THE HISTORY OF MARDI GRAS IN GALVESTON

I. CONTEXT

Mardi Gras was born out of a masquerade ball tradition that began in fifteenth century Europe. *Bal masque* events, where guests would wear extravagant costumes and masks to conceal their identities, were widespread throughout the continent. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the practice spread to some cities in the Western Hemisphere, including New Orleans, where French soldiers held the first recorded Mardi Gras celebration in 1699. Mardi Gras ("Fat Tuesday") was a particularly popular occasion for a masquerade ball as it afforded religious observers one final day of license before the onset of Lent, which begins with Ash Wednesday in accordance with the liturgical calendar.

In addition to New Orleans and Mobile, which hosted its first Mardi Gras celebration in 1702, Galveston emerged in the nineteenth century as a significant port on the Gulf Coast and developed its own Mardi Gras tradition. The city, which occupies a barrier island on the Texas Gulf Coast, owes much of its early growth to its advantageous natural port, which was utilized by pirates, Spanish explorers, and early Texas capitalists. After the Texas Revolution, when the Galveston City Company platted the land and began selling lots in 1838. The city quickly grew on the strength of cotton exports and farm supply imports. The downtown business district, with the Strand at its center, served as a particularly important commercial hub.

As the economy expanded, Galveston became an attractive destination for European immigrants. Most of them settled farther inland, but many stayed in Galveston, finding work with one of the companies that operated from the port or providing services for the city's growing population. Each immigrant group brought a distinct set of traditions and the sum of

these diverse contributions came to define the character of the city. One of the clearest expressions of this cultural development lies in the emergence of *bal masque*-style events in the city in the 1850s and 1860s, and the subsequent growth of Mardi Gras.

II. OVERVIEW

The first Mardi Gras in Galveston occurred in 1867, when a group called "the Jolly Young Bachelors" invited 100 guests for "dramatic entertainment and a *bal masque.*"[1] While novel in its celebration of Mardi Gras, the event was in actuality a continuation of an established masquerade ball trend. At least two previous similar events in the city are documented. The first took place on March 26, 1856 at the home of Michel B. Menard, the founder of the Galveston City Company and a native of Quebec.[2] As described in the Galveston Daily News on the following day, the ball was well attended by prominent Galvestonians in costumes such as "the Queen of the Gipsies," "Pocahontas," 'Turkish Costumes," and "Dominican Friars." In the article's conclusion, the author states,

> "The ball was the first of the kind, we believe, ever given in Galveston; and as regards the whole effect, it was exceedingly brilliant, and the company present, comprising the *bon son* of our city, accord to the accomplished hostess and host the greatest credit. This entertainment will doubtless be followed by others with a similar character, but it can hardly be surpassed for beauty, splendor and general enjoyment."[3]

Whether or not the author was accurate in his assertion that the Menards' party was the first of its kind in Galveston, the prediction of similar future events was prescient. Other masquerade balls indeed followed, including one at Tremont Hall (23rd Street and Post Office) on January 2, 1866, when a group of German Americans, dressed as "monks and Quakers—priests and soldiers—nymphs and nuns…mingled up in delightful confusion."[4]

Published descriptions for both the 1857 and 1866 events reveal European influences in the origins of Mardi Gras. Those influences are even more clearly demonstrated in advertisements leading up to the first Mardi Gras celebration, organized by the Jolly Young Bachelors on March 5, 1867 at Turner Hall (2105 Sealy). On the day of the event, Flake's Daily Galveston Bulletin provided a history of Mardi Gras observances in Paris, New Orleans, and New York. While explaining that "in truth, our (Galveston's) New Year's Day jollity is this custom transposed to another day," the author assures readers that "the *bal masque* of the 'Jolly Young Batchelors' at Turner's Hall this evening…will be unique and pleasant entertainment."[5]

According to a review printed in the same bulletin two days later, the 1867 Mardi Gras celebration met and surpassed high expectations. True to the *bal masque* spirit, masks obfuscated identities and gave license. The reviewer recalled that "monks were on the best of terms with seductive flower girls" and "a manly Romeo pirouetted with a lovely Juliet in *robe de nuit*, and disheveled hair." The highlight of the evening was Judge Alvan Reed, dressed as Falstaff from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and filling out the large costume "without padding but certainly not without pudding." The reviewer ends his review with a call for the Jolly Young Bachelors to repeat the event soon.[6]

To whatever extent the prospect of a second Mardi Gras celebration excited Galvestonians, the 1868 event seems to have been a disappointment, or as Flake's Bulletin

described it, "a doleful failure."[7] Mardi Gras faded into obscurity in 1869 and 1870 to the extent that by 1871, when two new groups called the Knights of Myth and the Knights M. began promoting planned events, the Galveston Daily News treated the occasion as a mysterious novelty. The newspaper provided thorough descriptions of the traditional celebrations in Europe and New Orleans, which the 1871 event was intended to mimic.[8] The program, featuring two night parades and grand balls at Turner Hall and Casino Hall (located on Winnie), marks a turning point in Galveston's Mardi Gras history.[9] The Knights of Myth and Knights of Momus (the former Knights of M) built upon their momentum with large gatherings in 1872 and 1873, the latter of which was attended by Governor Edmund J. Davis and other state officials.[10] The annual event survived throughout the 1870s and received national publicity.[11]

Due to the whimsical secrecy with which organizers presented the events and the complaisance with which journalists reported on them, the identities of the leaders behind the earliest Mardi Gras celebrations are unknown. However, several prominent local figures are listed among the members of the Knights of Myth and the Knights of Momus, the two groups that organized many of the festivities. The groups included figures such as George Schneider, Isadore Dyer, Sr., General Ebenezar B. Nichols, J.W. Jockusch, James Sorley, and John Sealy. Female guests at the early balls included Bettie Brown, Josephine Gresham, and Lizzie Moody.[12] Among these and other early organizers, the most pivotal leaders are unidentified.

In 1875, a new group called the Midday Revelers began organizing the events. Masked balls and parades continued until 1880, when they became too costly.[13] In 1887, the Galveston Daily News reported that "public observance of Mardi Gras in Galveston has been permitted to fall into innocuous desuetude."[14]

Private celebrations and impromptu parades continued even after the devastating 1900 Galveston Hurricane. Public events, however, did not resume until 1910, when a group called the Kotton Karnival Kids,[1] later renamed the Mystic Merry Makers, organized Mardi Gras for the purpose of staging parades for a larger Galveston Cotton Carnival.[15] In 1914, they added two dance functions to the program. One dance took place at the beach auditorium at the intersection of 27th Street and Avenue Q and the second was held at the Grand Opera House at 2020 Post Office. The 1917 celebration marked the beginning of two more enduring traditions: a party especially dedicated for children and a royal party featuring the crowning of that year's King Frivolous.[16]

In 1929, the Mystic Merry Makers could no longer afford to sponsor Mardi Gras. The group accepted an offer to surrender responsibility for the event to the Galveston Boosters Club.[17] Given only one month's notice, the Boosters Club managed their first celebration successfully, earning a $1,500 profit.[18] Under various names—initially the Galveston Boosters Club, and afterwards "the Caballeros," the Galveston Commercial Association, and after a merger with another existing group, the Galveston Chamber of Commerce[19]—the group continued to organize the event through 1941.

In 1942, organizers agreed to cancel Mardi Gras in recognition of World War II.[20] Following the war, civic leaders reinstituted community-wide celebrations and pageants on Seawall Boulevard as well as the old city auditorium downtown. In one typical occasion, the Greater Galveston Beach Association, chaired by Sam Maceo, invited comedian and ventriloquist Edward Bergen to perform at the Pleasure Pier in 1948.[21] Beginning in the early

[1] The Kotton Karnival Kids were commonly known by the abbreviation *K.K.K.* There is no evidence that the Kotton Karnival Kids had any affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan, who shares the abbreviation. Perhaps related to the Klan's resurgence after World War I, the Kotton Karnival Kids changed its name to the Mystic Merry Makers in 1920 and thereafter went by the abbreviation *M.M.M.*

1950s, celebrations became private rather than public affairs. Organizations including the Galveston Artillery Club continued the annual tradition. In 1956, the Catholic schools of Galveston threw an elaborate Mardi Gras "Treasure Ball" and coronation as a fundraiser, a tradition which has continued to the present day.

In 1985, business man and Galveston-native George P. Mitchell and his wife Cynthia Woods Mitchell spearheaded efforts to revive Mardi Gras as a public event building on the local traditions. The project coincided with the Mitchells' rehabilitation of the Tremont House, located on 23rd Street, which would serve as a central location for parade routes and a new downtown street festival.[22] Mitchell and his team emulated Mardi Gras New Orleans while celebrating Galveston's unique history through the reformation of the Knights of Momus, one of the original 1871 krewes, and a focus on the commercial Strand district and the residential Silk Stocking neighborhood as historic settings. The 1985 event included a dance in the Strand district and an evening parade led by jazz clarinetist Pete Fountain. Nearly 200,000 people attended.[23] The celebration was regarded as an overwhelming success and the tradition grew in subsequent years.

Soon other krewes, including the Krewe of Gambrinus and the Mystic Krewe of Aquarius, formed and began their own unique celebrations, including parades, processions, and balls. Enlisting logistical support from the Galveston Park Board and the city administration as well as financial support from the Moody Foundation, Mitchell's team expanded the event to a city-wide celebration lasting over two weeks featuring visual and performing artists from around the world. In 1988, city officials estimated that 400,000 people attended. Hotels and condominiums reached maximum capacity and downtown businesses reported increased activity.[24]

To commemorate the re-establishment of Mardi Gras in Galveston, Mitchell underwrote the Fantasy Arches project, which featured seven decorative arches designed by some of the country's leading architects.[25] The idea originated with Dancie Perugini Ware, a Houston public relations consultant associated with Mitchell. Ware conceived of the idea after discovering an 1881 photograph showing four arches constructed for Saengerfest, a choral singing contest organized by groups of German immigrants.[26]

Among the architects who participated in 1985 were Helmut Jahn, Cesar Pelli, Stanley Tigerman, Eugene Aubry, Michael Graves, Charles Moore, and Boone Powell. An eighth arch, designed by Aldo Rossi, was temporarily constructed in 1988. Mitchell and Ware afforded each architect the freedom to create an arch based on their own vision. Some explored *bal masque* themes of fantasy, while others used the opportunity to honor Galveston's heritage as a port city. City officials later ordered the removal of all of the arches except for the one designed by Boone Powell and constructed at the intersection of 24th Street and Mechanic (Avenue C), where it still stands.[27] In 1987, the designs of the arches were part of an exhibit at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian National Design Museum.[28]

Between 1987 and 2010, the Galveston Park Board provided the public support needed for Mardi Gras in conjunction with the festive galas and parades sponsored by the private krewes, all in accordance with the vision developed by Mitchell and his team. In 2011, Yaga's Entertainment, Inc. assumed responsibility for promoting and organizing the event. The group has added more parades as part of their efforts to revitalize the event. As of 2016, the festivities included twenty-one parades presented by Yaga's in addition to those sponsored by krewes. Yaga's has also added more daytime events to foster a more family-friendly environment.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

Today, Mardi Gras provides vital support for local economy. Attracting 300,000 visitors annually, the event is one of the city's most prominent attractions. Given the vast technological and cultural changes of the past 150 years, the modern celebration is understandably distinct from the early versions in 1867 and 1871 and the masquerade balls of the pre-Mardi Gras era. The periodic hiatuses of public events may have further obscured links to the tradition's nineteenth century origins, but that does not mean that the ties were severed. Through house parties, private affairs, impromptu parades, the most fundamental essence of the event's *bal masque* origins survive unscathed. Furthermore, the repeated efforts by multiple generations of Galvestonians to renew the public celebration of Mardi Gras is a substantial indication of a sustained commitment to retaining the depth of cultural ties to continental Europe that make the city exceptional.

IV. SOURCES

[1] "Jolly Young Bachelors." *Flake's Daily Galveston Bulletin*; March 1, 1867, p. 5. Web. *Newspaper Archive.* http://www.newspaperarchive.com: Accessed April 28, 2016.
[2] Henson, Margaret Swett. "Menard, Michel Brenamour," *Handbook of Texas Online*. Texas State Historical Association. Web, (https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fme09). Accessed April 26, 2016.
[3] "Masquerade Ball." *The Galveston Daily News*; Thursday, March 27, 1856. Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation, Galveston, Texas.
[4] "Masquerade." *Flake's Daily Galveston Bulletin*; January 2, 1866, p. 5. Web. *Newspaper Archive.* http://www.newspaperarchive.com: Accessed April 28, 2016.
[5] "Fat Tuesday." *Flake's Daily Galveston Bulletin*; March 5, 1867. Web. *Newspaper Archive.* http://www.newspaperarchive.com: Accessed April 27, 2016.
[6] "The Bal Masque." *Flake's Daily Galveston Bulletin*; Wednesday, March 7, 1867. Web. *Newspaper Archive.* http://www.newspaperarchive.com: Accessed March 16, 2016.
[7] "Mardi Gras." *Flake's Daily Galveston Bulletin*; Wednesday, February 28, 1868, p. 5. Web. *Newspaper Archive.* http://www.newspaperarchive.com: Accessed March 16, 2016.
[8] "K.O.M. – Knights of Myth." *The Galveston Daily News*; Thursday, February 16, 1871. Web. *Newspaper Archive.* http://www.newspaperarchive.com: Accessed April 29, 2016.
[9] "Galveston's First Mardi Gras Celebration Was Staged in 1867 at Old Turner Hall, With Justice Reed as Falstaff." *Galveston Tribune*; Saturday, January 30, 1932, Magazine Section p. 1. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

[10] "Galveston's First Mardi Gras…Justice Reed as Falstaff," *Galveston Tribune*, January 30, 1932. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[11] Herz, Lillian E. "This is Galveston." February 7. 1963, caption, p. 5-B. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[12] "History of Mardi Gras in Galveston Dates from 1871." *The Galveston Daily News*; Sunday, March 2, 1930. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[13] "History of Mardi Gras…from 1871," *The Galveston Daily News*, March 2, 1930.
[14] "Mardi Gras. The Beginning of the Lenten Season—Farewell to Flesh" *The Galveston Daily News*; Wednesday, February 23, 1887. Web. *Newspaper Archive.* http://www.newspaperarchive.com: Accessed April 28, 2016.
[15] "Galveston's Mardi Gras." *Galveston Daily News*; Thursday, February 21, 1924, p. 1. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[16] "History of Mardi Gras…from 1871," *The Galveston Daily News*, March 2, 1930.
[17] "Boosters Club to Take Over Galveston Mardi Gras Ball." *The Galveston Daily News*; Saturday, January 12, 1929. Web. *Newspaper Archive.* http://www.newspaperarchive.com: Accessed April 28, 2016.
[18] "Levy Reports $1,500 Profit on Mardi Gras." *The Galveston Daily News*; Thursday, March 28, 1929. Web. *Newspaper Archive.* http://www.newspaperarchive.com: Accessed April 28, 2016.
[19] Hartman, Betty. "Galveston's Mardi Gras Celebrations." Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[20] "Festivities to be Lacking on Mardi Gras Here." *The Galveston Daily News*; March 7, 1943. Web. *Newspaper Archive.* http://www.newspaperarchive.com: Accessed April 28, 2016.
[21] "King Charle McCarthy Will Rule Over Mardi Gras Dance." *The Galveston Daily News*; February 8, 1948. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[22] "For 25 years, the good times have rolled again." *The Galveston Daily News*; Saturday, February 6, 2010, pp. A1, A4. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[23] Crook, Terri. "Thousands flock to Mardi Gras." *The Galveston Daily News*; Sunday morning, February 17, 1985. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[24] Sireto, Cleta. "Mardi Gras visitors make huge impact on the island." *The Galveston Daily News*; Sunday morning, February 14, 1988. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[25] Reinhold, Robert. "Fantasies Soar for Texas Mardi Gras." *The New York Times*; February 10, 1986. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[26] Personal Statement by Dancie Perugini Ware, May 24, 2016. Preservation Resource Center, GHF, Galveston, TX.
[27] Stengler, Jack. "Arches must come down." *The Galveston Daily News*; Friday morning, July 25, 1986. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[28] "Isle arches featured in Smithsonian exhibition." *The Galveston Daily News;* Wednesday morning, September 23, 1987. Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.