

1837

In 1837, a group of young American merchants in New Orleans organized a procession that was similar to the first Cowbellion parade. New Orleans was an ethnically divided city in the 1830's, with a large Creole population in the old center of the city, while a new American-dominated area developed on the other side of Canal Street, the city's main thoroughfare.

Balls and festivities with public costuming were traditional among the French-speaking Creole inhabitants. But the parade in 1837 was organized among the new English-speaking population of migrants from the north, like those that dominated the city of Mobile. The New Orleans newspaper referred to the parade as "a cowbellion," meaning it looked just like the Mobile parades. There was a difference, however. Parades in Mobile were conducted on New Year's Eve but the men of New Orleans paraded on Mardi Gras, the typical day of festivity among Creoles in the city. Clearly then, the parading tradition in New Orleans began as a combination of many holiday traditions, many cultures, particularly American, British, French and Spanish.

COWBELLION – A lot of masqueraders were parading through our streets yesterday, and excited considerable speculation as to who they were, what were their motives, and what upon earth could induce them to turn out in such grotesque and outlandish habiliments..Boys, negroes, fruit women and what not, followed the procession – shouting and bawling, and apparently highly delighted with the fun, or what is more probable, anxious to fill their pockets with sugar plums, kisses, oranges, &c., which were lavishly bestowed upon them by these good-hearted jokers, whoever they were. For ourselves, we hardly saw them; but from the noise and tumult they made we concluded that it was a cowbellion society, turned loose in the streets to practice their harsh and discordant music.

The whole affair would have passed off well enough had it not been for the useless and unnecessary fears excited among some of the elderly ladies, old maids and such like, who inhabit our quiet and peaceful portion of the city, who, unused to such a horrid noise and din, were all but frightened out of their wits. One poor woman in particular, thinking that the millennium had come at last, went off into violent hysterics; another was seized with a violent convulsion fit...from which, however, she has since happily recovered. Some other trifling occurrences of a similar nature took place, but nothing serious that we have yet learned.

N.B. The city is now (11 o'clock at night) perfectly quiet.

In keeping with the Mobile tradition, *Picayune* editors carefully guarded the identity of these marchers, saying only that there was “considerable speculation as to who they were...” They were referred to as “a” cowbellion society, not “the” Cowbellion society, indicating that these were not all members of the Cowbellion de Rakin Society of Mobile, but were instead just another group of young men centered in New Orleans who were parading in costume and tossing treats to those watching, as the Cowbellions did on New Year’s Eve.

The word “cowbellion” had by that time become simply a way to refer to a rowdy procession of masked revelers, playing discordant music and causing a general disturbance of the peace. *Picayune* editors were using the term to describe their activities as something *like* the Cowbellions of Mobile.

The young men who started the New Orleans’ parade of 1837 were young American businessmen. They paraded on the American side of town, not in the area dominated by New Orleans’ Creoles, which had previously been the scene of all Mardi Gras celebrations. They began a celebration that was more like a Christmas or New Year’s Eve frolic but did it on Mardi Gras when the other part of the city was already celebrating on its own but *they* paraded in their own neighborhood. They were settling into and adapting to their new environment, blending the customs of the northeast with those already existing in the Deep South. They celebrated on the day of Mardi Gras, just like the Creoles were doing, but in a way that was more familiar to them.