

# **A Timeline of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in the United States**

**Adapted with permission from *Out of the Past: 400 Years of Lesbian and Gay History in America* (Byard, E. 1997, [www.pbs.org/outofthepast](http://www.pbs.org/outofthepast)) with additions and updates from *Bending the Mold: An Action Kit for Transgender Youth* (NYAC & Lambda Legal); *The American Gay Rights Movement: A Timeline*; *Just the Facts about Sexual Orientation and Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators, and School Personnel* (Just the Facts Coalition).**

**Additional materials and study guide by GSAFE ([www.gsafewi.org](http://www.gsafewi.org))**

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## READ MORE

This resource has primarily been adapted from PBS Online's *Out of the Past: 400 Years Lesbian and Gay History in America* (Byard, E., 1997, [www.pbs.org/outofthepast/](http://www.pbs.org/outofthepast/)). The interactive timeline online allows users to click on dates to read details about people, policies, and events that have shaped the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people living in the United States.

Several items on the PBS timeline online expand to reveal more details and in-depth descriptions. These have been marked with the bolded words **READ MORE** on this document.

Three examples of the expanded readings you will find online are shared at the end of this document. We encourage you and your students to go online to **READ MORE** about the people, places, and events that capture your attention.

Each item on this timeline, of course, offers an opportunity to read more. The PBS site includes an extensive bibliography for further research and exploration. GSA for Safe Schools also offers a bibliography of suggested reading in LGBT history.

## WATCH

Six of the people featured on the PBS timeline are profiled in the documentary *Out of the Past* and have been marked with the bolded words **WATCH** on this document. These individuals are:

- Michael Wigglesworth
- Sarah Orne Jewett
- Henry Gerber
- Bayard Rustin
- Barbara Gittings
- Kelli Peterson

The documentary is available for purchase through various retail and online stores for about \$10. It is an excellent resource for your GSA and school library.

The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) published a teachers' guide to accompany the documentary. The 31-page resource contains historical context, ideas for discussion, and suggested assignments for each of the video's six segments. A glossary, bibliography and resource section are also included. The teachers' guide is available as a free download from the GLSEN website ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)).

Many additional films and documentaries have captured the events, individuals, and issues that have shaped and defined the progress of the LGBT community in the U.S.

## Ways to Use this Timeline

This timeline was designed as a starting point for classroom and student club discussions, exploration, and research. A sample lesson plan is included. However, there are many additional ways to use this resource.

The timeline can be printed, copied, and posted in full or in part in the classroom, on a bulletin board, or in a display case.

Another option is to search the timeline and build smaller timelines based around themes ("Famous Lesbian," "LGBT People of Color," "LGBT People and the Military") or time periods ("The Modern Gay Rights Movement," "Early Gay American History").

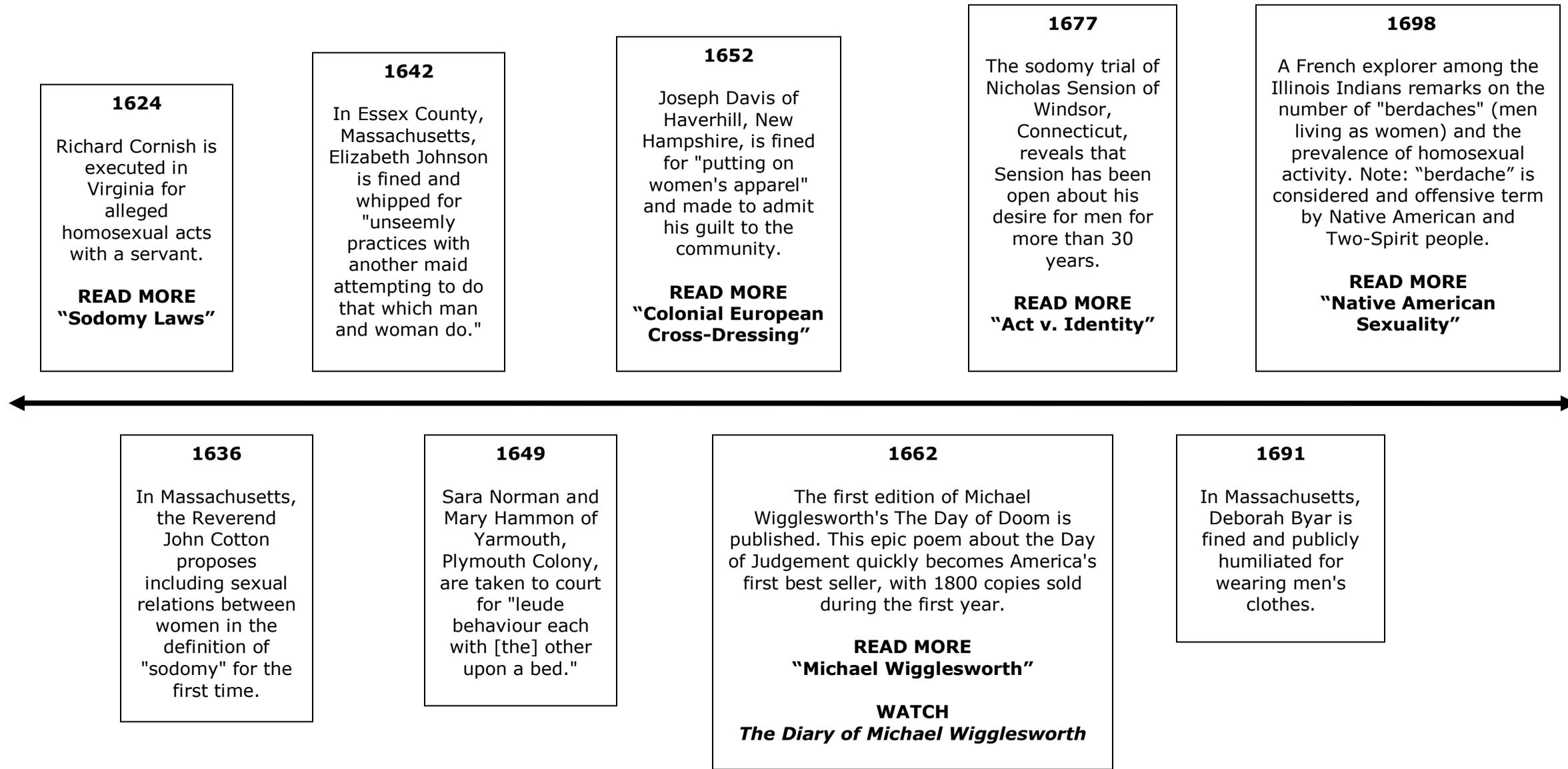
Make your own version of LGBT Jeopardy and divide your class or club into teams. Create a multiple choice quiz from the timeline and post the group results in your room. Consider taking the quiz as a school staff.

Use the timeline as the starting point for research projects. Another class or group project could involve researching and presenting local LGBT history and/or gathering oral histories.

Hold a movie night or show segments of films or documentaries in your classroom that profile people and events from the timeline.

Create a library display feature books with LGBT themes or by LGBT authors.

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**1624**  
 Richard Cornish is executed in Virginia for alleged homosexual acts with a servant.  
**READ MORE**  
**"Sodomy Laws"**

**1642**  
 In Essex County, Massachusetts, Elizabeth Johnson is fined and whipped for "unseemly practices with another maid attempting to do that which man and woman do."

**1652**  
 Joseph Davis of Haverhill, New Hampshire, is fined for "putting on women's apparel" and made to admit his guilt to the community.  
**READ MORE**  
**"Colonial European Cross-Dressing"**

**1677**  
 The sodomy trial of Nicholas Sension of Windsor, Connecticut, reveals that Sension has been open about his desire for men for more than 30 years.  
**READ MORE**  
**"Act v. Identity"**

**1698**  
 A French explorer among the Illinois Indians remarks on the number of "berdaches" (men living as women) and the prevalence of homosexual activity. Note: "berdache" is considered an offensive term by Native American and Two-Spirit people.  
**READ MORE**  
**"Native American Sexuality"**

**1636**  
 In Massachusetts, the Reverend John Cotton proposes including sexual relations between women in the definition of "sodomy" for the first time.

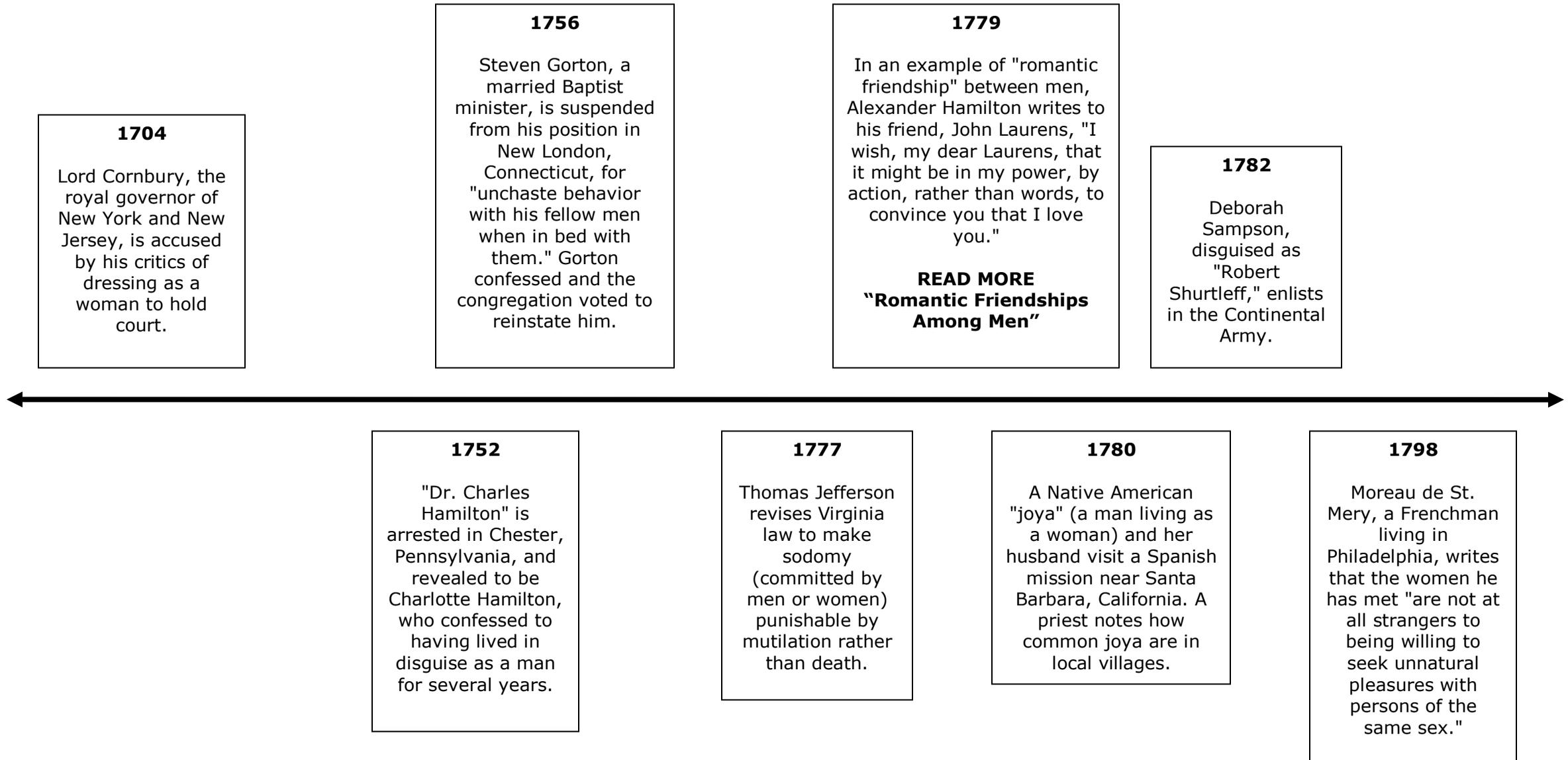
**1649**  
 Sara Norman and Mary Hammon of Yarmouth, Plymouth Colony, are taken to court for "leude behaviour each with [the] other upon a bed."

**1662**  
 The first edition of Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom* is published. This epic poem about the Day of Judgement quickly becomes America's first best seller, with 1800 copies sold during the first year.  
**READ MORE**  
**"Michael Wigglesworth"**  
**WATCH**  
***The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth***

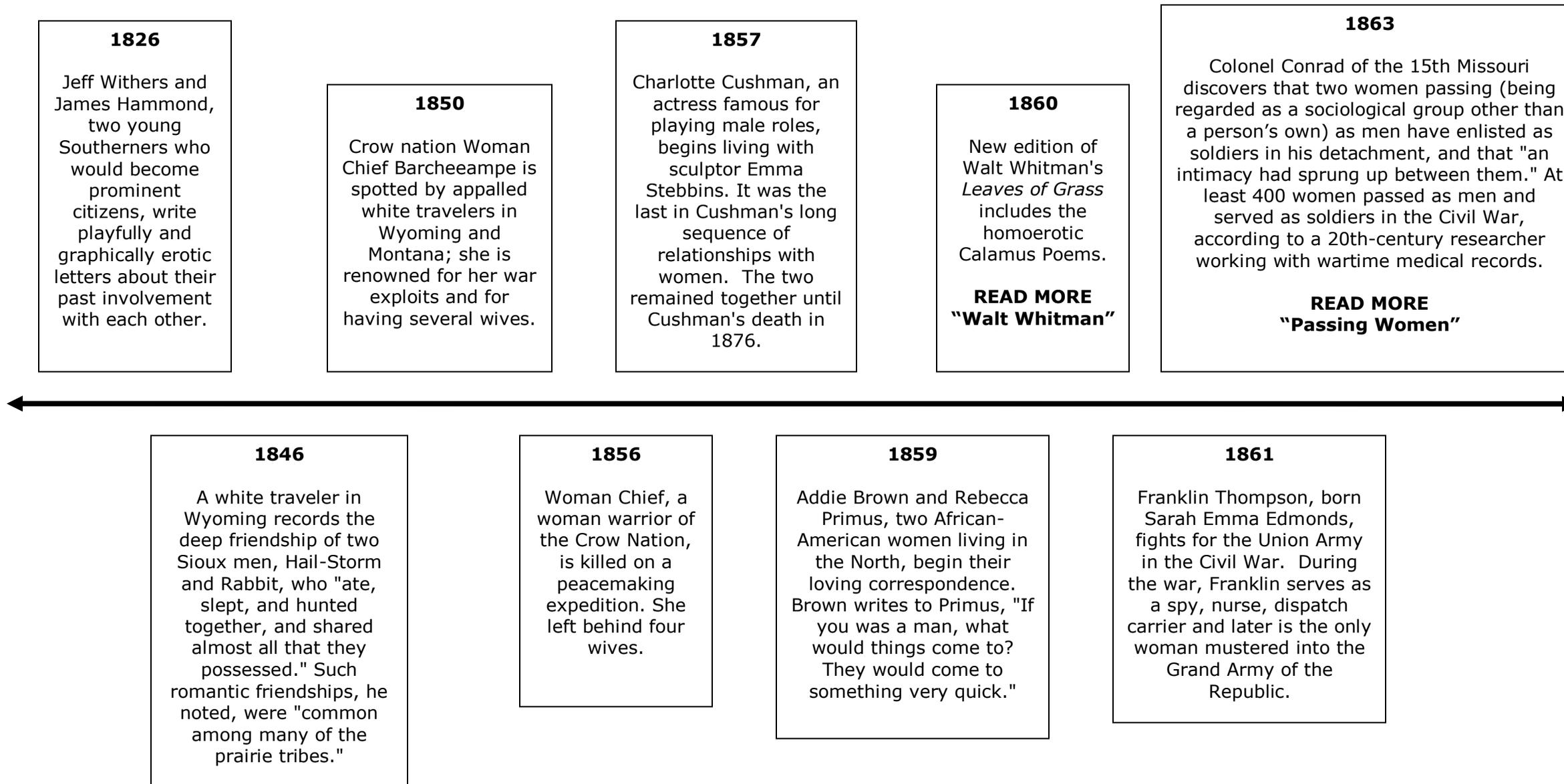
**1691**  
 In Massachusetts, Deborah Byar is fined and publicly humiliated for wearing men's clothes.

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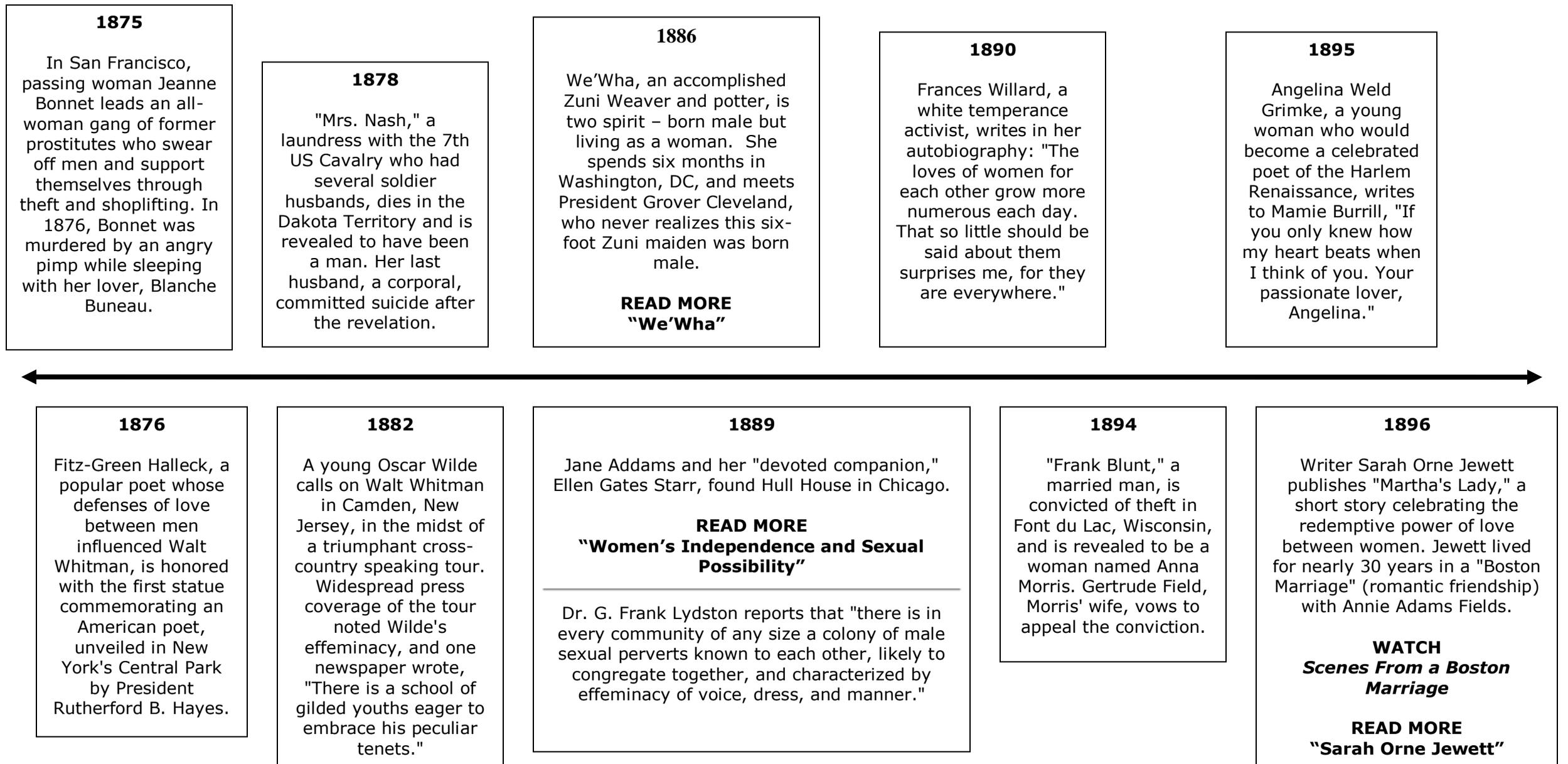


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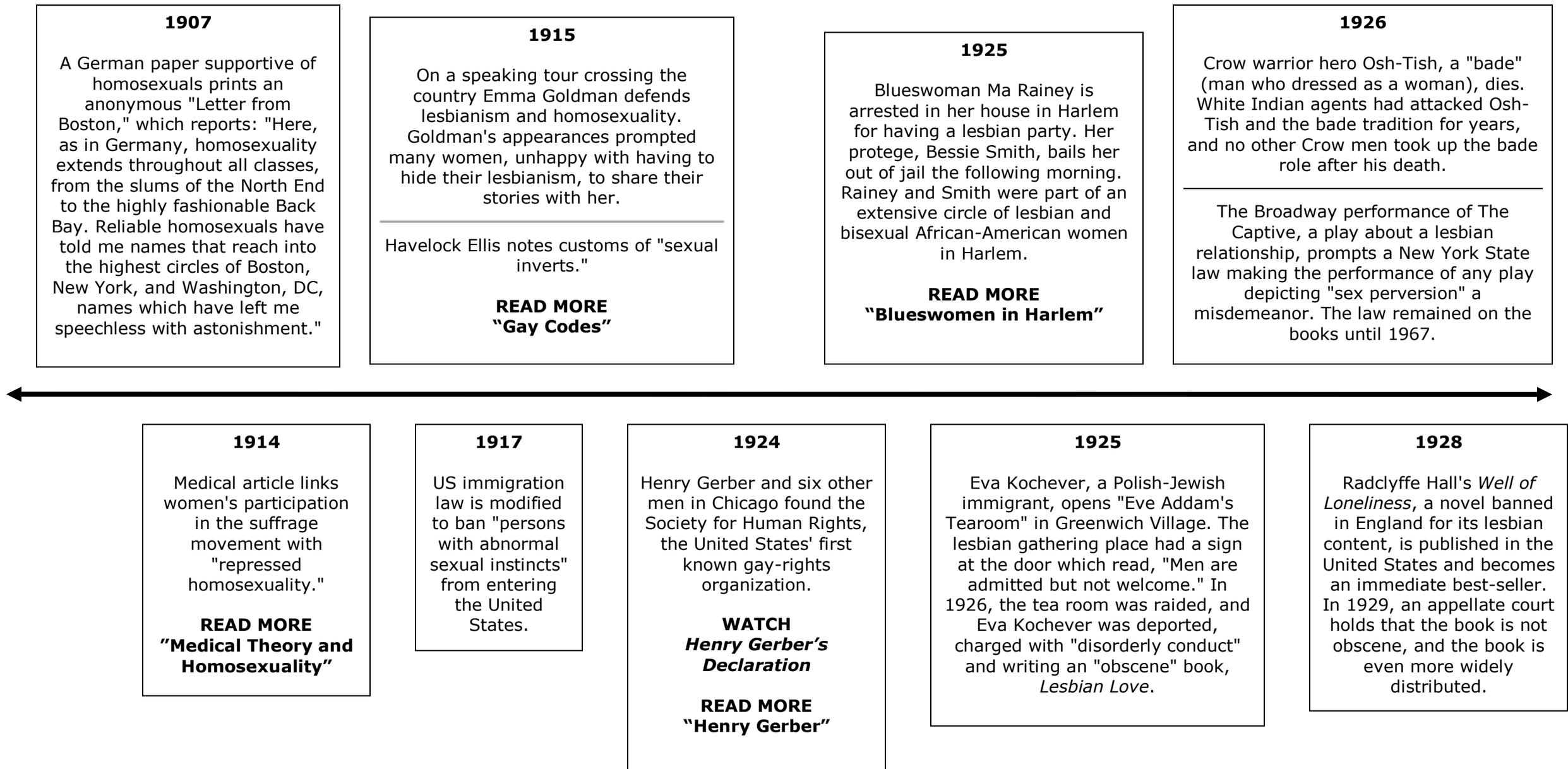


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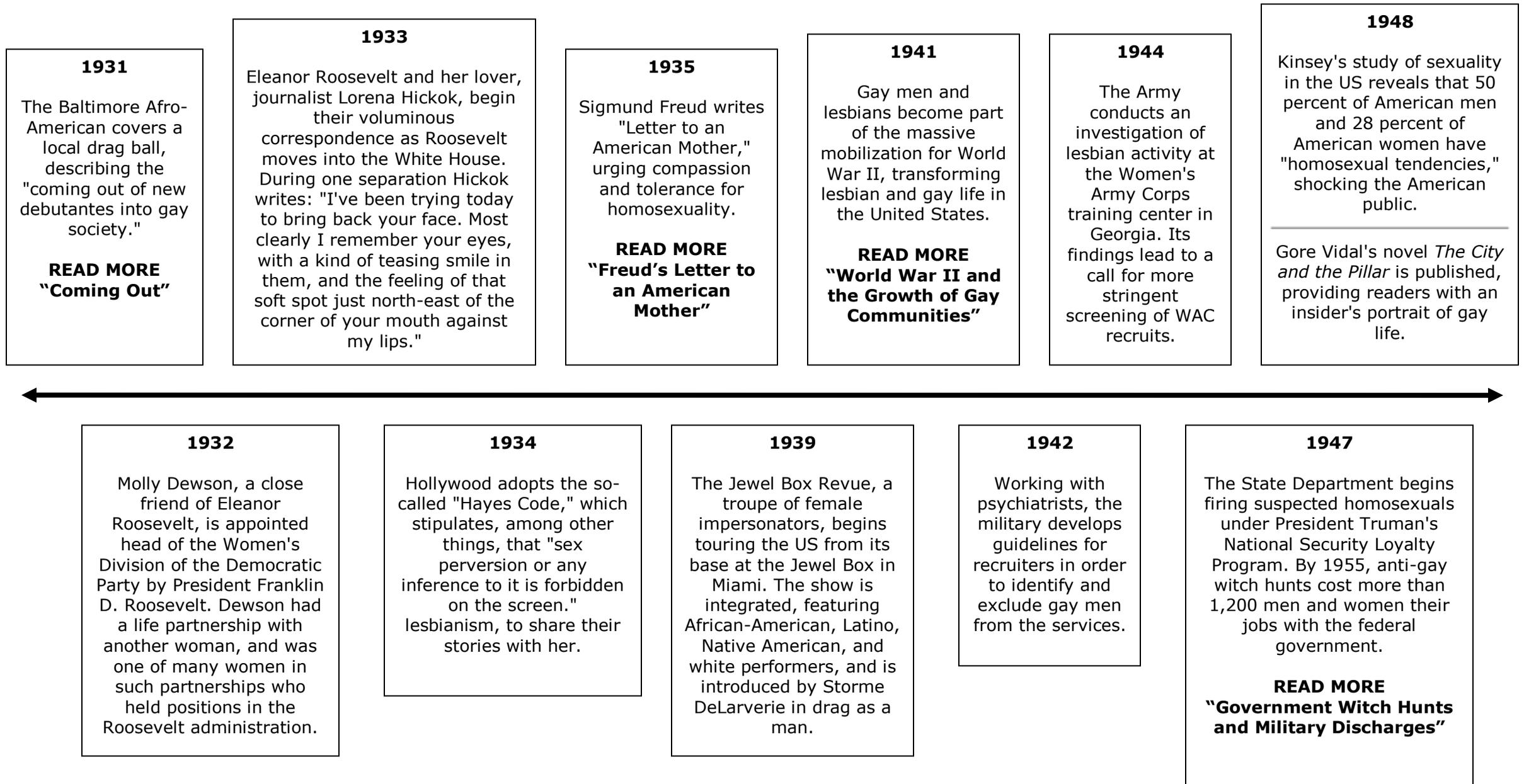


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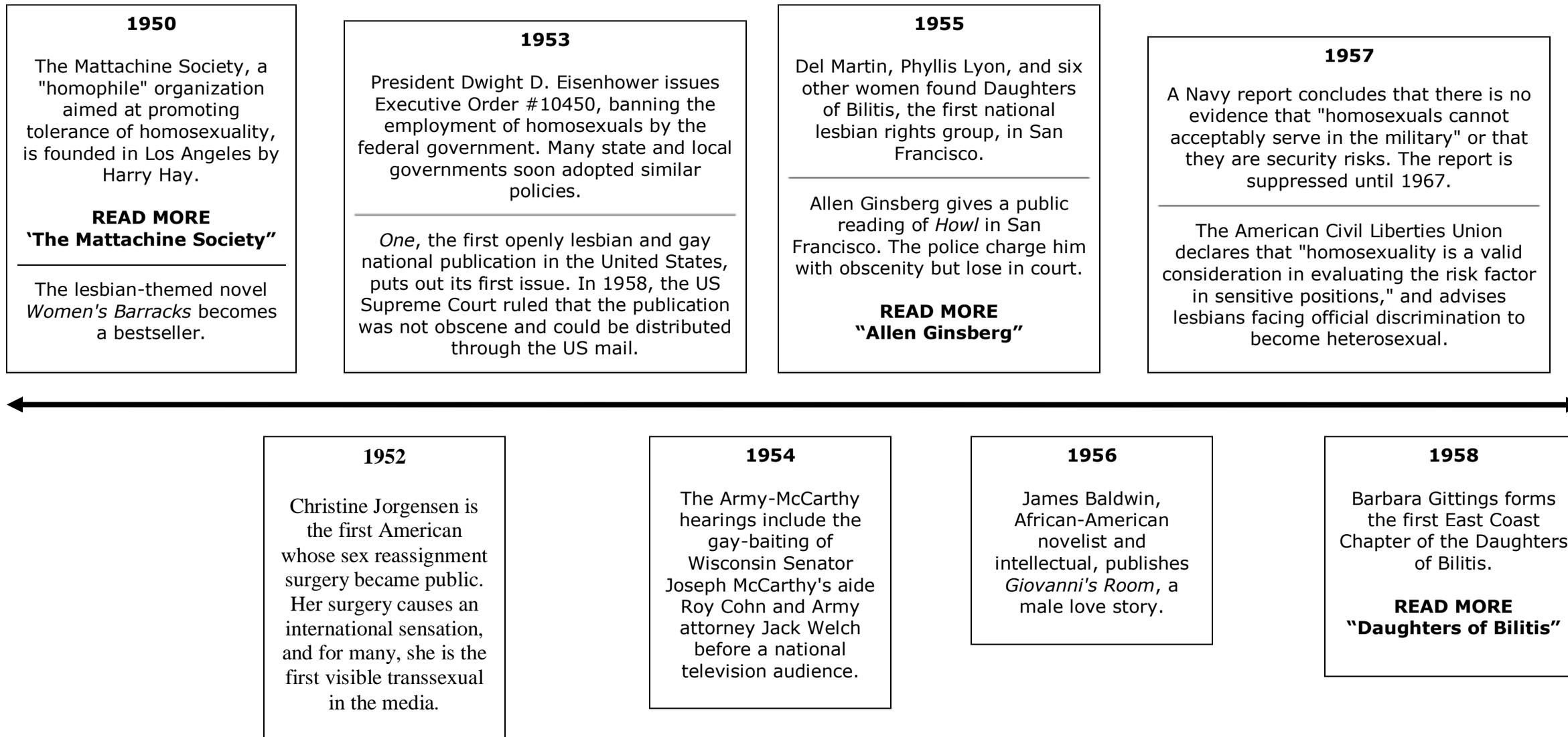
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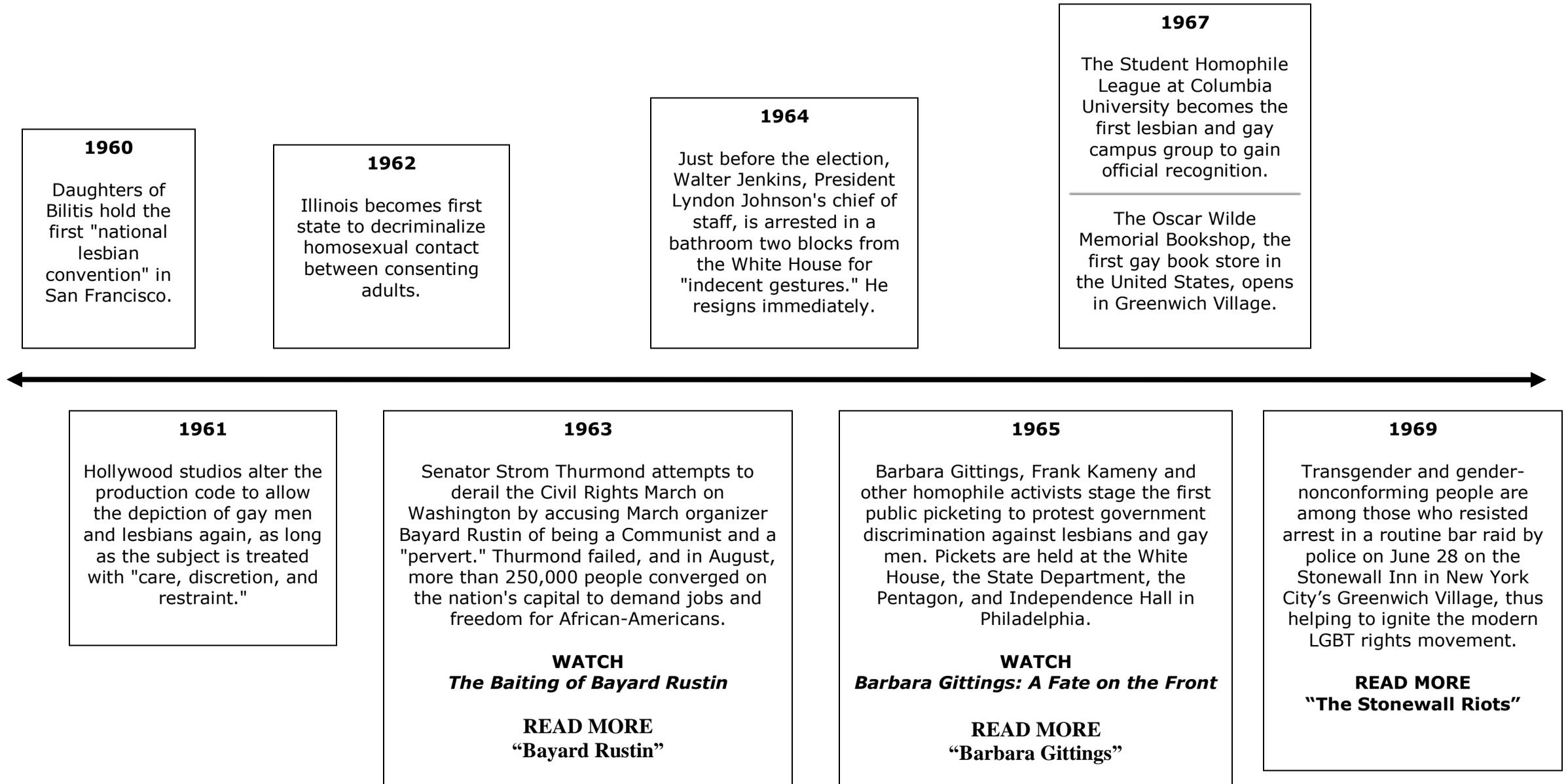
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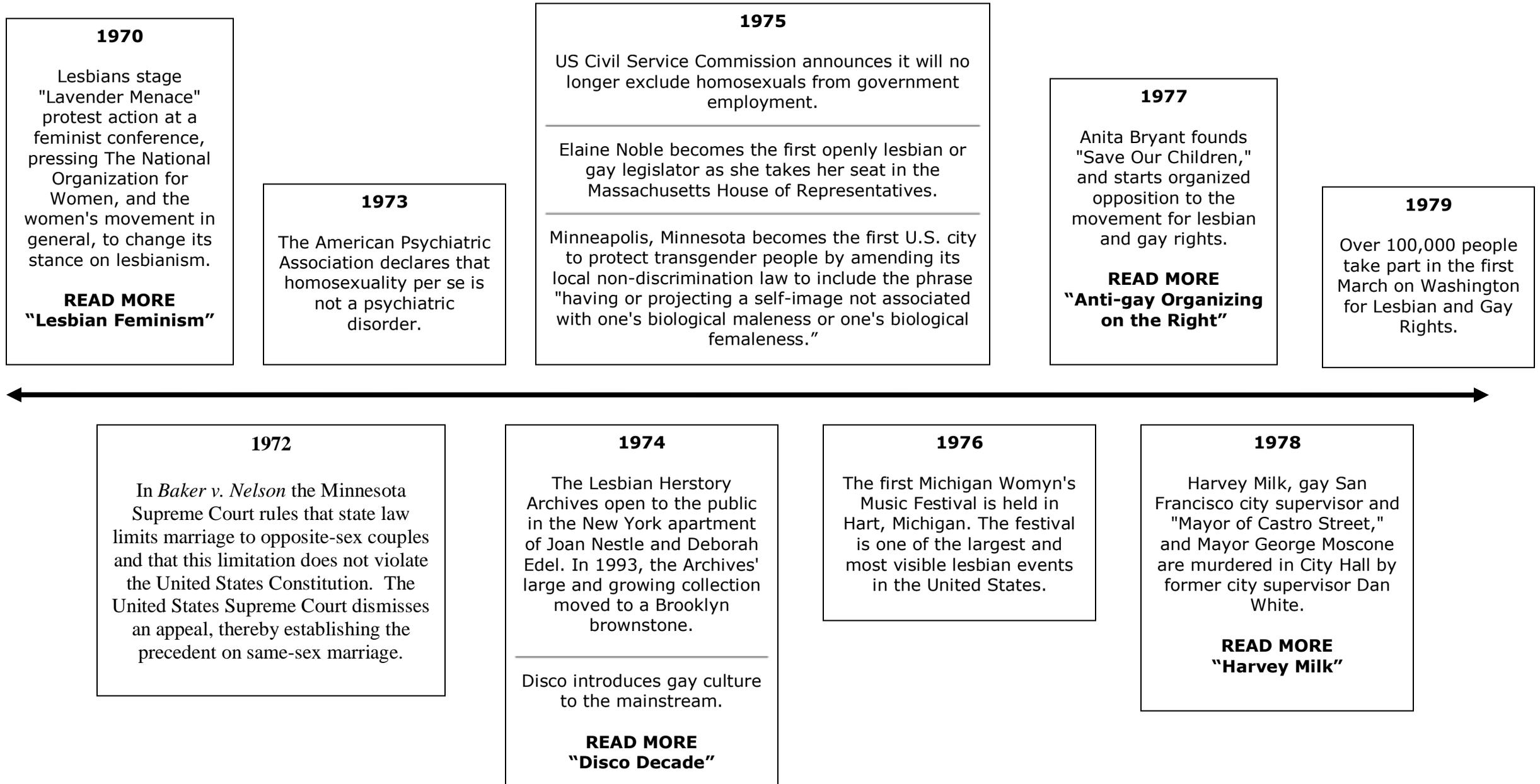
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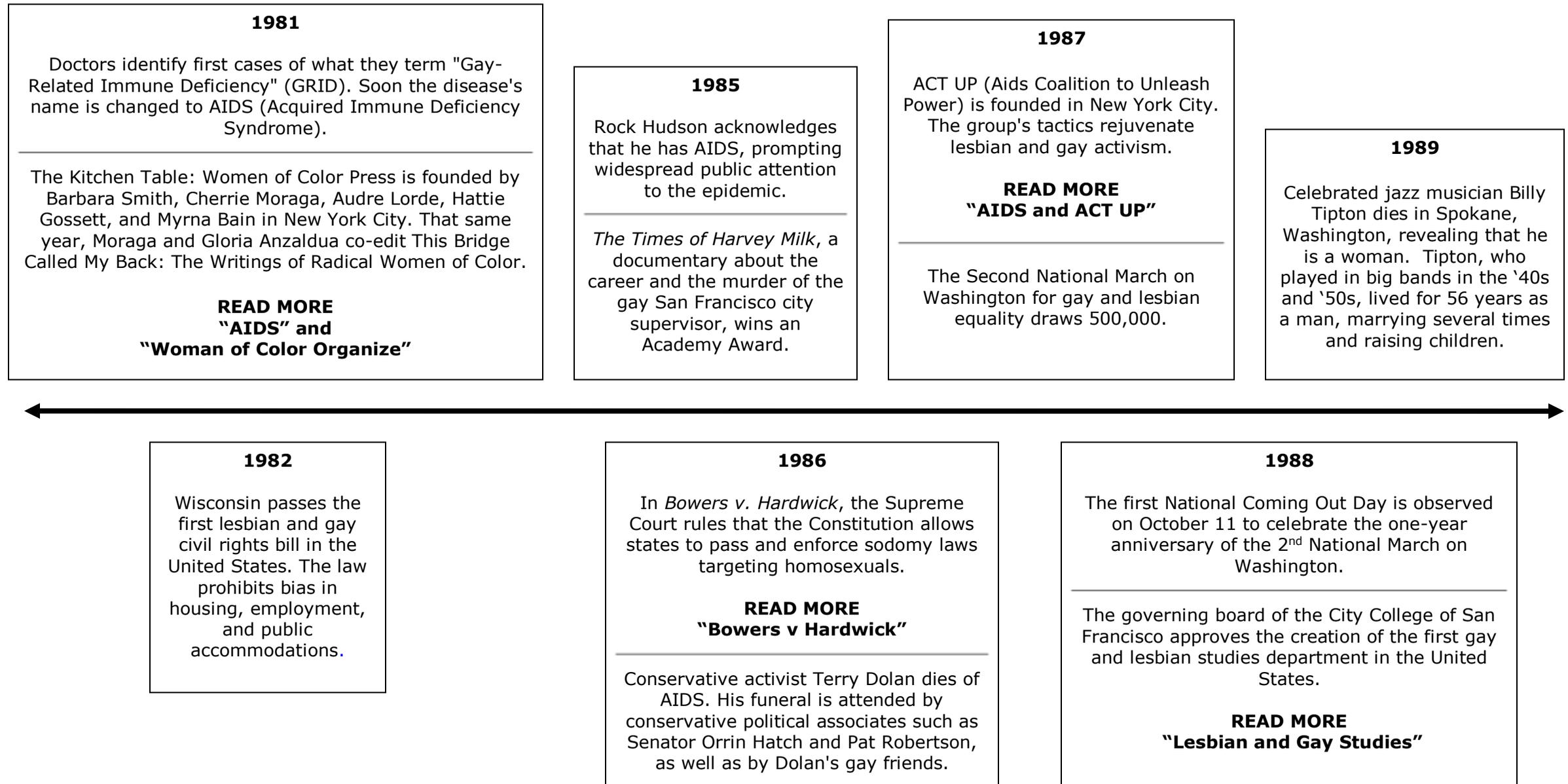
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# A Timeline of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in the United States

**1990**

The Gay and Lesbian Independent School Teachers Network (GLSTN) is founded. Only two known high school student clubs, known as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), exist in the US at the time.

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Term "outing" is coined by *Time* magazine to describe Michelangelo Signorile's campaign to identify closeted celebrities and elected officials.

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Policies restricting the immigration of lesbians and gays to the United States are rescinded. Immigration restrictions on people with HIV and AIDS, however, remain in place.

**1992**

Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde dies of breast cancer. At the time of her death, she was the poet laureate of New York State.

**1995**

President Bill Clinton signs an executive order forbidding the denial of security clearances on the basis of sexual orientation. Being closeted and vulnerable to blackmail, however, is still a possible grounds for a clearance denial.



**1991**

FTM activist Jamison "James" Green takes over Lou Sullivan's FTM newsletter and transforms it into FTM International, Inc., the world's largest information and networking group for female-to-male transgender people and transsexual men.

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Karen Thompson is named legal guardian of her lover, Sharon Kowalski, eight years after a car accident left Kowalski paralyzed and speech-impaired. Kowalski's family had refused to recognize the pair's relationship, and the ruling was a major victory for lesbian and gay couples.

**1993**

The Minnesota state legislature enacts the first statewide law banning discrimination against transgender people.

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Cheryl Chase founds the Intersex Society of North America to build awareness and offer support to intersex people.

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Transgender youth Brandon Teena is raped and murdered in Humboldt, Nebraska. This crime brings attention to transgender discrimination and violence and becomes the subject of the award-winning film, *Boys Don't Cry*.

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Senator Sam Nunn's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy for the US military becomes law. The law includes the determination that "persons who demonstrate a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts" are an "unacceptable risk" for inclusion in the military. Witch hunts against gay men and lesbians in the military continue to this day.

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The third lesbian and gay March on Washington draws over 1 million participants.

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**1996**

President Clinton signs the Defense of Marriage Act, denying federal benefits to same-sex spouses should gay marriage ever become legal, and creating an exception to the US Constitution to allow states to disregard same-sex marriages performed in other states.

Kelli Peterson founds a Gay-Straight Alliance at East High School in Salt Lake City, Utah. The city school board bans all "non-curricular" student clubs in order to keep the group from meeting.

**WATCH**  
*Kelli Peterson and a New Generation of Activists*

**READ MORE**  
"Kelli Peterson"

**1998**

Wisconsin Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin becomes the first openly gay person to win election to a first-term seat in Congress.

Matthew Shepard is tied to fence, beaten, and left to die by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson outside Laramie, WY on October 7<sup>th</sup>. The incident gains national media attention and sparks vigils around the world. Shepard dies five days later. His death inspires the award-winning play *The Laramie Project*

**1996 (cont)**

Students at the University of Virginia organize the first Day of Silence in response to a class assignment about non-violent protests.

A federal appeals court issues the first judicial opinion in US history finding that a public school could be held constitutionally accountable for not stopping antigay abuse. Ashland, WI school officials knew of anti-gay abuse directed at student Jamie Nabozny but did not intervene. Those officials later offer a settlement of nearly \$1 million to Nabozny.

In *Romer v. Evans*, the Supreme Court strikes down Colorado's Amendment 2, which denied gays and lesbians protections against discrimination, calling them "special rights." According to Justice Anthony Kennedy, "We find nothing special in the protections Amendment 2 withholds. These protections . . . constitute ordinary civil life in a free society."

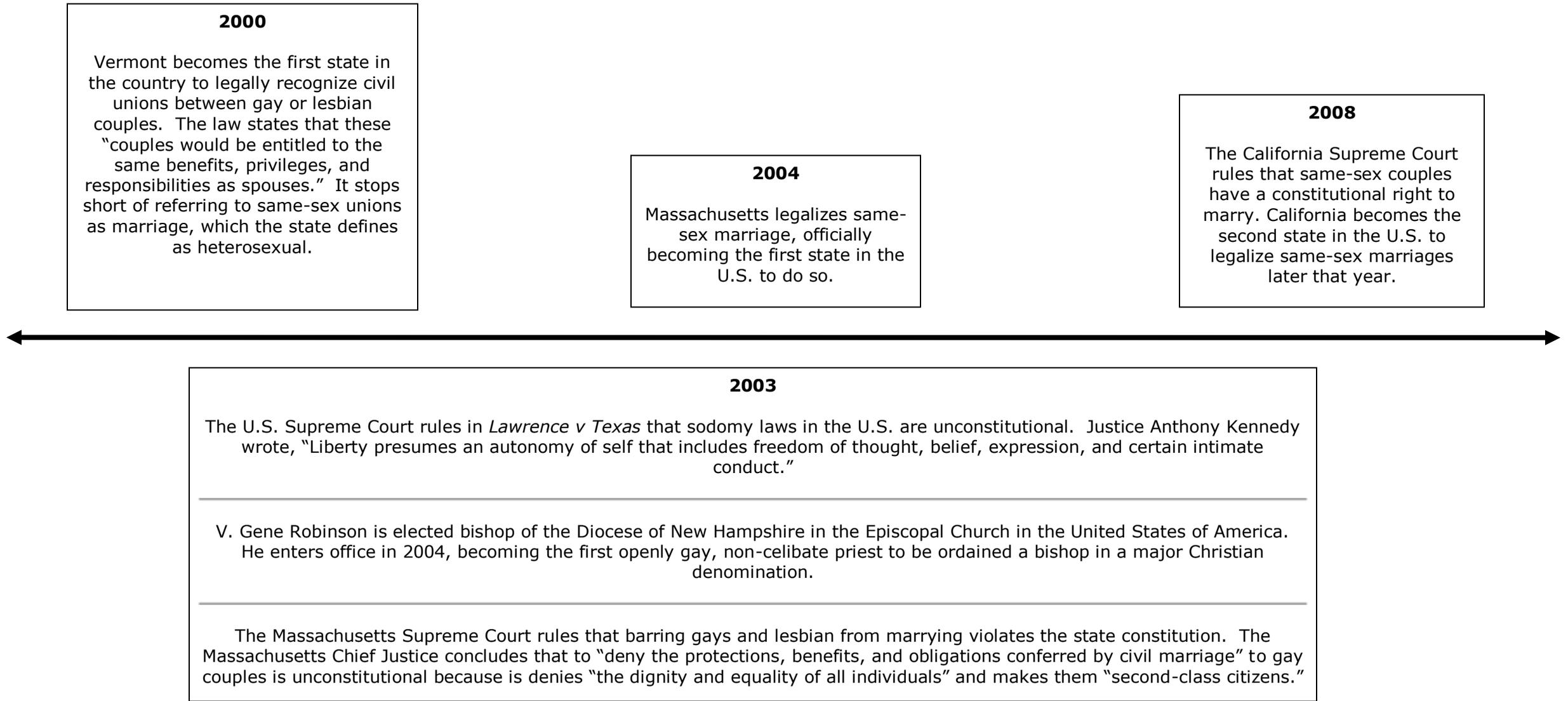
**1997**

Trans Activist Leslie Feinberg published *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, a who's who of transgender people throughout world history that traces the roots of transgender oppression.

**1999**

The American Counseling Association Governing Council adopts a position "opposing 'reparative therapy' as a 'cure' for individuals who are homosexual." Numerous medical, health, and mental health organizations – representing over 480,000 professionals – adopt position the "homosexuality is not a mental disorder and thus not something that needs to be or can be 'cured.'"

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## 1624 - Sodomy Laws

European colonial governments sought to control the sexual behavior of the people within their settlements. The British, French, and Spanish all passed laws regarding sex outside of marriage and "sodomy" - a range of same-sex sexual activities. In early British colonies, as under English law, sodomy was a capital crime (punishable by death). One of the earliest recorded convictions for sodomy in the colonies was that of Richard Cornish, a sea captain executed in Virginia for an alleged sexual assault on another man.

Colonial authorities were not always certain which sexual acts fell under the category of "sodomy." Religious leaders debated the point in the early 1600s, and the laws adopted by different colonies varied in what specific acts were punishable by death. Most only dealt with sexual acts between men. One law also covered sexual activity between women. Despite the severity of the laws, however, we know of only a few instances of executions in sodomy cases during the colonial period. People were more likely to be tried for the lesser offense of "lewd behavior," which did not incur the death penalty. Sodomy was a difficult charge to prove - two witnesses were required, and there was no possibility of a tell-tale pregnancy - and people may have been reluctant to place their neighbors' lives in jeopardy with such a dire accusation.

## 1652 - Colonial European Cross-dressing

Men dressing as women (and, to a lesser extent, women dressing as men) was not uncommon in European society, usually among common people in the context of social protests and Carnival celebrations. Men who cross-dressed were more likely to be in disguise or making a political statement than expressing anything about their sexual identity in the manner of a modern-day "drag queen." Colonial laws actually made it a crime to cross-dress, usually imposing a fine and some form of public contrition for the offense. Laws about what people could wear were generally intended to preserve social order and maintain a hierarchy within society, and were not directly concerned with homosexuality. However, evidence from England in the early 1700s indicates that there was some link between cross-dressing and male homosexuality in British popular culture. In London, observers wrote about a type of man referred to as a "mollie," who enjoyed sex with other men. Some mollies wore women's clothes. The accusations of cross-dressing lodged against New York's royal governor in 1704 may have been meant to make this association in order to ruin his reputation.

Women's motives for dressing as men were also probably mixed - to lodge a protest or to be in disguise. However, the possible sexual aspects of women's cross-dressing should not be overlooked. A writer describing Deborah Sampson's career as a male soldier during the Revolutionary War took great pains to explain Sampson's reported affairs with other women while disguised: "It must be supposed that she acted more from necessity than voluntary impulse of passion; and no doubt succeeded beyond her expectations, or desires."

## 1677 - Acts v. Identity

Looking at historical evidence of homosexual behavior, it is hard to figure out how people in the past understood and interpreted same-sex sexuality. In New England, for example, laws and religious thinkers condemned many different kinds of sexual activity (both heterosexual and homosexual) as sinful acts, but it is not clear whether people who engaged in sexual activity with people of the same sex were considered to be a different kind of person - like a "gay man" or a "lesbian" in modern society. It is also unclear whether all members of the society shared the official attitude toward homosexuality expressed by harsh anti-sodomy laws.

The 1677 sodomy trial of Nicholas Sension offers some interesting clues as to popular attitudes toward and perceptions of homosexual activities in colonial society. Historian Richard Godbeer points out that Sension had been open about his desire for other men for many years, and had not faced any serious punishment for his behavior despite his notoriety. His neighbors who testified in court had resisted his advances, but hadn't felt the need to report him to the authorities. Godbeer notes that witnesses at the trial also used language which might suggest that they understood Sension to be a different kind of person who was attracted to other men.