

History of Mardi Gras Parades

While beads, costumes, and King Cakes are all great additions to Mardi Gras, the Carnival season wouldn't be where it was today without its famous parades rolling through the streets of New Orleans and in other cities throughout South and all over the world.

However, have you ever wondered what was behind the parades: how they got started, what they represent, and when and why they are held? All of the answers to these questions are at the heart of what makes Mardi Gras celebrations so important. Understanding the significance of the Carnival parade history, will enable one to appreciate how Mardi Gras is much more than just a few weeks of excitement and sanctioned debauchery.

The first Mardi Gras parade in the United States wasn't even held in New Orleans but in Mobile, Alabama in the early 1700s, when the area was still under French rule. Mobile has the longest tradition associated with Mardi Gras-style parades. However, because the relaxed atmosphere in New Orleans, Mardi Gras has become the largest in Louisiana. Parades in New Orleans have largely outshined its neighboring cities and the world in their size and scope.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, about 60 parades rolled through the streets of New Orleans during the two weeks prior to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the Christian season of Lent. The parades are organized by a membership of like minded people referred to as a Krewe. Typically one must be invited to join a Krewe, with the acceptance of their application going before a membership review board.

While each parade is unique to the particular traditions of each Krewe, they all share a few commonalities that bind them together. First, every parade will elect a King or Queen. These individuals are picked from the respective Krewe membership. Though in recent years as the parades have gotten larger various celebrities have been bestowed the honor of being the parade's Grand Marshall.

And of course each parade must have floats. The floats are designed around that Krewe's particular theme for the year and often poke fun at certain cultural events. For instance, in 2006 many of the Krewe's floats reflected the feelings of many in the area that the U.S. government's relief efforts in response to Hurricane Katrina were too slow to arrive. Float design and decoration takes thousands of hours of preparation and work. The float preparations literally begin a few weeks after Mardi Gras for the next season.

The parade's respective Krewe members get the honor of riding the floats, and they get to toss beads, doubloons and trinkets over the course of the parade's route. The trinkets usually bear the Krewe's emblem and the particular parade's theme and date.

And finally, any parade in the Crescent City wouldn't be complete without music! The responsibility of providing a musical soundtrack for the fun falls to local high-school marching bands, and local jazz bands,

In addition to the bands, there are usually several local dance schools, which perform routines while marching. Flag drills, clap sequences, dance routines and marching steps along with colorful costumes make parade watching in New Orleans a fun activity.

Masked riders on horses will also fill in between the floats.

