

Before Stonewall: Early LGBTQ+ Activism in Philadelphia

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Equality means more than passing laws. The struggle is really won in the hearts and minds of the community, where it really counts.—Barbara Gittings

When many young children think about Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, they think of the founding of the United States, the Liberty Bell, and Independence Hall. These conceptions of Philadelphia, however, obscure the city's rich history in the fight for LGBTQ+ justice. In this article, we center on two examples of LGBTQ+ activism that were based in Philadelphia: Dewey's Lunch Counter Sit-In and Reminder Day. Predating the Stonewall Uprising in New York City, which is marked as the start of the contemporary LGBTQ+ Pride movement, the Dewey's Lunch Counter Sit-In and Reminder Day remind us that the fight for LGBTQ+ equality has been and continues to be a long and expansive effort.

Additionally, we present these two events as part of the larger movement for civil rights that occurred during the middle of the 20th century in the United States when several efforts for justice were underway: Black civil rights movements, Indigenous justice, feminist movements, environmental activism, anti-war movements, and LGBTQ+ justice. We recognize that the fight for justice in the United States is long and winding. While we focus attention on the efforts of LGBTQ+ activists, we also recognize that their efforts were not in isolation. The wisdom of LGBTQ+ activists was inspired by that which was shared by People of Color engaged in racial justice efforts, Indigenous activists, feminist activists, and others engaged in collective acts of resistance during this time period. Similarly, the wisdom generated through LGBTQ+ efforts inspired and informed the work of others engaged in activism. We want to acknowledge that the individuals involved in this movement had multiple identities and therefore varied relationships to power and privilege. As a result, many individuals would work across movements and space in support of multiple forms of justice. Whenever possible, we encourage teachers to help students make sense of the shared wisdom produced across these movements in effort to see them in solidarity with each other

toward a common goal while also acknowledging times of contradiction or conflict.

In this article, we present two curated text sets, each featuring a primary source analysis activity to engage upper elementary students in an examination of LGBTQ+ activism in Philadelphia between 1965 and 1969 as part of a larger unit on civil rights activism in the United States. Text sets offer



Figure 1. LGBTQ+ rights protesters, including Ernestine Eckstein—the only Black, lesbian to participate—on July 4, 1965 as part of the first Reminder Day protest at Independence Hall, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Temple University Special Collections.

students a multifaceted entry point to explore social studies topics, encourage authentic engagement with materials, and offer students the opportunity to practice important social studies and ELA skills.¹ Through engagement with the text sets shared in this article, students are encouraged to build understanding of LGBTQ+ history and make connections between organizers' efforts and the work of Black civil rights advocates who inspired LGBTQ+ activists. Thus, teachers and students can learn not only *about* LGBTQ+ people and Black civil rights activists, but also directly *from* them through primary and secondary sources.

A Note About Terminology

When engaging with historical sources, it is important to remind students that ideas around language and identity shift over time. Some of the sources featured within this article may include terminology that feels outdated or even inappropriate in today's contexts. Or, in some instances, words are used differently than they are today. Unless referring to a specific term or identity that is present within a historical artifact, always use current understandings of humanizing, affirming language to reference people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals and communities. If teachers are unfamiliar with the history of LGBTQ+ terminology, we suggest reviewing recommendations from LGBTQ+ organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign or Garden State Equality.

Historical Context

In this section, we give a brief overview of two protests in support of LGBTQ+ rights in Philadelphia which predate the 1969 Stonewall Uprising. For more detailed information, we highly recommend the Out History (www.outhistory.com) and the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov) websites.

Dewey's Lunch Counter Sit-In

On April 25, 1965, more than 150 patrons were refused service at Dewey's Restaurant in Center City because of their suspected connection to the LGBTQ+ community. Despite being a frequent hangout for folks in the Philadelphia LGBTQ+ community, Dewey's had been known to deny service to individuals who were suspected of being "homosexuals," "masculine women," "feminine men," and "persons wearing non-conformist clothing."² At some point during the day, three teenagers (two men and one woman) were denied service, and they subsequently refused to leave the lunch counter. Shortly thereafter, the police were called, and the three teenagers were arrested for disorderly conduct. This act of disobedience came to mark the beginning of the sit-in in an effort to gain equal access for LGBTQ+ patrons at Dewey's Restaurant in Philadelphia.

Organizers with the Janus Society of America, an early LGBTQ+ civil rights organization founded in 1962 in Philadelphia, quickly worked to distribute 1,500 pamphlets

in the surrounding community to share widely the problematic practices occurring at Dewey's Restaurant. A week later, on May 2, 1965, three more patrons planned a sit-in at Dewey's in an effort to continue to highlight the establishment's discriminatory practices. The police were again called by Dewey's employees—seeking the removal of the patrons. However, upon their arrival, protestors were told by the police that they "could stay in there as long as we wanted as the police had no authority to ask us to leave."³ After an hour, protestors declared victory and left the restaurant feeling as though their efforts were successful.

The sit-in at Dewey's Restaurant in 1965 is largely seen as the "first gay sit-in." Organizers acknowledged that they drew inspiration from the efforts of Black activists who engaged in lunch counter sit-ins across the southern United States as an act of civil disobedience against racial segregation.

Reminder Day

In 1965, individuals who openly identified as gay or lesbian were prohibited from any government job at any level, including military service. Frank Kameny, a white gay man, and Barbara Gittings, a white lesbian woman, organized approximately forty gay and lesbian activists on July 4, 1965, at Independence Hall in Philadelphia to protest this discriminatory practice.⁴ Most of the protestors in these marches were not, in fact, from Philadelphia. They came from places like New York and Washington, DC, as many gays and lesbians were afraid to march openly in their home communities. The majority of protestors involved in Reminder Day activities were white gay men, though a few lesbians were also involved. Ernestine Eckstein, pictured in Figure 1, was one of the few lesbian women, and the only Black woman, to participate in the Reminder Day protests.

Kameny and Gittings established clear guidelines for participation at the Reminder Day pickets as they were seeking to deliver a specific message that gay and lesbian people were just as employable as heterosexual people. These guidelines were distributed in advance of the event to ensure that all participants engaged in accordance with the guidelines. In contrast to contemporary Pride celebrations, the individuals involved with the Reminder Day protest adhered to a strict dress code, with men in ties and suit jackets and women in dresses. Kameny and Gittings wanted to emphasize the "normalness" and "employability" of gays and lesbians. The protestors held neatly lettered signs with statements such as "SUPPORT HOMOSEXUAL CIVIL RIGHTS," "STOP CRUEL AND UNUSUAL PUNISHMENT FOR HOMOSEXUALS" and "HOMOSEXUALS SHOULD BE JUDGED AS INDIVIDUALS" (see Figure 1). Additionally, the timing and location of Reminder Day were also selected with intention. A gathering of gay and lesbian people dressed in professional attire outside Independence Hall on July 4th was meant to represent that the persistent pursuit of

freedom must include all people, particularly the LGBTQ+ community.

Reminder Day protests occurred for the following four years as “Annual Reminders” and was the first time that the LGBTQ+ community engaged in a civil rights demonstration that was repeated annually. This act was incredibly courageous since being out publicly led individuals to potentially disastrous personal and professional consequences.

Teaching with Text Sets

Our goal is not to prescribe a specific instructional approach with the materials curated in the text set, although we provide guiding and supporting questions to support engagement with the primary sources provided in this article. The questions presented as a part of each text set aim to assist students in learning from LGBTQ+ wisdom and see the connections between that wisdom and the wisdom of other historically marginalized groups, and perhaps, help students see themselves as agents of change. Teachers should utilize state and national standards that address civic action, LGBTQ+ history, and human rights to best situate these sources within the existing curriculum. We do, however, find it necessary to encourage students to recognize the multiple overlapping justice movements that were in progress during this era. As a result, we present primary source documents from the Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In and Reminder Day alongside documents from the Black civil rights movement from which many LGBTQ+ activists drew inspiration. In curating these texts, we conceptualized a few framing questions to guide engagement with the documents:

- How did events like Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In and Reminder Day spark early LGBTQ+ activism?
- What conclusions can be made regarding the interactions between folks within LGBTQ+ and Black civil rights efforts?
- What wisdom can we glean from the events in Philadelphia to make sense of modern-day efforts at LGBTQ+ activism and solidarity?
- What role does symbolism play in these examples from the LGBTQ+ rights movement, and how might we think about symbolic representation in contemporary contexts?

Text Set Descriptions

We encourage teachers to utilize the four-step process established by Tschida and Buchanan when creating their own text sets: (1) identify the big idea to be explored, (2) recognize the multiple perspectives needed for a more complete story, (3) locate qualifying texts, and (4) select texts to be included.⁵ We provide two text sets that contain primary sources relevant to the Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In, the Reminder Day protests, and the Black civil rights movements. Our goal in sharing these sets is to encourage students to learn about

these two examples of early LGBTQ+ activism while also building a broader sense of the ways that justice movements informed and diverged from each other during this era.

In addition to the questions below, we encourage teachers to pay particular attention to the ways that the primary sources in both text sets attend to the specificities of race and LGBTQ+ identity within the contexts of their publication or commemoration: How do both of these text sets reflect organizers’ attention to the joys, sorrows, struggles, victories, wisdom, pain, and justice associated with LGBTQ+ and Black peoples and activism? In what ways does examining documents and materials across multiple justice movements build students’ understanding of the shared wisdom of/through collective action that was produced during this time? We encourage teachers to share all these documents with students in effort to increase understanding of the collective wisdom being generated in effort to advance equity and justice for all. In addition, teachers should follow students’ lead and incorporate additional context or sourcing information as students inquire about the production, use, and audience of the materials that are considered. Furthermore, based on students’ existing knowledge of race/ism, LGBTQ+ history, and Black civil rights histories, teachers can more directly attend to issues of representation, omission, and solidarity within and across movements.

Text Set 1: Participation

In the Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In and Reminder Day Protests, organizers shared their goals of the protest effort as well as the expectations of participants. For Dewey’s, Janus Society of America distributed pamphlets articulating their motivations for protesting at the lunch counter (see Figure 2). Within the pamphlet, Janus Society informed protesters of Dewey’s legal right to refuse service to anyone “except for the reason of race, religion, and nationality” noting that there was no evidence of these reasons being used to refuse service within the context of the sit-in.⁶ Further, Janus Society informs protestors that they may face arrest and prosecution even without violating any existing laws: “There are many possible reasons why police officers might bring prosecutions against demonstrators in spite of the fact that the charges are eventually considered improper.”⁷ Frank Kameny, organizer of Reminder Day pickets, also published a set of rules for participants regarding their attire and behavior at the events. Notably, the rules insisted that participants should be “well groomed,” their attire should be “conservative and conventional,” signs and slogans must be pre-approved in advance of the demonstration, in addition to other guidance surrounding the organization of the event itself.⁸ The final document in this set is a seven-page pamphlet for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. This event involved more than 250,000 individuals gathered at the Lincoln Memorial, in Washington, DC, to

protest racial discrimination and listen to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech. The pamphlet is broken down into several sections. Teachers may want to use the pamphlet in its entirety or highlight particular sections relevant to their lesson or unit.

Text Set 2: Commemoration

Both Reminder Day and the Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In were commemorated with the placing of historical markers. Historical markers are small plaques or signs that feature text and, at times, images meant to commemorate a histori-

cal event or significance of a location. The Reminder Day commemorative plaque, the first text in this text set, was installed in 2005 and is titled “Gay Rights Demonstrations, July 4, 1965–1969” (see Figure 3). The brief text of the marker emphasizes the “peaceful” nature of the demonstration and connects the events with other LGBTQ+ activism (Stonewall riots and Pride Parades). In 2018, a commemorative plaque was displayed to acknowledge the events of the Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In (see Figure 4). The text acknowledges that organizers were inspired by Black civil rights activists’ lunch counter sit-ins and situates the event as an

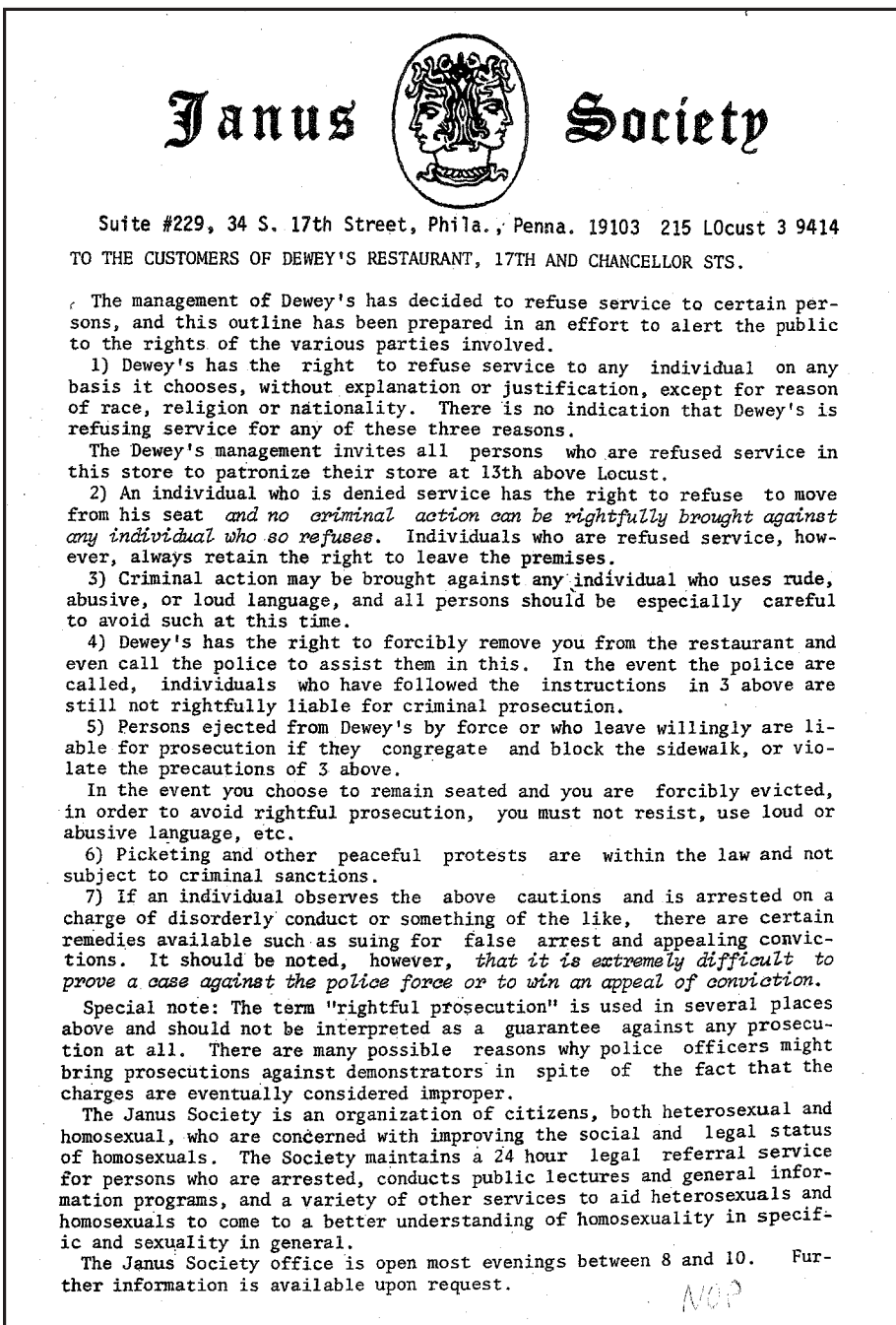


Figure 2. Pamphlet from Janus Society of America from OutHistory, <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/deweys-sit-in/item/2903>, CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 US DEED

Text Set 1: Participation

Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In pamphlet

Janus Society of America Rules of Protest for Reminder Day

Final Plans for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

Questions for Text Set 1

- What do you notice? What do you wonder?
- What was the purpose of these documents?
- What similarities and differences can you find between them?
- Do you think similar publications would be helpful in modern protests? Why or why not?
- What do you think the goals of these efforts were?
- How might the rules for participation in these events both invite and restrict participation by potential activists?
- Why would organizers include reference to engagements with law enforcement, legal support, and transportation concerns within the materials, and what wisdom does this reflect?

early LGBTQ+ rights victory. The third text in this set is a historical marker commemorating the Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-ins which took place in 1960 (see Figure 5). This nonviolent act of resistance led Woolworth Department Store to end its policy of racial segregation. The commemorative marker was erected in 1980 with the inscription “Launched the national drive for integrated lunch counters, Feb. 1, 1960, in Woolworth store 2 blocks south.” Since then, at least two others have been erected in the surrounding area.

Conclusion

Building students’ understanding of the past in ways that account for the existence of LGBTQ+ people is vital for preparing them for lives as civic actors in our diverse society. The events and lesson ideas presented in this article are just a few ways to help learn from LGBTQ+ people and the wisdom they bring to our society and its history. We also invite teachers and students to consider the consequences of LGBTQ+ and Black civil rights activism not traditionally taught in conversation with each other. The traditional, flattened civil rights era discourse common in elementary social studies has obscured sites of solidarity, resistance, intersectionality, and shared wisdom that occurred during this time and as a result has shaped our understanding of past and contemporary struggles for justice.

We recognize the sharp political contexts present at the writing of this article. Despite efforts initiated in LGBTQ+ civil rights movement of the 1960s, discrimination and marginalization against the LGBTQ+ population in the United States persists. States like Florida, Missouri, Arkansas, Texas and others have restricted LGBTQ+ inclusion in the curriculum. LGBTQ+ youth, particularly trans youth, still face verbal and

physical harassment from peers, school faculty, and policy. Similarly, several of these states also restrict teachers’ ability to teach about race, racism, Black history, and ethnic studies in effort to preserve white ways of framing the past. While these setbacks are discouraging, all hope is not lost. States

Text Set 2: Commemoration

Reminder Day historical marker
 Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In historical marker
 Woolworth Sit-In historical marker

Questions for Text Set 2

- What do you notice? What do you wonder?
- What do these historical markers tell us about how these events of the past are viewed in our current time?
- The markers were erected more than twenty years after the events occurred. What does this say about contemporary understandings of LGBTQ+ and Black civil rights?
- In what ways do we commemorate contemporary efforts of resistance?
- What does this primary source tell us (or not tell us) about the motivations of protestors?
- What does this primary source tell us (or not tell us) about the methods used by protestors?
- Who is the intended audience of the primary source? How do you know?
- In what ways do these markers reflect or obscure the significance of the events they commemorate?

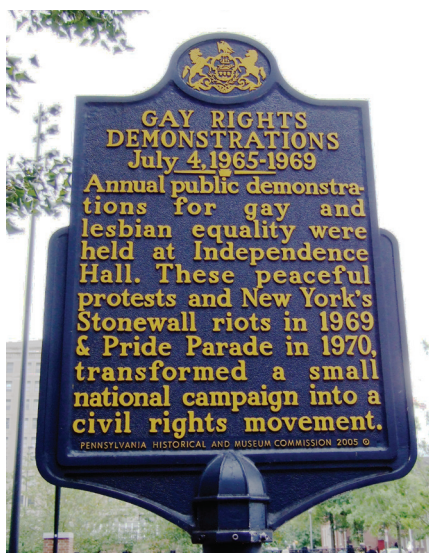


Figure 3. Reminder Day Historical Marker, photograph by Richard Dworkin, September 29, 2009, www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=24889



Figure 4. Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In Historical Marker, photography by Cosmos Mariner, June 26, 2019, www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=135798

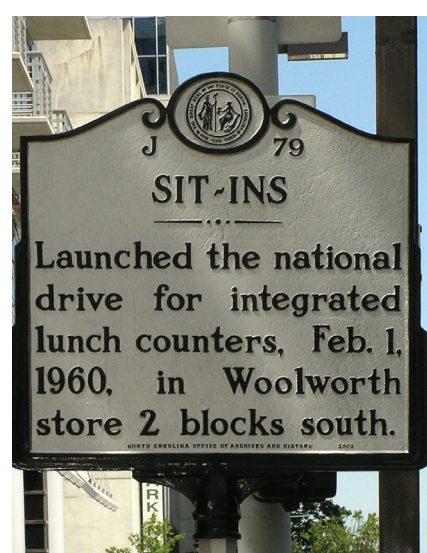


Figure 5. Woolworth Sit-In Historical Marker, photograph by Paul Crumlish, May 10, 2010, www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=30921

like California, Illinois, and our home state of New Jersey mandate LGBTQ+ inclusion in the K–12 curriculum, and several states have declared themselves as safe havens for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

And yet, the history of the Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In and the Reminder Day pickets are necessary for understanding the complexities of the pursuit of freedom and justice within the United States. We close with a quotation from Ernestine Eckstein, the only Black lesbian woman to march in Reminder Day. This quotation, and the words from Barbara Gittings used to open this article, highlight the interactive and interconnected nature of the pursuit of justice. Justice is not obtained in solitude, but rather through solidarity and through action. The wisdom of early LGBTQ+ activists should continue to propel all of us in our continued fight for justice for all people who face interlocking forms of oppression today. ■

Supplemental Resources

Dewey’s Lunch Counter Sit-In oral history transcripts, interviews by Marc Stein in “Dewey’s Sit-in in Philadelphia, 1965,” *OutHistory*, April 20, 2015, <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/deweys-sit-in/intro>.

Reminder Day: The Second Largest Minority by Lilli Vincenz, 1968, Video, www.loc.gov/item/mbrs01991429/.

Stonewall: A Building. An Uprising. A Revolution by Rob Sanders, illustrated by Jamey Christoph (Random House, 2019)

The Stonewall Reader, edited by New York Public Library (Penguin Classics, 2019)

City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves, Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972 by Marc Stein (Temple University Press, 2004)

Gay & Lesbian History for Kids: The Century-Long Struggle for LGBT Rights, with 21 Activities by Jerome Pohlen (Chicago Review Press, 2015)

March on Washington pamphlet, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2014645600/

The homosexual has to call attention to the fact that he’s been unjustly acted upon on. This is what the Negro did. Demonstrations, as far as I’m concerned, are one of the very first steps toward changing society. ... Movements should be intended, I feel, to erase labels, whether “black” or “white” or “homosexual” or “heterosexual.” I’d like to find a way of getting all classes of homosexuals involved together in the movement.

—Ernestine Eckstein⁹

NOTES

1. Christina M. Tschida and Lisa Brown Buchanan, “Tackling Controversial Topics: Developing Thematic Text Sets for Elementary Social Studies,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 10, no. 3 (2015): 40–56.
2. Marc Stein, “Dewey’s Sit-in in Philadelphia, 1965,” *OutHistory*, April 20, 2015, <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/deweys-sit-in/intro>.
3. Janus Society of America president Clark Polak, as quoted in Daniel Avery, “10 LGBT Uprisings Before Stonewall,” *Newsweek*, June 23, 2019, www.newsweek.com/before-stonewall-riots-1445365.
4. “About the National LGBT 50th Anniversary Celebration,” LGBT 50th Anniversary, July 4, 2015, <http://lgbt50.org/about>.
5. Tschida and Buchanan, “Tackling Controversial Topics.”
6. Janus Society, April 1965, *OutHistory*, <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/deweys-sit-in/item/2903>.
7. Janus Society.
8. The Mattachine Society of Washington, Committee on Picketing and Other Lawful Demonstrations, “Rules and Precepts for Picketing,” John J. Wilcox, Jr. Archives, <https://sofe.wilcoxarchives.org/the-right-to-speak-out/the-annual-reminder-demonstration>.
9. As quoted in Victoria A. Brownworth, “Black History Month: Ernestine Eckstein,” *Philadelphia Gay News*, February 9, 2022, <https://epgn.com/2022/02/09/black-history-month-ernestine-eckstein/>.

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