

Pride Festival of Central PA

LGBT Center of Central PA History Project Digital Encyclopedia

By Jeremy Boorum

The Pride Festival of Central PA is an annual event celebrating the LGBTQ+ community in the Central Pennsylvania region. Founded in 1992, the festival takes place every year on the last Saturday of July in the city of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Each July, approximately 5,000 individuals travel to downtown Harrisburg and attend the Pride Festival. It is the largest Pride celebration between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

I. Origins of the Pride Festival (1976-1991)

While most Pride celebrations in larger cities like New York and San Francisco emerged in the years immediately following the Stonewall riots on June 28, 1969, the Pride Festival of Central PA charts a different history. During the 1970s, the conservative environment of Central Pennsylvania created a hostile atmosphere for discussions about and considerations for LGBTQ+ civil rights. Therefore, when Governor Milton J. Shapp declared June 12-19, 1976, as “Gay Pride Week” throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, an unprecedented move, he faced severe backlash from many Central Pennsylvanians.¹ Considering this response and the region’s political climate, Central Pennsylvania’s LGBTQ+ community did not create their own local Pride celebrations in the 1970s. Instead, some residents traveled to nearby cities like Philadelphia to participate in Pride festivities. In 1976, individuals from various organizations in Central Pennsylvania, including Dignity/Central PA, Susquehanna Valley Gays United, Gay Community

¹ William Burton and Barry Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania: The History of an LGBTQ Community* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 174-5.

Services, and Gays United Lancaster formed the Pennsylvania Rural Gay Caucus and participated in Philadelphia's Pride parade.² This event marked the first documented example of Central Pennsylvania's LGBTQ+ population forming an organization to take part in a Pride celebration. Over time, this participation prompted the need for Harrisburg to have its own established Pride event.

a. Open Air Festival (1984-1988)

By 1984, Harrisburg's LGBTQ+ community was ready to launch its own event. Rather than host a Pride festival, however, community leaders instead organized a series of picnics. These picnics were better known as the Open Air Festivals, an annual celebration which provided Harrisburg residents an opportunity to connect with other LGBTQ+ individuals in an intimate setting and form a sense of community. Several gay and lesbian organizations in the Harrisburg area were instrumental in launching the Open Air Festivals, including the Pennsmen, Metropolitan Community Church of the Spirit, Dignity/Central PA, *The Lavender Letter*, Gay Fathers, Harrisburg Women's Center, PFLAG, and the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard of Harrisburg.³ While the Open Air Festival represents the first official Pride celebration in Harrisburg, organizers deliberately chose not to name the festival "Pride" so as not to draw unnecessary attention to the event. The title "open air" is a generic term and thus would not attract local media outlets, whose coverage would likely be insensitive towards the privacy of LGBTQ+ individuals.⁴ This decision was also necessary because during the 1980s, Harrisburg saw an increase in violence targeted at LGBTQ+ individuals, coupled with ongoing challenges

² Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 175.

³ Harrisburg Area Lesbian/Gay Organizations, Open Air Festival Flyer, 2 June 1985, LGBT-036 Lawrence Valerio Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

⁴ Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 176.

such as the lack of antidiscrimination laws on the basis of sexual and gender identity and stigma surrounding the AIDS crisis and the LGBTQ+ community.

The first Open Air Festival was held on July 8, 1984, at the Police Picnic Grounds on Linglestown Road in Susquehanna Township.⁵ In keeping with the meaning behind the festival's name, organizers purchased minimal decorations to mark the celebration. In fact, the only decorations included a small bundle of pink balloons left at the entrance of the Police Athletic League's facility so the couple hundred attendees who knew to look for the balloons could locate the festival.⁶ During these events, attendees enjoyed food, played volleyball and lawn games, shopped at craft vendor booths, and listened to music from local performers like Bobbi Carmitchell. In all, the Open Air Festivals were intimate gatherings that allowed attendees to celebrate Pride in a relatively safe environment and build connections with others in an open air setting. The Open Air Festival continued at the Police Picnic Grounds from 1985 to 1987, and then occurred once more in 1988 at nearby Lower Paxton Lyons Park.⁷

b. Unity Festival (1989-1991)

Around the same time the Open Air Festival ended, another event appeared: the Unity Festival. Unlike Open Air, Unity emerged out of a need to raise awareness about the ongoing AIDS crisis. Festival founder Nikki E. Knerr created Unity to fight against the stigma surrounding AIDS being a "gay disease." Thus, the meaning behind the name "Unity" encouraged citizens from diverse backgrounds, both within and outside the LGBTQ+

⁵ *The Lavender Letter*, Newsletter, May 1984, LGBT-009 Lavender Letter Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

⁶ Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 176.

⁷ *The Lavender Letter*, Newsletter, June 1988, LGBT-009 Lavender Letter Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA; Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 175-6.

community, to join together to raise awareness and necessary funds for local AIDS organizations in the Central Pennsylvania and Mid-Atlantic regions.⁸ Through Unity, the LGBTQ+ community in Central Pennsylvania would once again have a festival to call their own, while also raising needed money earmarked for AIDS patients and related outreach. Community leaders were quick to embrace the new event, with *The Lavender Letter* exclaiming “although the Open Air Festival is not happening this summer, Unity Festival ’89... will provide a great opportunity for our community to get together.”⁹

The first Unity Festival occurred on August 5, 1989. Rather than find a public location for the event, Knerr hosted the first festival at her six-acre property in Mechanicsburg.¹⁰ Since the festival occurred at her home, Knerr made sure to accommodate patrons and her neighbors, organizing efforts to rent school buses to shuttle attendees to and from the event to avoid traffic and parking issues.¹¹ To help the event run smoothly, Knerr recruited LGBTQ+ community members and allies as volunteers, marking one of the first collaborations between LGBTQ+ individuals and the outside community in Central Pennsylvania. When at the festival, attendees enjoyed food, crafts, and music from Bobbi Carmitchell, Suede, the Girls’ Club, Outburst, and the Harrisburg Men’s Chorus.¹² In the end, the approximately 700 attendees, each paying a \$20.00 admission fee, raised more than \$13,000, which was then distributed to several organizations joined in the fight against AIDS, including South Central AIDS Assistance Network (Harrisburg), York Support (York), We the People (Philadelphia), DLG Health

⁸ Nikki Knerr, interviewed by Barry Loveland, 9 October 2016, LGBT Oral History 058, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

⁹ *The Lavender Letter*, Newsletter, August 1989, LGBT-009 Lavender Letter Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

¹⁰ Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 177.

¹¹ Knerr, interview.

¹² Thom Cardwell, “Strength in Unity: Networking in H’burg,” 1989, LGBT-058 Anonymous Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

Advocates (Delaware), HERO (Baltimore), Grandma's House (Washington, D.C.), and the Harrisburg Men's Chorus.¹³

After the success of the first festival, Knerr decided to search for a new venue to host the event. In 1990 and 1991, the festival moved to Ski Roundtop in Lewisberry, located in nearby York County, and occurred during the last weekend in July. Knerr was already familiar with the site as she created brochures for Ski Roundtop through her printing company, and she knew there were no events happening at the venue during the summer months.¹⁴ In addition to shifting the event to the last weekend in July, Knerr also converted Unity Festival into an all-day event filled with performances by Lily White and Company and Bobbi Carmitchell, among others, food, craft vendors, and tables for LGBTQ+ services and affiliated organizations. Turnout at the festival continued to climb, with an estimated 1,500 patrons attending in 1990 and over 2,000 in 1991.¹⁵ The Unity Festival continued to raise money for AIDS organizations and evolved into a signature AIDS fundraiser for the Mid-Atlantic region, drawing attention from many individuals beyond Harrisburg.

Despite the successes of the 1990 and 1991 events at Ski Roundtop, an unexpected obstacle hindered the continuation of Unity Festival in 1992. When Knerr attempted to book Ski Roundtop again for the 1992 festival, the then manager refused to rent to Knerr because one of his guards allegedly witnessed two men having sex on the property. This behavior in public, according to the manager, would damage Ski Roundtop's image as "a family-oriented business,"

¹³ Unity Festival, Program, 22 July 1990, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA; Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 177.

¹⁴ Knerr, interview.

¹⁵ Unity Festival, Exhibitor and Vendor Invitation Brochure, 1991, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA; Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 178.

and thus he could not allow the festival to continue at the venue.¹⁶ This type of decision was not uncommon during this time, as some businessowners feared how they would be perceived in the larger community if they allowed LGBTQ+ affiliated events to occur at their organizations. Faced with the new challenge of locating a different venue at a late stage in the planning process, Knerr decided to end the Unity Festival, leaving the Central Pennsylvania region without a festival dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community.

II. History of the Pride Festival (1992-present)

a. Reservoir Park (1992-1995)

Following Unity's abrupt ending, some feared the LGBTQ+ community would lose a major event that represented an opportunity for community members to foster connections with one another. In spring 1992, however, local activists Dan Miller and Barry Loveland decided over lunch that it was time for Harrisburg to have its own Pride festival to recognize the LGBTQ+ community.¹⁷ Soon after, Miller, Loveland, and Patrick Wallen planned and organized the first Pride festival for the city in the span of three months. To mark this new direction, the event would take on a bold new name: the Gay and Lesbian Pride Festival of Central PA.¹⁸ The decision to include the words "Gay and Lesbian" in the festival's official name ensured that members of the LGBTQ+ community in the Central Pennsylvania region would no longer hide but rather celebrate their identities and authentic selves. Despite the fact some LGBTQ+ individuals would not attend this event as they were concerned about being outed, the organizers recognized the importance of the Pride Festival and described the event as "a giant step forward

¹⁶ Knerr, interview.

¹⁷ Barry Loveland, interviewed by Korie Lain, 22 March 2014, LGBT Oral History 070, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

¹⁸ Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 179.

for gays and lesbians in the midstate,” as reported in the first newspaper article about the festival’s debut.¹⁹

The first Pride Festival of Central PA was held on July 26, 1992, in Reservoir Park, and featured the event theme “Together Celebrating Pride.”²⁰ Festival organizers decided to hold the event during the last weekend in July to pay homage to its predecessor, the Unity Festival, and to not compete with other nearby Pride celebrations, often scheduled in June to coincide with Pride Month.²¹ In the past, Central Pennsylvanians would often travel to other Mid-Atlantic cities including New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore to participate in Pride festivities, and thus the steering committee hoped to draw attendees from these nearby markets to Harrisburg. Despite overcast skies, more than 1,000 attended the free event at Reservoir Park (with nearly 500 people signing up for the festival’s mailing list), visited 48 vendor booths, and enjoyed performances from Bobbi Carmitchell, Nancy Day, Natalie Darkes, and the Harrisburg Men’s Chorus.²² Additionally, at the 1992 festival, Peter Wambach, a Pennsylvania state representative, received an award in recognition of his work and advocacy on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community.²³

After the success of the 1992 festival, organizers were eager to plan the following year’s event. For the 1993 festival, organizers implemented several new changes, such as establishing the Community Awareness Council to plan and manage the event, creating a dedicated festival

¹⁹ Jeanette Krebs, “Gay, Lesbian Pride Festival set,” *The Patriot-News*, July 19, 1992, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA, B4.

²⁰ Gay and Lesbian Pride Festival of Central Pennsylvania, Program, 26 July 1992, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

²¹ Knerr, interview; Dr. Eric W. Selvey, interviewed by Jennifer Ott, 9 April 2015, LGBT Oral History 104, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

²² Pride Festival, Program, 1992; Jeanette Krebs, “Rainy weather can’t dampen gay spirits,” *The Patriot-News*, July 27, 1992, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA, B1; Gay and Lesbian Pride Festival Committee of Central Pennsylvania, Minutes, 20 September 1992, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

²³ Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 180.

office space courtesy of Miller and Associates, and receiving event sponsorship from the City of Harrisburg.²⁴ Each of these new developments signified that the Pride Festival would become a regular fixture for the Central Pennsylvania region. Additionally, Pride organizers arranged a series of events throughout the entire week leading up to the festival, including a pre-festival “An Evening of Pride” black-tie gala fundraiser concert at the State Museum of Pennsylvania featuring the Flirtations and Nancy Day.²⁵ Other performers at the festival included BETTY, Fred Small, Debbie Jacobs, Natalie Darkes, Bobbi Carmitchell, Betsy Salkind, and the Harrisburg Men’s Chorus.²⁶

After the 1993 event, a new leadership team sought to expand the festival’s imprint in Central Pennsylvania. On April 9, 1994, the Pride Coalition of Central PA formed, consisting of 12 groups and individuals dedicated to planning the Pride Festival.²⁷ Under the stewardship of President Doug Warner and President-Elect Dr. Elaine F. Wasilewski, the Pride Festival continued to evolve. One major change the new committee implemented included dropping “Gay and Lesbian” from the title of the festival, considering “Pride” to be an inclusive term for the spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities.²⁸ From this point forward, the event would be known by its current name: Pride Festival of Central PA. The 1994 festival was successful like the previous two, drawing in nearly 5,000 patrons to visit 58 vendor booths and enjoy entertainment from

²⁴ Pride Festival, Minutes, 1992; Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 180.

²⁵ Gay and Lesbian Pride Festival of Central Pennsylvania, “An Evening of Pride” Concert Invitation, 24 July 1993, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA; Pride Coalition of Central Pennsylvania, *Festival News: The Pride Newsletter*, May/June 1994, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

²⁶ Gay and Lesbian Pride Festival of Central Pennsylvania, Program, 17 to 25 July 1993, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

²⁷ Pride Coalition of Central Pennsylvania, Pride Festival of Central Pennsylvania Program, 31 July 1994, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

²⁸ Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 183.

festival regulars like Bobbi Carmitchell, Natalie Darkes, and the Harrisburg Men's Chorus, as well as Katie Dunton, Lily White and Company, Andy Pushnik, and the Central Pennsylvania Womyn's Chorus.²⁹

The 1995 Pride Festival, with the new theme "Pride on the Rise," continued to grow. Several new developments included receiving sponsorships from local corporations for the event, establishing a CAT Trolley to transport attendees to and from downtown and Reservoir Park, and organizing children's activities such as face painting and games thanks to the Central Pennsylvania Womyn's Chorus.³⁰ Additionally, politics entered the festival in 1995, with Candace Gingrich, half-sister of Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the United States House of Representatives, making an appearance to advocate for LGBTQ+ civil rights.³¹ Festival organizers in previous years steered away from adding a political dimension to the event, instead focusing on the creation of an annual celebration by and for the local LGBTQ+ community. Another unique feature at the 1995 event included the distribution of the first prototype of a new magazine, *Crossroads*. Spearheaded by Dr. Eric W. Selvey, *Crossroads* was a bimonthly publication created specifically for Central Pennsylvania's LGBTQ+ community, as most LGBTQ+ periodicals available in the region at the time came from other metropolitan areas. Selvey writes the goal of *Crossroads* is "to bring the inhabitants of Lancaster, Harrisburg, York and the surrounding environs together in a way not achieved since the inception of the Community Awareness Council of Central PA."³² *Crossroads* captured the spirit of the Pride

²⁹ Pride Coalition, Program, 1994; Pride Coalition of Central Pennsylvania, Festival Report, 1994, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

³⁰ Jill Devine, "Pride on the Rise and Coalition Image on the Mend," *Crossroads*, July 30, 1995, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA, 7.

³¹ Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 183.

³² Eric W. Selvey, "Publisher's Note," *Crossroads*, July 30, 1995, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA, 1.

Festival of Central PA, as both sought to connect the LGBTQ+ community throughout the Central Pennsylvania region's various enclaves.

b. Harrisburg Area Community College (1996-1998)

For the 1996 festival, there were a few changes. Under the direction of Ken Oakes with support from the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard of Harrisburg, the festival moved from its home at Reservoir Park to Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC). The decision to move to HACC's campus was also accompanied by charging attendees a \$2.00 admission fee and shifting the event from a Sunday to a Saturday.³³ Additionally, Stephen D. Reed, then mayor of Harrisburg, proclaimed July 22-27, 1996, "Pride Festival Week."³⁴ This acknowledgment marked the first time any Harrisburg mayor officially recognized an entire week leading up to the Pride Festival, rather than just the single-day event. Other changes at the 1996 festival included the creation of the first Pride of Susquehanna Awards to celebrate the achievements of residents whose work benefitted the local LGBTQ+ community. Recipients of the first awards were Candace Gingrich for her public advocacy work with the Human Rights Campaign and Joy K. Ufema for her role as director of York House Hospice, which provided end-of-life medical care to AIDS patients.³⁵ With each of these changes, the Pride Festival of Central PA continued to evolve and establish itself as a staple event to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community in the region.

The Pride Festival returned to HACC for two more years. The political dimension continued to expand at the festival, with both the 1997 and 1998 events featuring an appearance

³³ Pride Coalition of Central Pennsylvania, Pride Festival of Central Pennsylvania Program, 27 July 1996, LGBT-023 Teresa "Teddy" Maurer Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

³⁴ Pride Coalition, Program, 1996.

³⁵ Pride Coalition, Program, 1996.

by Rita Addressa, longtime director of the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force, who collected signatures and advocated for the creation of statewide antidiscrimination laws protecting LGBTQ+ individuals.³⁶ Unlike previous iterations of the festival, 1997 and 1998 saw the first public protests against the Pride Festival, with one protestor holding a sign stating “Repent or Perish” and “God is angry with the wicked every day.”³⁷ Despite these protests, attendees were relatively unbothered by their appearance and still visited the HACC campus to celebrate Pride in the Central Pennsylvania region. After the protests, however, some of the college’s board members expressed their discomfort with allowing the festival to continue at HACC.³⁸ Soon after, it became clear to festival organizers that HACC would no longer be a viable option for the Pride Festival.

c. Riverfront Park (1999-2017)

The decision to no longer host the Pride Festival at HACC prompted the need to search for a new location. Following the 1998 festival, Tina Manoogian-King, then director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Harrisburg, expressed to longtime festival organizer Dr. Eric W. Selvey desires from several local officials to bring the Pride Festival back to downtown Harrisburg.³⁹ Soon after, efforts began to search for the event’s new home. According to Selvey, Reservoir Park was no longer an option as it would soon become the site for the new National Civil War Museum, and another popular destination, City Island, was not considered due to its previous associations in the mid-1980s as a gay cruising site.⁴⁰ In the end, Riverfront Park was selected as the new location for the Pride Festival, where it would remain for nearly 20 years.

³⁶ Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 184.

³⁷ Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 184.

³⁸ Selvey, interview.

³⁹ Selvey, interview.

⁴⁰ Selvey, interview.

With this new location, the festival became a highly visible event right along Front Street and the Susquehanna River. In 1999, Pride Festival distinguished itself from the Open Air and Unity Festivals by truly becoming a publicly visible celebration of the LGBTQ+ community in Central Pennsylvania.

The 1999 festival was held on July 31, drawing attendees from the LGBTQ+ community and beyond. To mark the festival's new direction and to entice crowds to visit Riverfront Park, event organizers booked gay icon and R&B singer CeCe Peniston, best known for her hit song "Finally."⁴¹ This decision worked, as an estimated three times as many people attended the 1999 festival compared to the 1998 event.⁴² At the same time, attendance was high considering the event conflicted with Lilith Fair, the popular 1990s traveling feminist music festival, which returned to nearby Hershey on the same date and featured headlining performances from Sarah McLachlan, Sheryl Crow, and the Pretenders (led by Chrissie Hynde).⁴³ Despite the success of the Pride Festival, the move to Riverfront Park was not celebrated by all citizens, as individuals opposed to LGBTQ+ civil rights strongly disapproved of the City of Harrisburg's support of the festival. In one instance, morning hosts on Radio 580AM, a local radio station, criticized the decision to allow the festival to occur in Riverfront Park as it placed LGBTQ+ Pride "right in your face!"⁴⁴ While the hosts repeated this refrain in a derogatory manner, these comments captured the sense that the Pride Festival was now a highly visible event and would thereafter exist as an integral celebration for the entire community.

⁴¹ Sandy Cullen, "Peniston set to sing at Gay Pride Festival," *The Patriot-News*, July 30, 1999, LGBT-023 Theresa "Teddy" Maurer Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA, E1; Selvey, interview.

⁴² Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 185.

⁴³ Sean L. McCarthy, "Women of song bring Lilith Fair to Hershey," *The Patriot-News*, July 30, 1999, LGBT-023 Theresa "Teddy" Maurer Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA, E1.

⁴⁴ Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 186; Edward T. Hoffman, "Cafeteria Christianity," *The Patriot-News*, August 8, 1999, B14.

Following the success of the 1999 event, Riverfront Park remained the home for the Pride Festival until 2017. Over the years, several new traditions appeared to enhance the festival experience for attendees and to celebrate Pride in the Central Pennsylvania region. In 2002, the first annual Central Pennsylvania Gay and Lesbian Film Festival occurred at Midtown Cinema simultaneously with the Pride Festival, before shifting to a fall event in 2003 and 2004.⁴⁵ Additionally, the 2003 festival featured a mass commitment ceremony for 15 gay and lesbian couples, the first type of celebration at any Pride event across Pennsylvania.⁴⁶ This ceremony continued for several years and paralleled recent fervor across the nation following the passage of *Lawrence v. Texas* and the legalization of same-sex marriage in several states, including in Pennsylvania in 2014, and then nationally in 2015 through *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Other traditions followed to establish Pride as a weekend event, including the creation of a Friday evening Voices United Concert in 2006 featuring various LGBTQ+ and allied choral groups from Central Pennsylvania, as well as a Sunday morning Spirits United LGBTQ+ affirming interfaith service in 2007.⁴⁷ Both the Voices United Concert and the Spirits United service continue today. The festival briefly hosted the Central PA PrideFest Unity Parade, which occurred from 2006 to 2010, and then only once more in 2012, ending due to decreasing attendance and rising costs.⁴⁸ Like previous iterations of the festival, numerous music headliners performed over the years to draw crowds to Riverfront Park. To celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Pride Festival in 2017,

⁴⁵ Pride Festival of Central PA, *Official Pride Guide*, 27 July 2002, LGBT-021 LGBT Center of Central PA Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA; *The Lavender Letter*, Newsletter, October 2004, LGBT-009 Lavender Letter Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

⁴⁶ *The Lavender Letter*, Newsletter, July 2003, LGBT-009 Lavender Letter Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA; Burton and Loveland, *Out in Central Pennsylvania*, 186.

⁴⁷ Pride Festival of Central PA, *Official Pride Guide*, 29 July 2017, LGBT-021 LGBT Center of Central PA Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

⁴⁸ Pride Festival of Central PA, "History of Pride," <https://centralpapride.org/history-of-pride/>.

Martha Wash, an R&B singer and member of the Weather Girls, best known for their gay anthem “It’s Raining Men,” performed at the event.⁴⁹

d. Pennsylvania State Capitol (2018-2019)

Brad Martin, then president of the Pride Festival, and other organizers were ready to return to Riverfront Park for the 2018 event; however, the Susquehanna River flooded due to severe storms, making Riverfront Park unsafe for attendees. In response, Governor Tom Wolf and state representatives Patty Kim and Brian Sims welcomed the festival to Soldiers’ Grove Memorial Park, located on the grounds of the Pennsylvania State Capitol Complex.⁵⁰ Like previous installments, the festival was successful, with thousands attending the event and enjoying food, local vendors, and entertainment, including a headlining appearance by drag performer Alaska Thunderfuck.⁵¹ Moving the festival to a new location on short notice signifies the importance of this event not only to the LGBTQ+ community, but also to the Central Pennsylvania region as a whole. At the same time, this move also made history, with the 2018 Pride Festival of Central PA becoming the first Pride celebration to take place on any state capitol grounds across the United States.⁵²

The success of the 2018 festival prompted organizers to return to the Pennsylvania State Capitol Complex in 2019. This year was an important milestone for many Pride celebrations across the nation, as it marked 50 years since the Stonewall riots in 1969. To recognize this legacy, organizers of the Pride Festival of Central PA created the theme “50th Anniversary of the

⁴⁹ Pride Festival, *Pride Guide*, 2017.

⁵⁰ Mark Pynes, “Relocated Harrisburg Pride Fest rocks the Capitol,” *The Patriot-News*, July 28, 2018, https://www.pennlive.com/life/2018/07/relocated_harrisburg_pride_fes.html.

⁵¹ Pride Festival of Central PA, *Official Pride Guide*, 28 July 2018, LGBT-014 Barry Loveland Collection, LGBT History Project, Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA.

⁵² Jillian Atelsek, “Annual Central Pa. Pride Festival brings thousands to State Capitol,” *The Patriot-News*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2019/07/annual-central-pa-pride-festival-brings-thousands-to-state-capitol.html>.

Stonewall Uprising and 50 Years of LGBT+ Liberation” for the 2019 festival, which featured a headlining appearance by Aja, a former contestant from *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.⁵³ This theme coupled with the festival’s location provided an apt retrospective of the progress achieved for Central Pennsylvania’s LGBTQ+ community, to go from private gatherings in an era of heightened violence and discrimination to a public Pride festival held on state capitol grounds amidst increasing LGBTQ+ civil rights. Many challenges persist today; however, the Pride Festival of Central PA exists as a reminder for how far the region’s LGBTQ+ community has come.

e. COVID-19 and New Directions (2020-present)

As with other celebrations across the world, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic forced festival organizers to cancel the event in 2020, and then subsequently in 2021 to mitigate community spread.⁵⁴ These cancellations disappointed LGBTQ+ residents, many of whom looked forward to the region’s annual celebration. Over the years, the Pride Festival of Central PA has been a vital event which ensures the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community in a relatively conservative region, allows residents to form connections with other LGBTQ+ individuals and allies, and advances discussions pertaining to LGBTQ+ civil rights. For these reasons, local variety show troupe Sundae Best decided to host a Pride celebration in lieu of the 2021 festival cancellation. The group hosted a COVID-safe event near the Broad Street Market, partnered with Open Stage, Midtown Cinema, Gamut Theatre Group, Brownstone Lounge, and Stallions to organize activities throughout the week, and donated ticket proceeds to the LGBT Center of

⁵³ Pride Festival of Central PA, *Official Pride Guide*, 27 July 2019, http://cdn1.creativecirclemedia.com/pnjmagazines/files/20190621-073702-CV_PrideGuide19-F.pdf.

⁵⁴ Deb Kiner, “Pride Festival of Central Pa. canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic,” *The Patriot-News*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.pennlive.com/coronavirus/2020/05/pride-festival-of-central-pa-canceled-because-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic.html>; Becky Metrick, “Pride 2021 canceled due to COVID-19 concerns,” *The Patriot-News*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2021/03/pride-2021-canceled-due-to-covid-19-concerns.html>.

Central PA and GLO Harrisburg.⁵⁵ Though not as large as the annual Pride Festival, this event demonstrates the resiliency of the LGBTQ+ community in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

After a nearly three-year absence since the last festival in 2019, the Pride Festival of Central PA returned to the city of Harrisburg in 2022. The 30th Anniversary Pride Festival took place on Saturday, July 30th at Emergency Responders Plaza, located on the Capitol grounds near the State Museum of Pennsylvania. The event featured performances from Brandon Parsons, Jelli Jive, the Harrisburg Gay Men’s Chorus, and the Central Pennsylvania Womyn’s Chorus, as well as drag shows, a Family Zone, food trucks, regional vendors, and more.⁵⁶ Reflecting on the event’s return and the meaning of the Pride Festival of Central PA to the region, longtime festival planning committee member Cathy Nelson says “throughout history, everyone has decided who we are... The Pride Festival is showing you who we are.”⁵⁷ Local residents look forward to the opportunity to celebrate Pride and to participate in future installments of the festival.

⁵⁵ Megan Magensky, “Harrisburg groups step up to organize Pride, despite official fest being cancelled,” *CBS 21 News*, July 25, 2021, <https://local21news.com/news/local/harrisburg-groups-step-up-to-organize-pride-despite-official-fest-being-cancelled>.

⁵⁶ Susan Ryder, “30 Years Strong: Pride Festival of Central PA returns to the Capitol grounds for a landmark anniversary,” *TheBurg*, June 30, 2022, <https://theburgnews.com/in-the-burg/30-years-strong-pride-festival-of-central-pa-returns-to-the-capitol-grounds-for-a-landmark-anniversary>.

⁵⁷ Ryder, “30 Years Strong.”