

First Same-Sex Marriage in NYS

Governor Andrew Cuomo signed the Marriage Equality Act in June 2011. When the Act went into effect on July 24, 2011, New York became the sixth state to recognize same-sex marriage.

At the stroke of midnight, July 24, 2011, Kitty and Cheryle Lambert-Rudd married here on beautiful Luna Island, making Niagara Falls State Park the site of the first same-sex marriage in New York State. Honoring Niagara Falls's heritage as a wedding destination since the 1830s, Niagara Falls Mayor Paul Dyster was the joyful officiant.

At the time of their union, Kitty Lambert (54) and Cheryle Rudd (53) were grandmothers who had been together for more than a decade. In 2004, Kitty and Cheryle had founded OUTSpoken for Equality, a Buffalo-based LGBTQ+ rights group, which focused on marriage equality.

Cheryle and Kitty's hard-fought advocacy and lobbying paid off in 2011 when State Senator Mark Grisanti changed his stance on same-sex marriage, paving the way for the New York State Senate to pass the Marriage Equality Act.

Four years later, in June 2015, the United States Supreme Court's Obergefell v. Hodges decision made same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states.

New York State has often played an important role in the history of LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States, sometimes positive, and other times negative.

Pro-gay and lesbian activism, advocating for rights in New York, began in the 1950s and 60s. The 1969 Stonewall Riots, a response to police raids of gay establishments in New York City, have been recognized by many as the birth of the modern LGBTQ+ civil rights movement. In NYS, same-sex sexual relations were illegal for most of New York's history. In 1980, the NYS Court of Appeals eliminated many of the state's remaining anti-sodomy laws in *New York v. Onofre*. In 2002, the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act passed the NY Legislature, going into effect the following year. In 2003, the Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act (GENDA) was introduced in the NYS Legislature, which would have added gender identity and expression as protected classes against discrimination and hate crimes. GENDA finally passed the State Legislature and was signed into law in 2019.

Niagara Falls, New York has played an important role in the wedding plans for numerous couples, nationally and internationally. Being a wedding and honeymoon destination, it was a logical selection for the Lambert-Rudds' historic wedding to be at the Falls and join in the marital traditions previously not afforded to LGBTQ+ individuals.



During their many years together, Kitty and Cheryle faced challenges that no legally married pair would. While Cheryle was hospitalized battling cancer, a relative challenged Kitty's right to visit her. After their wedding, Cheryle said that if her cancer ever recurs, "nobody can stop us from coming into the room. If I need her for anything, she's there. They can't stop her." That experience, and others like it, informed the couple's work for their grass-roots advocacy group, OUTSpoken for Equality.

In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, on June 30, 2019, Kitty officiated a mass same-sex wedding ceremony on Goat Island in Niagara Falls State Park. Couples from all over the United States came to be wed or to renew their marriage vows. Assemblymember Harry Bronson addressed the crowd and presented the pen used by Governor Cuomo to sign the Marriage Equality Act, which was then used to sign the wedding certificates issued that day.

This marker is made possible by Niagara Pride, Inc.

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PHOTO CREDIT: Dr. Michael Yeh