

Kameny's work finds new home Library of Congress to preserve gay activist's 70,000 letters, documents

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Veteran D.C. gay rights leader Franklin E. Kameny has turned over more than 70,000 of his personal letters and documents to the Library of Congress, which will make them available to scholars and researchers.

At a ceremony scheduled for Oct. 6 at the library's ornate Thomas Jefferson Building across the street from the U.S. Capitol, library officials were expected to join Kameny and many of his longtime friends and supporters to commemorate the library's acquisition of the Kameny papers.

Kameny, 81, is credited with playing a lead role in launching the modern U.S. gay rights movement in the early 1960s after government officials discovered he was gay and fired him from his job as an astronomer with the Army Map Service.

In what gay activists see as a monumental twist of fate, the product of Kameny's work on gay rights causes for nearly 50 years will now be placed in the same Library of Congress Manuscript Division that holds original documents of Frederick Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, Susan B. Anthony and Bayard Rustin, among many other historic figures.

The Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History also has accepted a collection of 1960s-era protest and picket signs from the Kameny collection that Kameny and his supporters used for the nation's first-ever gay rights demonstrations in front of the White House.

"After examining the Kameny papers, Manuscript Division historians judged them to be a rich and valuable resource that would allow researchers to more accurately understand the evolution of the homosexual rights movement into a significant social and political force," said John Earl Haynes, a 20th century political historian at the Manuscript Division.

"The personal detail provided by the material on Mr. Kameny himself and those he assisted in similar circumstances is of unusual value," Haynes said.

"Nearly 50 years go, the United States government banned me from employment in public service because I am a homosexual, Kameny said in a statement. "This archive is not simply my story," he said. "It also shows how gay and lesbian Americans have joined the American mainstream story of expanded civil liberties in the 20th century.

"Today, by accepting these papers, the nation preserves not only our history, but marks how far gay and lesbian Americans have traveled on the road to civil equality," he said.

Haynes said officials with the Manuscript Division first contacted Kameny about obtaining his papers in 1995 after they read an article about Kameny's work by gay historian David K. Johnson. The article appeared in the official journal of the Historical Society of Washington.

Documents valued at \$75,000

Earlier this year, a group of gay rights advocates and supporters founded the Kameny Papers Project, an ad hoc group created to raise money to facilitate the transfer of the papers to the library, according to gay public relations executive Charles Francis, the lead organizer of the project.

Francis said the group's main purpose was to raise funds to buy the papers from Kameny — so that he could be compensated for his life's work — and then donate the documents to the Library of Congress.

Its first task was to help Kameny assemble the papers in an orderly fashion and to have them appraised by a professional document appraiser. The appraiser determined the papers had significant historic value and were worth \$75,000.

“With advancing years and limited means, Frank Kameny was not eligible for a federal tax deduction, as is common with such an extraordinary donation,” the Kameny Papers Project said in a statement.

Former California congressman and philanthropist Michael Huffington made the single largest contribution toward the purchase of the papers from Kameny, Francis said. **He said the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay political group, and the gay groups Gill Foundation, Bohnett Foundation, Log Cabin Republicans, Liberty Education Fund and the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force also contributed to the fund.**

Others firms and individuals that provided pro-bono services or contributions included Francis, New York gay businessman Donald Capoccia, the gay public relations firm Witeck-Combs Communications, the Joiner Law Firm, attorney Michele Zavos and activists Gregory King, Elizabeth Koontz, and Ellen Ratner, according to the Kameny Papers Project.

Huffington and Capoccia have been longtime contributors to Log Cabin Republicans, and Francis is one of the founders of the Republican Unity Coalition, which has billed itself as a gay-straight alliance of prominent Republicans that support gay civil rights.

Kameny vs. J. Edgar Hoover

Gay historians have described Kameny as the architect of the modern U.S. gay rights movement, crediting him with transforming the fledgling “homophile” movement of the 1950s into an assertive civil rights struggle for gays and lesbians.

Most gay activists view the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York's Greenwich Village as the spark that ignited a new phase in the gay movement that celebrated the slogan, “Out of the closet and into the streets.”

But gay historians like Johnson have credited Kameny with establishing, beginning in 1961, the philosophical and tactical underpinnings for the Gay Pride marches and political advocacy work that followed the Stonewall riots.

Kameny was the gay movement's equivalent of Bayard Rustin, according to D.C. gay activist Rick Rosendall, in referring to Rustin's role as a lead strategist for Martin Luther King, Jr. in the black civil rights movement.

Shortly after being fired from his job at the Army Map Service, Kameny founded the Mattachine Society of Washington, the city's first gay rights group. Kameny initially modeled the group after Mattachine Society chapters that had formed since 1950 in Los Angeles and other cities.

In some of his earliest papers now preserved at the Library of Congress, Kameny took exception to the prevailing view by Mattachine Society leaders that the groups should keep a low profile. Nearly all of the early Mattachine groups limited their work to research about homosexuality, educating the public on the subject, and helping other homosexuals adjust to society's anti-gay prejudice, Johnson wrote in his 2003 book, "The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government."

"Under Kameny's leadership, the MSW would not remain underground and seek heterosexual authorities to speak on its behalf," Johnson wrote. "On issues of homosexuality, Kameny argued, 'we are the experts and the authorities.'"

Among Kameny's innovations was the publication of a Mattachine Society of Washington newsletter, which the group sent to most top U.S. government officials, including President John F. Kennedy at the White House and all of Kennedy's cabinet members, and then FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

Although most government officials did not appear to pay much attention to the newsletter, Kameny said he was startled in the summer of 1963 when FBI agent John A. O'Birne called Kameny by phone and requested to meet with him.

Kameny said he and Mattachine Society member Bob Bellanger had no idea why they had been summoned to a meeting with the FBI, and the two wondered whether a crackdown against Mattachine was in the works.

To their amazement, Kameny said, O'Birne politely asked him and Bellanger to remove Hoover's name from the Mattachine Society mailing list, saying that Hoover did not wish to have his name on such a list. Kameny said he told O'Birne that he would have to consult other members of the group about this request and would get back to the FBI with the group's response.

"I sent them a letter setting conditions for our removal of Hoover from our list," said Kameny.

The conditions included a requirement that the FBI provide the group with the name of another FBI official to be placed on the newsletter list in place of Hoover and that the group would reserve the right to send Hoover a one-time mailing if an important issue arose.

The FBI never responded to Kameny's letter. "Hoover stayed on our mailing list until the day he died," said Kameny.

Hoover, who became notorious for keeping secret files on political activists and politicians – including President Kennedy – appears to have had the tables turned on him by discovering he was powerless to have his name removed from a homosexual rights group, gay activists have said.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Kameny served as an administrative counsel to gays who encountered problems obtaining or keeping security clearances issued by the federal government, becoming one of the nation's recognized experts on gay-related security clearance issues. He also represented members of the military under investigation for being gay. In advising gay service members, Kameny coined the phrase, "Say nothing, sign nothing, and get counsel."

He is also credited with creating the slogan "Gay is Good," which activists used in protest marches and Gay Pride festivals.