

The History of the Rainbow Flag

In April 2021, the GLBT Historical Society received an extraordinary archival donation from the Gilbert Baker Foundation: a fragment of one of the two original rainbow flags first raised on June 25, 1978, in San Francisco's United Nations Plaza for the Gay Freedom Day Parade. Long thought lost, this piece—displaying all eight of the original colours—is the only known surviving remnant of the inaugural flags created by Gilbert Baker and hand-dyed and stitched with volunteers including Lynn Segerblom (Faerie Argyle Rainbow), James McNamara, Glenne McElhinney, Joe Duran, and Paul Langlotz.

Baker, who arrived in San Francisco in 1972 during the early Gay Liberation movement, became known for his sewing talent and bold political artistry. In 1978, at the request of Supervisor Harvey Milk and other activists, he designed a new emblem for the LGBTQ community—a “rainbow of humanity” symbolizing diversity and empowerment.

The original flag had cost about \$1,000 to make and measured roughly 9 x 18 metres. However, practical constraints soon reshaped the design. In 1979, hot pink was removed due to fabric shortages, and turquoise was later dropped to allow an even number of stripes for streetlamp displays along Market Street. This produced the now-familiar six-stripe flag.



The two original eight-color rainbow flags flying at United Nations Plaza during San Francisco Gay Freedom Day 1978. A segment of the flag in the foreground, with the pink stripe at the top, was donated to the GLBT Historical Society in April 2021. Photograph by Mark Rennie, courtesy of the Gilbert Baker Foundation.



A view from the stage in front of San Francisco City Hall at the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade. The two rainbow flags can be seen flying in the far distance. Photograph by Crawford Barton, Crawford Barton. Collection (1993-11), GLBT Historical Society.

Who is Gilbert Baker?



Gilbert Baker sewing the mile-long rainbow flag for the 1994 New York City Stonewall 25 Pride Parade. Photographs by Mick Hicks, used with permission, all rights reserved; Gilbert Baker Flag Collection (2002-41), GLBT Historical Society.

Gilbert Baker (1951–2017) was an American artist, activist, and self-taught vexillographer best known for creating the rainbow flag, now a universal symbol of LGBTQ pride. Born in Kansas, he once joked that “unlike Dorothy, when the tornado came, I ran right for it, saying, “Take me away!” Drafted into the U.S. Army in 1970, he was stationed in San Francisco as a medic and ultimately settled there in 1972.

Amid the rising Gay Liberation movement, Baker's sewing skills and flair for dramatic visual expression quickly made him a central figure in the city's activist and artistic communities.

In 1978, he designed the original eight-stripe rainbow flag, a design that later evolved into the six-stripe version recognized worldwide.

Baker moved to New York in 1994, continuing to fuse art and social justice in his work. He travelled extensively, organizing and participating in cultural events centred on the flag. That same year, he created what was then the longest rainbow flag—a mile-long banner carried down First Avenue in Manhattan. In 2003, he surpassed his own record with a 1.25-mile-long flag unfurled through Key West, Florida.

Throughout his life, Baker produced large-scale banners, flags, and public artworks for protests, Pride celebrations, and human-rights causes. He spent decades championing the rainbow flag as a global emblem of LGBTQ identity. Baker died in 2017, leaving a legacy inseparable from modern queer history and activism

What is the GLBT Historical Society?

Founded in 1985, the GLBT Historical Society is a global leader in LGBTQ+ public history. The Society collects, preserves, exhibits, and makes accessible to the public materials and knowledge to support and promote understanding of LGBTQ+ history, culture, and arts in all their diversity. Its extensive archives document queer life in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond, housing personal papers, photographs, textiles, artworks, organizational records, and rare artifacts that chronicle decades of activism, community building, and cultural expression.

The Society operates both an archives and research center, as well as the GLBT Historical Society Museum, the first stand-alone LGBTQ+ history museum in the United States. With a mission of safeguarding LGBTQ+ cultural heritage, the Society supports scholarship and makes queer history accessible through exhibitions, public programs, and community partnerships.

Known for stewarding landmark collections—such as materials related to Harvey Milk, the AIDS crisis, and the creation of the rainbow flag—the Society plays a vital role in preserving stories often excluded from mainstream archives. Through wide ranging initiatives and community engagement, it ensures that stories like Baker's—and the broader histories of LGBTQ+ struggle, resilience, and creativity—remain accessible to researchers, educators, and the public.



Volunteers hoist one of the two original rainbow flags created for San Francisco Gay Freedom Day 1978. A segment cut from this flag was donated to the GLBT Historical Society in April 2021. Photograph by James McNamara, courtesy of Mick Hicks.

What the colours mean



Scan the QR code to learn more about the GLBT Historical Society or visit glbthistory.org



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Comhairle Cathrach Chorcaí
Cork City Council



The Rainbow Flag on display was gifted by the Gilbert Baker Foundation to the GLBT Historical Society.

The GLBT Historical Society has kindly lent the flag to Cork Public Museum.