studies can be done using queer topics. Professors could even create problems that are dealing with queer related issues in which statistics could bring about an answer in a sociological or psychological perspective. Using queer demographics as data to teach students how to do simple random sample testing is a very simple way to introduce students to these ideas while maintaining the current curriculum. This data is also one of the more available data sets relating to queer studies, so it should be relatively simple to find.

Grade Level: 1-5

Subject: Reading

Activity: One easy way to reach children is the books they use to learn how to read. Simple, interesting books that children enjoy make them more excited to learn how to read, and subliminally introducing queer aspects to them through literature is a great way to introduce queer ideologies to young children.

For example, choosing to read a book in class where the character has same-sex parents would teach kids from a young age that there are family situations outside of the norm, which will make further knowledge on the subject easier to grasp.

Grade Level: 5

Subject: Health

When young people are first introduced to Anatomy and the ideas of sex and gender, they are not taught anything about queer ideals. The lack of this information in the education assists in the denigration and lack of representation of queer people. Simply educating children that there are norms and that they are not superior to other ways will make queer ideas more understood and accepted within society.