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 COMMUNITY MEDIA

Mapping gay space in Northern Virginia

In 1964, a businessman named Bob Damron began publishing what he called "The Address Book." Inside were listings of bars and public spaces that he considered friendly to gay men at a time in which much of the country was openly opposed to homosexuality.

While most of the listings were from Damron's personal experiences in large, metropolitan areas of the United States, eventually, locations in smaller cities and suburbs made their way onto what is now known as the Damron guides.

Now, thanks to a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant, historians Amanda Regan, Ph.D., and Eric Gonzaba, Ph.D., who met while in graduate school at George Mason University, have begun to map the listings of the Damron guides.

At the moment, their project at mappingthegayguides.org lists all of the locations from the 1965 guide through 2003. The 1965 guide only lists five locations in Virginia: one in Roanoke, one in Richmond, one in Norfolk and two in Virginia Beach. Damron's readers had more options in Washington, D.C., which had 14 listings in that publication. Except for Johnnie's Bar in Southeast, all of the listings in Washington were in the Northwest quadrant.



The City of Alexandria is hosting its ninth annual pride fair Saturday.

PHOTO/CITY
 OF ALEXANDRIA

The number of listings expanded as time went on, although the number of cities sometimes didn't. For example, the 1974 guide had 25 listings in the Commonwealth of Virginia, but 22 of those 25 were in Norfolk or Richmond.

The first time a location in Alexandria is listed in "The Address Book" is in the 1976 guide, which was Steve's Restaurant on what was then Jefferson Davis Highway, although the wooded area around the Iwo Jima Memorial had been mistakenly listed as an Alexandria location in the previous year's publication.

A bookstore called the Black Fox Saddlery, Ltd. joined Steve's in the 1979 edition before both listings disappeared from the 1980 publication. Those two listings, however briefly they stayed in business,

let local gay men know that they weren't alone in Alexandria and that there were public spaces where they could be themselves.

The internet has substantially hurt the business of printed travel guides, and the Damron guides will soon no longer be available in paper form. Thanks to a three-year NEH grant, Regan and Gonzaba mapped the locations from the 1981 to the 2000 guides, but the effort to do so is substantially more than the first 15 years due to the expansion of the guides.

In January, the project launched Mapping the Gay Guides 2.0, with a redesigned site featuring 147,044 new locations and extending coverage from 1980 to 2003. One of the most interesting aspects, when one visits the project, is

to see the ebb and flow of establishments that made it onto the guide.

If the number of listings reflects progress in terms of sexual orientation, then progress was not linear by any means, especially in Alexandria.

Alexandria is celebrating Pride Month this June. For more information on what the city is doing to celebrate, including the ninth annual Alexandria Pride Fair Saturday at John Carlyle Square Park, please visit www.alexandriava.gov/LGBTQ.

This column was originally printed in the Alexandria Times on June 24, 2021, and includes updated information on the Mapping the Gay Guides online project.

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 provided by the Office of
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