

ERNESTINE ECKSTEIN

GAY PIONEER

b. April 23, 1941

d. July 15, 1992

**She was a pioneering
Black lesbian and
leader of the early
LGBTQ+ civil rights
movement.**

*“I’ve always believed that love
transcends any kind of label —
Black, white, woman, man.”*

Ernestine Eckstein was a pioneering Black lesbian activist and leader of the early LGBTQ+ civil rights movement. She served as the New York chapter vice president of the nation’s first lesbian organization and participated in the Annual Reminders — the first demonstrations for gay and lesbian equality, held from 1965 to 1969, in front of Independence Hall.

Born Ernestine Delois Eppenger, Eckstein was one of eight children. Growing up, she was attracted to various female teachers and friends but did not know those feelings had a name. She attended Indiana University, where she majored in magazine journalism and minored in Russian and government. After graduating in 1963, she moved to New York City.

In New York, Eckstein met members of the nascent LGBTQ+ community. When she identified herself as a lesbian, she quickly turned to activism, adopting the pseudonym Eckstein for protection. At the time, her race and sexuality put her safety at risk.

Eckstein attended meetings of the New York chapter of the Mattachine Society, the first gay civil liberties organization in the United States, which led to her membership in the Daughters of Bilitis, the first U.S. lesbian organization. She also joined the Congress of Racial Equality, an influential organization in the Black Civil Rights Movement.

In 1965, Eckstein broke new ground as an African American and a lesbian. She was appointed vice president of the New York City chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis and traveled to Philadelphia to participate in the first Annual Reminder Demonstration for Gay and Lesbian Rights, held on July Fourth in front of Independence Hall. Eckstein is the only known Black person to have participated among the roughly 40 protesters that day. In October, she demonstrated in front of the White House, where again, she was the only person of color picketing. Her sign read “Denial of Equality of Opportunity is Immoral.”

In 1966, Eckstein gave an interview to “The Ladder,” the magazine produced by the Daughters of Bilitis, and was the first out Black lesbian featured on the cover. In the article, she stated that even before she knew she was gay, she believed that love transcended labels.

In 1968, Eckstein moved to Northern California. In the early 1970s, she joined the feminist organization Black Women Organized for Political Action. She worked in advocacy and activism throughout her life, although little more is known about her work.

Eckstein died in San Pablo, California, at the age of 51. Her cause of death is unknown.



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