

The Lesbian Herstory Archives

484 14th Street, Brooklyn
Tax Map Block 1103 Lot 31

Built: 1908

Architect: Axel Hedman

Style: Renaissance Revival

Action: Calendared June 28, 2022; Public Hearing October 25, 2022



484 14th Street, Brooklyn, LPC

484 14th Street in Park Slope, Brooklyn, is culturally significant as the home since 1991 of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the nation's oldest and largest collection of lesbian-related historical material. The three-story Renaissance Revival row house was originally constructed as a two-family dwelling in 1908 and designed by Axel Hedman for the Prospect Park West Realty Company. 484 14th Street is located within the city's Park Slope Historic District, which was designated in 1973.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives is an entirely volunteer-run non-profit organization founded in 1974 by activists Joan Nestle, Deborah Edel, and others, housed until 1991 in Nestle and Edel's apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The Archives began as a grass-roots attempt to end the silence around lesbian history, and to create a physical archive for study, analysis, and community gathering. At a time when the LGBTQ+ community faced enormous legal and social discrimination, the Archives fought to bring lesbian cultural artifacts into public view, and to normalize them as an integral piece of American history. The project was intentionally feminist in nature, using the term "herstory" to note the rejection of patriarchy, and inclusive, with women of color counted among the organization's early supporters and contributors.

The Archives were conceived as a living repository and grew to include a wide variety of materials dating from the 1950s to the present with a national scope, collected and donated by lesbians themselves. Materials in the Archives include periodicals, files on lesbian activist and community groups, audio-visual materials, oral histories, and the personal and professional papers of lesbians from a diversity of cultural, ethnic, and class-based communities. Among many others, significant collections include those of the organizations Daughters of Bilitis, the Salsa Soul Sisters, and the New York Chapter of ACT-UP, as well as the papers of Archives cofounder Joan Nestle, 1960s LGBTQ+ organizer Barbarba Gittings, and the African American activists Mabel Hampton and Audre Lorde.

The collection had outgrown its space by 1990, and by 1991 the Archives had raised enough funding to purchase 484 14th Street in Park Slope, Brooklyn. After more than a year of renovations, the building was transformed into a new headquarters for the Archives, with exterior alterations limited to accessibility and security improvements necessary for the building's new use. Since 1991, the Archives has continued to grow its collection, adding materials relating to more recent lesbian individuals and organizations, and to issues like lesbian parenthood, political organizing in the 1990s, and the marriage equality cases of the 21st century.

As a nationally important collection of LGBTQ+ historical materials, the Lesbian Herstory Archives plays an essential role in telling the story of a mostly unseen community of women who contributed to America's cultural, political, and social history. 484 14th Street is culturally significant as the Archives' headquarters for over 30 years, where it expanded its collection, grew to national prominence, and has served as a vital educational organization, community space, and center for lesbian history and culture.

