

What is a Mystic Parade?

A public procession filled with revelry and loud music, unified around one theme illustrated with visual imagery, theatrical sets and costumes, and organized by members of a secretive society whose identities are hidden. These parades are traditionally followed by a tableau, in which members further illustrate the theme as an ensemble, and a formal ball for invited guests, although members remain behind masks, their identities never revealed.

This unique combination originated in the commercial Gulf Coast port of Mobile, Alabama, which rose to prominence in the early 1800's as a center of world commerce and trade. The various influences of American, Afro-Caribbean and European traditions led to new forms of cultural expression. In this context, "mystic parades" emerged as an exciting and unique form of public festivity.

The elements themselves were not new but the combination, created by a group of young merchants who called themselves the "Cowbellion de Rakin Society," became quickly popular, soon repeated by other groups in Mobile and eventually across the country. Many variations on the concept developed, but each maintains these basic elements.

Later developments include the addition of a royal court and a focus on the last day of carnival, Mardi Gras or "Fat Tuesday," the climax of celebrations before the start of Lent.

Mobile's Mystic Parades : A Brief Summary

Ann J. Pond, PhD

Though they began as casual revelry in the 1830, Mobile's New Year's Eve parades soon became theatrical, educational presentations that moved through the streets in a way that was musical, engaging and artistic. Each theme was illustrated with detailed and elaborate costumes and, played out at the end with a tableau and ball. Nothing else like it existed in the country, or in the world.

This custom originated in Mobile with a group of young merchants who formed the "Cowbellion de Rakin Society." Seeking their fortune in the booming cotton trade, they had come primarily from the urban and industrial northeast down to the remote Gulf Coast on America's great rivers.

The city grew quickly in the early 1800's as a nexus of trade, attracting merchants from around the world. Before the Civil War, the port of Mobile became the second largest exporter of cotton in the country, but it was also a center of the slave trade and suffered annually with outbreaks of Yellow Fever, all of which had a great impact on the American economy.

Mobile was also, however, a nationally recognized center of arts and culture. Known for the quality of its theaters, the city welcomed some of the country's greatest actors each fall and winter.

Mobile's early mystic parades were considered an extension of this, theatrical sets and living tableaux, moving through the city for the public to view before the performance in the theater itself.

The mystic parades, with their particular plan of street revelry, secret societies, tableaux and balls, originated as a holiday custom and drew tourists from far away, by steamship and later by railroad. After the Civil War Mobile extended its mystic parades to Mardi Gras, or "Fat Tuesday," the day before Lent. Soon after, a Carnival Association was formed which aggressively marketed Mobile's Mardi Gras as a three-day community festival, using it to attract tourists to the city, and by the end of the century, New Year's Eve celebrations had faded from glory, in favor of the Mardi Gras celebration.

Mobilians had always taken great pride in their unique mystic parades and these new efforts helped rebuild both the city's spirit and economy by the end of the century.
