

There would be no 1969 Stonewall riots, Pride month or Pride period, without formerly enslaved William Dorsey Swann. Known as William Dorsey Swann, but to his friends he was, “the Queen.”

Born in Maryland in 1860, Swann endured brutal Black chattel slavery, the Civil War, racism, Anti-Black police patrols, torture behind bars, and many other racial and homophobic injustices.

Despite all of the injustices and trauma, in the 1880s, Swann not only became the first Black American activist to lead a queer resistance group; he also became, in the same decade, the first known person to dub himself a “queen of drag” or, more familiarly, a drag queen.

Swann was born into Black chattel slavery in Maryland at around 1860, just a few years before Black Americans were freed when Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This was "a time of excitement and danger" as the Ku Klux Klan rose to prominence, while simultaneously Black men were also being elected into office.

Initially, Swann attended these drag balls held by the formerly enslaved Black community in D.C., who gathered in secret out of fear of police raids and imprisonment, despite the fact there were no specific laws against cross-dressing at the time.

At the turn of the new century the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, **Lodge 110** on 155th street and 8th Avenue had become about a block long and was relocated to Harlem, New York.. The **Rockland Palace** as it was now called, was the home of **Hamilton Lodge Ball** at the corner at **280 West 155th street and Frederick Douglass Avenues** in Harlem.

The famed Rockland Palace housed political events, banquets, church sermons, lectures, pageants, and most notably, the Drag Ball, was an overlooked piece of Harlem history.

Later into the 1920's spectators ranged from leading lights of Black society and the Harlem Renaissance such as the singers **Nora Holt** and **Taylor Gordon**, the writers **Wallace Thurman** and **Bruce Nugent**, and the heiress socialite **A'Leia Walker**, to downtown celebrities and perennial gay favorites **Tallulah Bankhead**, Beatrice Lillie, and Clifton Webb, to such pillars of old New York respectability as the extremely wealthy Astors and Vanderbilts.

De-Dee Loftin-Davis





Resources:

[The First Drag Queen Was a Former Slave | The Nation](#)

[America's first drag queen was a former slave and LGBT rights crusader, says historian | CBC Radio](#)

[The Legendary Hamilton Lodge Ball Home At The Rockland Palace Dance Hall In Harlem 1920's \(harlemworldmagazine.com\)](#)

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