

Beyond the Archive:

Rediscovering Mary Pyne and the Quiet Heart of Provincetown's LGBTQ Literary History

Provincetown, Massachusetts. New research conducted under the National Park Service's Underrepresented Communities (URC) Grant has brought to light the overlooked legacy of Mary Pyne, an actress, poet, and editor whose quiet presence during one pivotal summer in Provincetown helped shape a cultural moment that still echoes today.

At the heart of this rediscovery is Pyne's poem, *The River Bank*, by Ginny Binder of the Provincetown Community Compact, published in the June 1919 issue of *Harper's Magazine*. But that lyrical work is only one trace of a deeper story, one marked by literary kinship, queer companionship, and a life lived at the edge of artistic transformation.

A Brief Summer, A Lasting Impact

Mary Pyne spent the summer of 1915 living at 577 Commercial Street, a modest boarding house known as Francis's Flats. That summer placed her in intimate proximity to the Provincetown Players, whose early productions were redefining American theater.

She was married to poet Harry Kemp known as the "poet of the dunes" and would go on to become the longtime companion of modernist icon Djuna Barnes, author of *Nightwood*. Pyne and her husband lived across the hall from playwright Eugene O'Neill. Pyne's own creative and emotional world paralleled those of the writers and performers around her, reflecting the spirit of experimentation and chosen kinship that Provincetown cultivated in that era.

"She was here for one summer, but that summer mattered," said Binder, Senior Preservation Specialist for the project. "Her presence reminds us that creative revolutions are made not just by the people on stage, but by those who shape the air around them."

After that summer, Pyne moved to Greenwich Village with the Provincetown Players troupe, joining the migration of artists who would go on to ignite the modern American theater.

A Town in Rehearsal: A Place for Creative and Queer Becoming

Though her time in Provincetown was brief, Pyne's relationships and creative output align with the core values that defined the Provincetown Players: honesty, community, boldness, and belonging. Her life moved between multiple modes on the stage, on the page, and in emotionally complex partnerships that defied convention.

Her presence in Provincetown offers a valuable record of LGBTQ historical experience not through declarations, but through movement, attachment, and artistic labor.

"LGBTQ history isn't always loud," said Binder, "It lives in chosen companionship. In shared houses. In a poem like *The River Bank*. Mary Pyne's story reminds us that significance can be subtle, but no less essential."

Expanding the Definition of Significance

This research exemplifies a core objective of the URC Grant Program: to expand the definition of significance. Mary Pyne's story challenges traditional preservation narratives that prioritize prominence, longevity, or built form. Instead, her story reveals the power of brief, transformative presence of those whose lives shaped creative legacies without being canonized.

"History is not just made by those who dominate space," said Jay Critchley, Executive Director of the Provincetown Community Compact. "It's made by those who cultivate it, quietly, relationally, and with care."

A Living Archive, A Community Invitation

To honor Pyne's legacy, The Compact will host a public reading this summer. The program will include a live reading of *The River Bank*, and a discussion on how relational history and queer presence continue to reshape our understanding of historic districts.

This is one of several discoveries emerging from The Compact's LGBTQ research in Provincetown, each expanding how we define value, visibility, and belonging as represented in the physical form.

About the URC Grant Project

The National Park Service's Underrepresented Communities Grant Program supports the documentation and nomination of historic places associated with communities whose stories have been left out of the National Register. The Compact's Provincetown project centers LGBTQ lives that have shaped and continue to shape the cultural and emotional landscape of this singular town.

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