

Mapping LGBTQ St. Louis
Additional Information Sheet

Location:

death of Robert R.

[while other sources have published his last name, the mapping project has chosen to use only his initial]

City Hospital

1515 Lafayette Avenue

Additional Information:

In 1968, a young St. Louisian, Robert R., was taken to City Hospital for a mysterious illness. A fifteen-year-old African-American, Robert told doctors little of his life, only stating he was born in St. Louis, had not traveled outside the Midwest, and was sexually active. The young man was hospitalized more than a year before his death May 1969 from an apparent collapsed immune system, a rare cause of death. His physicians preserved blood and tissue samples, and in 1984 wrote the *Journal of American Medicine* (JAMA) and stated that recent tests indicated secondary infections commonly found in those with AIDS. The doctors asserted: "Although some claim that AIDS is newly imported to the continental United States, the typical features exemplified by our native-born American patient suggest that the syndrome is, at least in part, endemic and appeared more than ten years before the current epidemic" Finally in 1987 more advanced scientific testing seemed to confirm that patient "Robert R." had suffered from AIDS, making him one of the earliest victims of the disease in North America. Based only on the common supposition held by doctors considering the case in 1984, it was speculated that Robert R. was gay, and as a teenager, possibly a prostitute. Historical consideration of the facts do not offer any evidence of his sexuality, although based on symptom development he would have contracted the illness years earlier (as a young child) with some suggesting the source was perhaps sexual abuse.

For additional history see:

Woznica, Dan. "Reading "Robert R.": The Production of Knowledge about America's First AIDS Patient." Honors Thesis, Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program, Washington University in St. Louis, Spring 2011. Abstract online: http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2011/154

Auerbach, David and William Darrow, *et al.*, 1984. "Cluster of Cases of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome: Patients Linked by Sexual Contact." *The American Journal of Medicine* 76: 487-492.

Wald, Priscilla. 2008. "The Columbus of AIDS: The Invention of 'Patient Zero'." In *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 213-270.