

# Topless Men – How Men Won Top Free Rights in the U.S.

By Jordan Blum, YNA June 9, 2016

Men's freedom to go topless is often taken for granted and is perceived as a normal part of American society. Thus many people do not realize that bare-chested males running around in public is a relatively recent thing in American Society.

For decades, public display of [male nipples](#) was considered taboo, too sexual and completely inappropriate. Part of the reasoning behind this was that women would not be able to contain their sexual impulses when confronted with the sight of a shirtless man. This archaic reasoning is exactly what women are facing today – just for women, the battle is so much more difficult (even though [women's breasts](#) serve a vital part in child rearing).



*Men's swimwear with tops and shorts in the early 20th century*

However, for men, this all changed quickly during the first part of the 20th century.

The history of male toplessness can most closely be associated with the various laws about what clothing was appropriate for swimming.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, most men would not dare remove their jacket in the presence of a lady. Therefore, there was no need to legislate that men keep their shirts on at all times. That said people were surprisingly liberal when it came to swimwear, and it was common for men to swim nude or in their underwear.

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Charles William Stores

Old advertisement for men and women's one-piece swimwear

One of the first examples of a law against men being shirtless does not appear until 1737. It was then that the city of Bath declared that men who wanted to swim in the town's hot water springs had to wear "a Pair of Drawers and a Waistcoat on their bodies" if they were over the age of 10. Despite these laws, swimmers continued to go nude until the mid 1800's when Victorian social values became increasingly and extremely rigid. Men were legally required to wear swimsuits that covered their chest and legs. In some places, men were forced to wear a short skirt over their swimsuit. This was in an effort to hide the slightest hint of inappropriate skin exposure or god forbid, a "penis bulge."

Regulations by the American Association of Park Superintendents required that "nothing below the armpits could be shown on the chest."

Public attitudes towards male toplessness started to change after World War I. During the wild times of the roaring 20's, men started to wear two-piece [swimsuits](#) that consisted of tightly fitting bottoms and a small tank top. This replaced the baggy one-piece swimwear of the time.

Though men still could not go topless in public, male film stars of the 1920's and 1930's regularly appeared shirtless.

### Hollywood's Influence on Men's Topless Rights

Hollywood icons like Rudolph Valentino and Clark Gable appeared in memorable film scenes that revealed their nipples. Countless tabloid magazines started publishing pictures of topless male actors at private beaches.

Just like in modern times, the public quickly started to follow their favorite movie stars. However, almost every public pool and major city had laws against men being bare-chested.

In 1934, the same year the Clark Gable took off his shirt in a film called *It Happened One Night*, four men were arrested at Coney Island for revealing their chests. They were charged with disorderly conduct and fined \$1 each. This arrest kicked off a string of protests and subsequent arrests over male shirtlessness.



*Clark Gable appears shirtless in the film It Happened One Night (1934)*

In 1935, an entire group of protesters went to Atlantic City and removed the top half of their swimsuit.

Another group of lifeguards removed one shoulder strap so that people could see one of their nipples.

Around the country, more and more men were starting to arrange protests that typically involved them going to a beach while wearing only swimming trunks.

Ultimately, New York City was the first to give in to public pressure.

In 1936, they repealed their laws against male toplessness. After this act, other cities quickly followed NYC's lead. When it became apparent that almost no one was offended by male breasts, it was easier for cities to repeal outdated laws instead of wasting law enforcement officers' time on swimwear enforcement.

According to this article at Nerve, it was the finances of buying swimsuits that ultimately led to the laws being overturned. Sometimes parks departments had to purchase swimwear (to provide or rent out), and simple trunks were cheaper than full-body suits.

We actually found evidence of this in newspaper archives. In July of 1936 in Westchester County, it was announced in the NY Times that the county park commission would continue to prohibit topless bathing suits for men. This was after the State Park Commission had changed its rules to start allowing them.

The superintendent of the commission, Hermann Merkel, was quoted as saying, "I still believe that a few things had better be left to the imagination and that appearance of many un-beautiful 'manly' figures would be ameliorated by even the slight covering that a bathing suit top gives."

Then in November of 1936, the Westchester Park Commission changed its tune about male "decency." During their budget meeting, they were shown that trunks were cheaper than full suits. Thus, they decided to overturn the ban and allow topless male swimwear like many other parts of the state.

By the 1940's, almost no male swimsuits included shirts, and it was common for men to remove their shirts during sports or outdoors activities.

In closing, we would just like to point out that many of the arguments that were posed to justify not allowing men to be topfree in public, are the same arguments used against women's top freedom today. Perhaps, one day soon, both women and men will be able to free the nipple without anyone giving it a second thought. But for that to happen, we need more social change to happen. It's not just a matter of more women going top free, but of ending slut-shaming,

rape culture, sexual objectification and other issues that predominantly affect women today. We need a society in which women are free to do what they want with their own bodies and not pay a price for it.

**In 1934, four men in Coney Island were arrested for baring their chest. Men's nipples were considered shameful. Then a mob of 42 more were arrested then released. Their fight changed laws and social consciousness. And by 1936, men's bare chests were accepted as the norm across the country. When do we start our next fight for more freedom? Come on women, as proven in the past, mass protesting works!**



This article about topless men and how men won their right to be topfree was published by [Young Naturists and Nudists America](#).

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About the Author :

Jordan Blum is a lifelong nudie and co-founder of Young Naturists America.