William Dorsey Swann

PIONEERING DRAG QUEEN

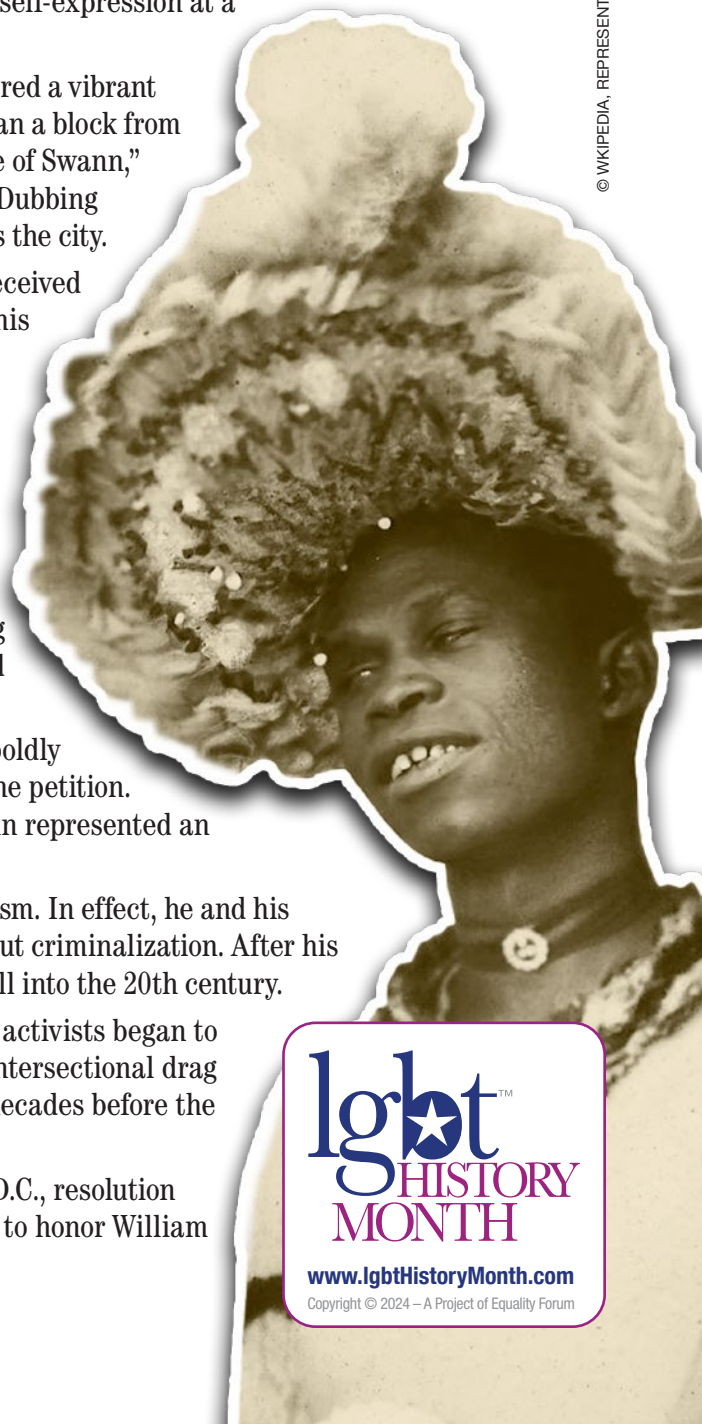
b. Circa 1860

d. December 1925

He was a former slave and the first self-described drag queen in America.

William Dorsey Swann was a formerly enslaved person and the first known American to identify as a drag queen. He was also the first American on record to request a presidential pardon for drag-related offenses.

Born into slavery in Hancock, Maryland, Swann was emancipated after the Civil War, sometime in the late 1860s. History suggests that Swann, as a 19th-century Black man, spent his entire adult life fearlessly committed to queer self-expression at a time of immense homophobia and racial oppression.



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Around aged 20, Swann moved to Washington, D.C., where he discovered a vibrant LGBTQ community comprising many formerly enslaved men. Less than a block from the White House, Swann organized elaborate drag balls at his "House of Swann," featuring extravagant costumes, live music, and exuberant dancing. Dubbing himself the "Queen of Drag," Swann attracted partygoers from across the city.

Swann was employed as a janitor at a business college. In 1882 he received a combined seven-month sentence for stealing several objects from his employer and books from the Washington Library Company. Shortly after his conviction, the injured parties together petitioned the U.S. president for Swann's pardon, citing his courtesy, diligence, and desire only to further his education and support his family. It is unclear whether clemency was granted.

In 1896 police raided Swann's birthday drag ball and arrested over a dozen men, falsely charging Swann with running a brothel. The Washington Post's account of the incident described Swann as a "big negro arrayed in a gorgeous dress of cream-colored satin." It marked the first documented arrest of a "female impersonator" in America.

Swann pleaded not guilty. After receiving a 10-month sentence, he boldly applied for his own presidential pardon. Thirty of his allies signed the petition. The U.S. attorney adamantly rejected the request, stating that Swann represented an "evil" and "corrupting" influence.

Swann's clemency petition represents a seminal feat of LGBTQ activism. In effect, he and his cohorts had asserted their right to gather, particularly in drag, without criminalization. After his incarceration, Swann resumed his drag balls and continued them well into the 20th century.

It was not until the latter part of the 20th century that scholars and activists began to uncover Swann's historical legacy, recognizing him as trailblazing intersectional drag figure who helped pave the way for LGBTQ rights more than seven decades before the Stonewall riots.

Aged 65, Swann died in Hancock, Maryland. In 2022 a Washington, D.C., resolution decreed that a street already named Swann would henceforth serve to honor William Dorsey Swann.

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