

MARDI GRAS

Once a year, New Orleans descends into a flurry of chaos, crowds, and colorful masks as the city celebrates Mardi Gras– the last day of the Carnival celebration. Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday as it's also known, is the Christian feasting period before the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday. But in the Big Easy the day of indulgence takes on a whole new meaning as galas, parades, and parties take over the city– it's even a Louisiana state holiday.

Some think Mardi Gras may be linked with the ancient Roman pagan celebrations of spring and fertility such as Saturnalia, a week-long festival when work and business came to a halt. Schools and courts of law closed, and the normal social patterns were suspended. On the Julian calendar, which the Romans used at the time, the winter solstice fell on December 25. Hence, the celebration gradually became associated with Christmas.

Mardi Gras arrived in North America as a French Catholic tradition with the Le Moyne brothers, Pierre and Jean-Baptiste, in the late 17th century, when King Louis XIV sent the pair to defend France's claim on the territory of *Louisiane*, which included what are now Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and part of eastern Texas.

The expedition entered the mouth of the Mississippi River on 2 March 1699 (Lundi Gras). They did not yet know it was the river explored and claimed for France by René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle in 1683. The party proceeded upstream and made camp. on 3 March (Mardi Gras) so in honor of this holiday, the spot was named *Point du Mardi Gras* and the nearby tributary Bayou Mardi Gras. In 1703, French settlers in Mobile established the first organized Mardi Gras celebration tradition in what was to become the United States.

The first Mardi Gras parade held in New Orleans is recorded to have taken place in 1837. The tradition in New Orleans expanded to the point that it became synonymous with the city in popular perception, and embraced by residents of New Orleans beyond those of French or Catholic heritage. Mardi Gras celebrations are part of the basis of the slogan *Laissez les bons temps rouler* ("Let the good times roll"). On Mardi Gras Day, the last parades of the season wrap up and the celebrations come to a close with the Meeting of the Courts (Rex Ball). Other cities along the Gulf Coast, from Pensacola; Galveston; to Lake Charles and Lafayette; and north to Natchez and Alexandria, have active Mardi Gras celebrations.

The first year that Mardi Gras was celebrated on a grand scale in Galveston was 1871 with the emergence of two rival Mardi Gras societies, called the Knights of Momus (known only by the initials "K.O.M.") and the Knights of Myth, both of which devised night parades, masked balls, exquisite costumes and elaborate invitations. The Knights of Momus, led by some prominent Galvestonians, decorated horse-drawn wagons for a torch lit night parade which culminated with a presentation of tableaux and a grand gala.

In the rural Acadiana area, many Cajuns celebrate with the *Courir de Mardi Gras*, a tradition that dates to medieval celebrations in France. St. Louis claims to host the second largest Mardi Gras celebration in the United States.

