



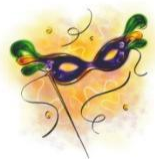
In the Middle Ages, people preparing for several weeks of fasting during Lent would eat all the meat, cheese, and eggs in their homes. In France, the day of binging before Ash Wednesday became known as Mardi Gras, or “Fat Tuesday.” The weeks leading up to Lent are also known as “Carnival” from the Latin carnelevare, "to remove or take away meat."

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Europeans who explored the New World brought with them the carnival celebrations. Montreal, Rio de Janeiro, and New Orleans became famous for their carnival festivities.



Mardi Gras came to America in 1699 with the Le Moyne brothers, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville and Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, when King Louis XIV sent the pair to defend France's claim on the territory of Louisiana, which included what are now the U.S. states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Mardi Gras had been celebrated in Paris since the Middle Ages. Iberville and Bienville sailed into the Gulf of Mexico and launched an expedition up the Mississippi River. On March 3, 1699 they set up camp on the west bank of the river, about 60 miles south of where New Orleans is today. This was the day Mardi Gras was being celebrated in France. In honor of the special day, they held a small celebration and named the site Point du Mardi Gras.

Bienville went on to found the settlement of Mobile, Alabama in 1702 as the first capital of French Louisiana. In 1703 the tiny settlement of Fort Louis de la Mobile celebrated the very first Mardi Gras.



In the decades that followed, New Orleans and other French settlements began marking the holiday with street parties, masked balls and lavish dinners. However when New Orleans came under Spanish rule the custom of masked balls was banned. The ban remained in force until the mid 1820s when New Orleans became a U.S. city.

The first documented New Orleans Mardi Gras parade took place in 1837. Unfortunately, Mardi Gras gained a negative reputation because of rowdy behavior of the maskers during the 1840's and 50's. The situation became so bad that the city leaders considered putting an end to the celebration.

In 1857 a secret society of businessmen called Mistick Krewe of Comus organized a new kind of parade. With dazzling floats and costumes, the Comus organization added beauty to Mardi Gras and demonstrated that it could be a safe and festive event.



After being interrupted by the Civil War, the Mardi Gras celebration continued in 1866. New krewes joined in the New Orleans Mardi Gras. These organizations introduced new customs like the official colors of Mardi Gras (purple, green, and gold), the official anthem, "If Ever I Cease to Love You," and the official King Rex. Other lasting customs include throwing beads and other trinkets, wearing masks, decorating floats and eating King Cake.

Louisiana is the only state in which Mardi Gras is a legal holiday