

Description of Mobile during the holidays in 1839 written by a visiting reporter from Portland, Maine

The Mobilians are a lively community, given to all sorts of wassail and revelry. Indeed, could one expect it to be otherwise? No inconsiderable portion of the population is composed of young men who come out from the North to spend the winter. Now, youth must have a source of amusement, some safety valve to let their exuberant spirit, and the young Mobilian, being deprived in great measure, of the soft and restraining influence of female society contrive to make a "dose of turmoil" in getting off the suberabundant hilarity!

- *Portland Advertiser*, February 4, 1840

In the 1830's The Cowbellions established the mystic tradition.

Beginning around the year 1830, the COWBELLIONS established the mystic parading tradition in Mobile.

MICHAEL KRAFFT, a cotton broker in Mobile in his early '20's, is traditionally credited with first initiating the group which paraded annually with loud obnoxious music, much like a typical "fantastical" procession in the north.

Within a year or two of their first outing, the Cowbellions took their association one step farther and organized a secretive society with the intention of parading with loud noise and costumes each year during the holidays. They had little purpose other than laughter and jokingly called themselves the "Cowbellion de Rakin Society" to mock the formality of similar secretive. or "mystic" male-only associations which were so popular at the time.

Secrecy about who their members were, where they met and what they did in private was a key to establishing themselves as an elite group in Mobile society and they soon added elaborate initiation ceremonies and other rituals in keeping with the traditions of the Freemasons which were so popular at the time.

That combination of festivity and secret ritual is what made the Cowbellions unique.



Michael Krafft, known as the Founder of the Cowbellions

By 1834, the Cowbellions began publishing only coded messages in the newspaper. This one from the *Mobile Register* is now deciphered (below).



Undated *Mobile Register* clipping, 1834,
History Museum of Mobile, Cowbellion file.

The Society Cowbellion de Rakein will meet at the old den Sunday evening the 28th of Dec. at 7:00 for any action of company business. The members will please come prepared to shake the dust for fees and dues or they will not be permitted to parade with the society.

By order of Daniel Boon, Captain

Masonry of Mummery:

A Baltimore Report About Cowbellion Mysticism, 1881

It is literally true that no one knows what men compose it. That they are from the best educated and wealthiest class of society is proved by the splendor with which they graphically reproduce delicate themes from all the past. Absolutely perfect representations, in street parade, of the "Eras o Jewish History," of Dante's "Inferno," of the "Wars of the Roses," or Kaulbach's "Era of the Reformation," draw heavily both on brain and purse. Yet all preparations for their great processions, often far exceeding a hundred figures, are silent as all else, and no outsider can even dream of what he is to see before he actually beholds it. It is the very "Masonry of mummery."

Baltimore Sun, July 28, 1881, 4.

Probably in no city in the Union is the holiday at New Year more diligently celebrated or more eagerly looked for than here in Mobile. Divers reasons are at hand to account for the fact...the town abounds in young men who are neither married nor feel very strongly the temptations to matrimony and economy that exist in older cities...These young men make a good deal of money, but hoard none, and from them mainly comes the lavish expenditure which characterises Mobile.

-- *Mobile Register*, January 7, 1850

The first known written record of the Cowbellions appeared on January 2, 1832. It was announced in the *Mobile Commercial Register* that those who were by then part of the "Society," should be prepared for another gathering at the same time the next year.



COWBELLION NOTICE

Members of the Cowbellian de Rakeian Society will hold their next meeting and parade in the Evening of the 24th of December next at 9:00 at Ledyard Exchange – Grogmore Lane Yelp, O.S.

N.B. – Should any Roudyism be committed in the streets, the citizens will not put it to the account of this highly respectable society.

Jan. 2

79 t.f.

It was a humorous and satirical name for a fraternal association, yet the air of exclusivity was already apparent and that allowed the Cowbellions to quickly become an elitist group of northern-born, better-educated young merchants amid what had been, less than 20 years earlier, a forbidding and forgotten outpost of a distant European kingdom.

For almost three decades, no other group was able to match the skill with which such an odd combination manifest itself in Mobile. Street processions of men in disguise, playing loud, rancorous music and tossing candies to onlookers also appeared in New Orleans, but there they paraded on Mardi Gras, the day before Lent, a traditional day of festivity among New Orleans' Creole population. More importantly, the groups that paraded in New Orleans in the 1830's and 1840's were not secretive, i.e., not "mystic." It was not until 1857 that a group appeared in New Orleans ready to copy the formula developed by the Cowbellions, combining the mystic fraternal society with an organized yet revelrous public parade.

MOBILE'S MYSTIC MARVELS.
Program For Carnival Week—Masked Balls and Such.
MOBILE, Ala., January 31.—Mobile, which is the "Mother of Mystic" by name and