

William Dorsey Swann, Black Appalachian and First recorded “Queen of Drag”

Skylar

100 Days in Appalachia

[See full story at

<https://mailchi.mp/100daysinappalachia/what-collective-grassroots-commitment-can-accomplish-8116669?e=4f7799d5d6>

The introduction to the article address concerns over states’ “...[all seen anti-drag bills introduced this legislative session](#), to say nothing of other anti-LGBTQ bills being [debated in state legislatures across the region](#)...”]

In March 1860, William Dorsey Swann was born into slavery in Appalachian Maryland. After the Civil War and emancipation, Swann’s parents remained in Washington County, where they purchased a small plot of land and began farming. The family struggled to make ends meet, and like many children and teenagers of his era, Swann was expected to contribute to the family’s expenses. He took a job as a waiter at a hotel, but it wasn’t enough. Financial hardship forced Swann to leave Appalachia in 1880, moving to Washington, D.C...

... William Dorsey Swann became the first person in history known to have been referred to as a “queen of drag,” or what would become the drag queens of today. That’s right, y’all. The first drag queen was a Black Appalachian.

...It is believed that the first ball was held somewhere around 1882. By 1888, however, the police became aware of the gatherings and raided them. Swann fought the officers who came to his door while others managed to escape through open windows. This marks one of (if not the) first times in American history that physical force is known to have been used to defend LGBTQ rights.

...The balls continued until 1896, when Swann was sentenced to 10 months in jail for “keeping a disorderly house,” which was a charge brought against those accused of running brothels. The charge was baseless...

...Ultimately, [President] Cleveland denied the pardon. After his release, Swann returned to Washington County and to Appalachia, where he died in 1925. Local officials burnt his home to the ground, meaning we have no documents or artifacts from Swann himself...

Sincerely,

Skylar