

MARDI GRAS HISTORY

The origins of Mardi Gras can be traced to Medieval Europe, though we have no written record of how that really transformed into the current Mardi Gras of today. But the origins of the Mardi Gras we celebrate today -- with Kings, Mardi Gras colors, and brass bands -- are traced to New Orleans.



Although we can trace its history to the Romans, a French-Canadian explorer, Jean Baptiste Le Moyne Sieur de Bienville, landed on a plot of ground 60 miles directly south of New Orleans in 1699 and called it "Pointe due Mardi Gras." He also established "Fort Louis de la Louisiane" (which is now Mobile) in 1702. In 1703, the tiny settlement of Fort Louis de la Mobile celebrated the very first Mardi Gras.

In 1704, Mobile established a secret society (Masque de la Mobile) ... similar to those who form our current Mardi Gras Krewes. It lasted until 1709. In 1710, the "Boeuf Graf Society" was formed and paraded from 1711 through 1861. The procession was held with a huge bull's head pushed alone on wheels by 16 men. This occurred on Fat Tuesday.

New Orleans was established in 1718 by Jean-Baptise Le Moyne. By the 1730s, Mardi Gras was celebrated openly in New Orleans.. but not in parade form. In the early 1740s, Louisiana's Governor The Marquis de Vaudreuil established elegant society balls -- the model for the New Orleans Mardi Gras balls of today.

The earliest reference to Mardi Gras "Carnival" appears in a 1781 report to the Spanish colonial governing body. That year, the Perseverance Benevolent & Mutual Aid Association is the first of hundreds of clubs and carnival organizations formed in New Orleans.

By the late 1830s, New Orleans held street processions of maskers with carriages and horseback to celebrate Mardi Gras. Newspapers began to announce Mardi Gras events in advance.

In 1871, Mardi Gras's second "Krewe" is formed, the Twelfth Night Reveler's, with the first account of Mardi Gras "throws."

1872 was the year that a group of businessmen invented a King of Carnival -- Rex -- to parade in the first daytime parade. They introduced the Mardi Gras colors of purple, green and gold; the Mardi Gras song, and the Mardi Gras flag.

In 1873, the first floats were constructed entirely in New Orleans instead of France. In 1875, Governor Warmoth of Louisiana signs the "Mardi Gras Act" making it a legal holiday in Louisiana, which it still is. Most Mardi Gras Krewes today developed from private social clubs that have restrictive membership policies. Since all of these parade organizations are completely funded by its members, we call it the "Greatest Free Show on Earth!"