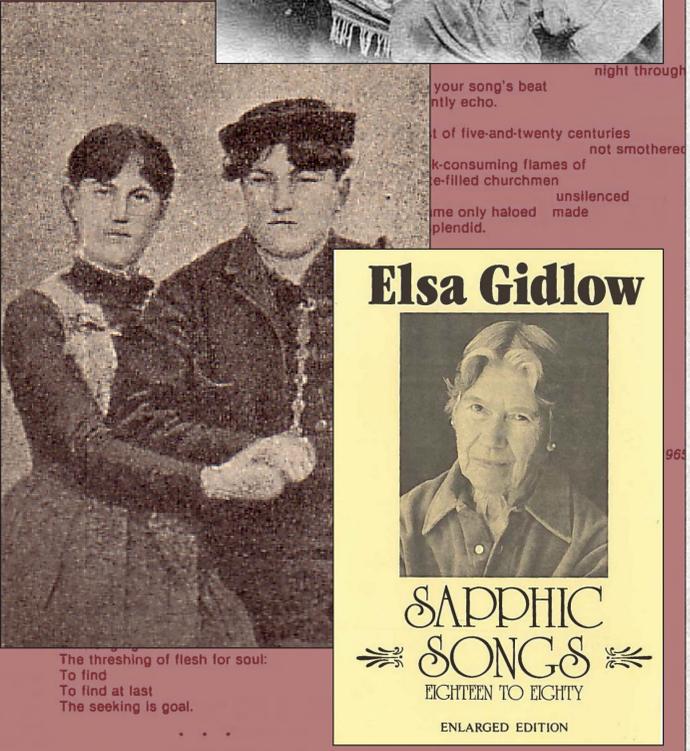


# EARLY LESBIAN HISTORY



Prior to sexologists' classifying the social category "lesbian" in the late 19th century, a term denoting sexual love between women did not exist, complicating the search for lesbian identities. World-wide, gender representations in historical records have almost always been male-centered and have cast heterosexuality as the norm. As a result, much of our information on early lesbian culture is prejudicially conceived at best, completely absent at worst. Still, through careful reading and analysis, traces of lesbian identity emerge from a variety of historical records. In the history of lesbianism, we also find elements of the history of gender and the role of women in a shifting patriarchal culture.



**1700 BCE** - The Code of Hammurabi provided one of the earliest mentions of lesbians in existing historical documents when it referred to "salzikrum," or daughter-men, who were allowed to marry other women.

**7th Century BCE** - The Greek poet Sappho was born on the island of Lesbos, the place from which the term "lesbian" is derived. Some fragments of her poetry that exist today speak to her passion and love for women.

**1649** - In the earliest known record of lesbianism in American history, the Plymouth Colony records describe two women, Sara Norman and Mary Hammon, prosecuted for "lewd behavior." While the younger woman was "cleared with admonition," the older woman was required to publicly acknowledge the sexual intimacy.

**1655** - For the first time, lesbianism is specifically prohibited in the U.S. when New Haven, Connecticut, included it in anti-sodomy laws.

**1861** - To live on her own and escape an abusive father, Sarah Emma Edmondson disguised herself as Franklin Thompson. Edmondson enlisted in the Union army and served for two years as a man. Numerous other people assigned female at birth are known to have participated in the war disguised as men.

**1883** - The term "lesbian" is used for the first time in a U.S. medical journal referring to Joseph Lobdell, born Lucy Ann, who was assigned female at birth but lived as a man.

**1894** - In Black River Falls, Wisconsin, Anna Morris (aka Frank Blunt) lived with a wife for 15 years until arrested for robbery and found to be a woman. There are many historical examples of women maintaining relationships with other women by having one publicly pass as a man.

**1904** - In Germany, Anna Ruing makes the world's first known public defense of lesbian civil rights.

(Top left) Lesbian women in the 1920s. Photographed by Harris and Ewing; (Top right) A photograph of male impersonator Vesta Tilley. Photographer Unknown; (Middle) Working women. Photographed by Carl T Thorner; Women in hammock. Photographer Unknown; (Bottom left) Coppia lesbica. By Cesare Lombroso; (Bottom right) Cover of Elsa Gidlow's *Sapphic Songs, Eighteen to Eighty*; (Bottom right background) By Maximilian Pirner, 1903.