

## WHEN did the Cowbellions really originate?

Within a decade, the Cowbellions were the respected leaders of Mobile's elite society. The details of their founding however, remained obscure. Almost 100 years later, Erwin Craighead, respected civic leader and long-time editor of the *Mobile Register*, who also wrote many books on Mobile's history, turned to Francois Diard in 1929, expressing his confusion and seeking assistance.



MOBILE, ALABAMA

Jan 26, 1929

Dear Mr. Diard:

I am working on a Carnival article, and there are a few points still to be fixed. What you have already given me, is of material help.

Writes differs in matter of Michael Krafft date. I make it December 31, 1830, or the Eve of 1831. Some others make it appear December 31, 1831.

I follow your account as to adoption of name C de R. S. in 1831 at Post's home. Rushmore.

There have been many stories of the Cowbellions' origins but all were written more than 20 years after the event. One anonymous source, an 1870 letter signed only "P.L.," included a long and detailed account, dating their founding to 1831. The New Year's Eve 1831 parade was, according to this author, planned by Krafft just a week earlier, on Christmas. In this story, Krafft was on board the ship of Captain Joseph Post for a Christmas dinner.

After stumbling off the ship and down the street, Krafft sat down in front of a hardware store, knocking down a rake and string of cowbells, which he took along with him. He then met up with his friend, James Taylor, and together they had a drink at Nathaniel Ledyard's bar in Exchange Alley, where others joined in and the scene became more rowdy. Following this entertaining evening, they decided to have a full-fledged parade on New Year's Eve. They invited many friends, including the author of this story himself, and the author's friend, Captain John Haynie. Immediately following the successful although last-minute New Year's Eve parade, he said, they were invited in to the home of Mayor John Stocking.<sup>45</sup>

### JOHN STOCKING, MAYOR OF MOBILE 1831 – 1835

Unlike the author above who insisted on the year 1831, most popular stories about the Cowbellion's founding include the group marching to the home of Mayor John Stocking on the night of their first outing, but in 1830.

However, John Stocking wasn't inaugurated as mayor until the spring of 1831. Samuel Garrow was the mayor of Mobile on New Years Eve in 1830.



Cotton-laden steamboats at the port of  
New Orleans c. 1860 – 1867

Shipping records *do* show that Captain Post was in Mobile during the holidays in 1831 yet not there in 1830. James Taylor was there in late December, 1831 as well and shipping records show that Captain Haynie's schooner left New Orleans headed for Mobile on December 30, 1831. So, he too should have been in Mobile on New Year's Eve 1831, but not in 1830.

Still, almost all of the printed material produced by the Cowbellion organization marks their anniversary to 1830, not 1831. The author of this 1870 letter very specifically objected to this. He began by saying "In the first place, I would correct a chronological error with regard to the date of its origin... I am very positive from its connection with other facts of my personal history, about which I am certainly not mistaken, that the date was 1831."





The History Museum of Mobile holds a Cowbellion ballot box and set of punch cups bearing the date 1831, a unique discovery. Among the few pieces inscribed with the anniversary date of 1831 instead of 1830 is curious canvas-backed lid or piece of an invitation (above), now in the collection of the Historic Mobile Preservation Society. The only ball invitation like this comes from 1874, a time when Mobile's mystic parades were reaching their full potential and inspiring the same type of festivities in cities like Galveston, Memphis and St. Louis.

COWBELLION DE RAKIN SOCIETY.  
THIRTY-EIGHTH ANNIVERSARY.  
The history of this society has been so often rehearsed, with so many variations, that we suppose everybody in Mobile has seen or another of the versions put at his League's end, each of them composed, in about equal proportions with any of the others, of truth and fiction. These have, by this time, become so hopelessly mingled, that probably nobody could separate them except a very few persons who may be relied upon to do nothing of the sort. We

Realistically, the structure and unique customs of the Cowbellion de Rakin Society developed over time, not in one night. It is easy to see that a group of young men including Michael Krafft, may have considered or talked about the idea in 1830, perhaps over Christmas dinner or while celebrating on New Year's.

Michael Krafft may have spontaneously yelled it out, as most versions of the legend tell us, while carousing recklessly with a friend or two on New Year's Eve, 1830. Yet, the accumulated evidence indicates the

first organized procession taking place in 1831. In that year it was pre-planned. Participants were casually invited to join in the fun but showed up in any sort of ridiculous costume they could put together, armed with alcohol and noise-making instruments, ready to scamper from bar to bar within the four-block section of the city where popular drinking establishments were located.

The 1870 letter also contained this statement: “The transparencies [illuminated paintings] in the annual procession of the society number one more anniversary than is correct, without counting the original display, which was surely not an anniversary.” This statement might answer the question. What was this “original display”? As it was understood at the time, whatever happened in 1830 was the spark that led to the first parade of 1831.

Regardless of the date, Michael Krafft remains a symbol of the young cotton merchant of the era who was almost as concerned about having a good time as he was about making money; and created a new style of festivity seen nowhere else, combining Masonic ritual and mystery with the loud and rambunctious street procession, the format of festivity which soon attached itself to the day before Lent, Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras, transforming that holiday and creating a new American tradition.