

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Rambo's Role in Mardi Gras History

Not everyone is aware that the mummer traditions of Philadelphia had a significant influence on the celebration of Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Even before Comus hit the streets of the Crescent City in 1857, there were many murmurs of mummers and their activities.

The New Orleans *Daily Delta* made numerous mentions of mummers on their pages in 1855:

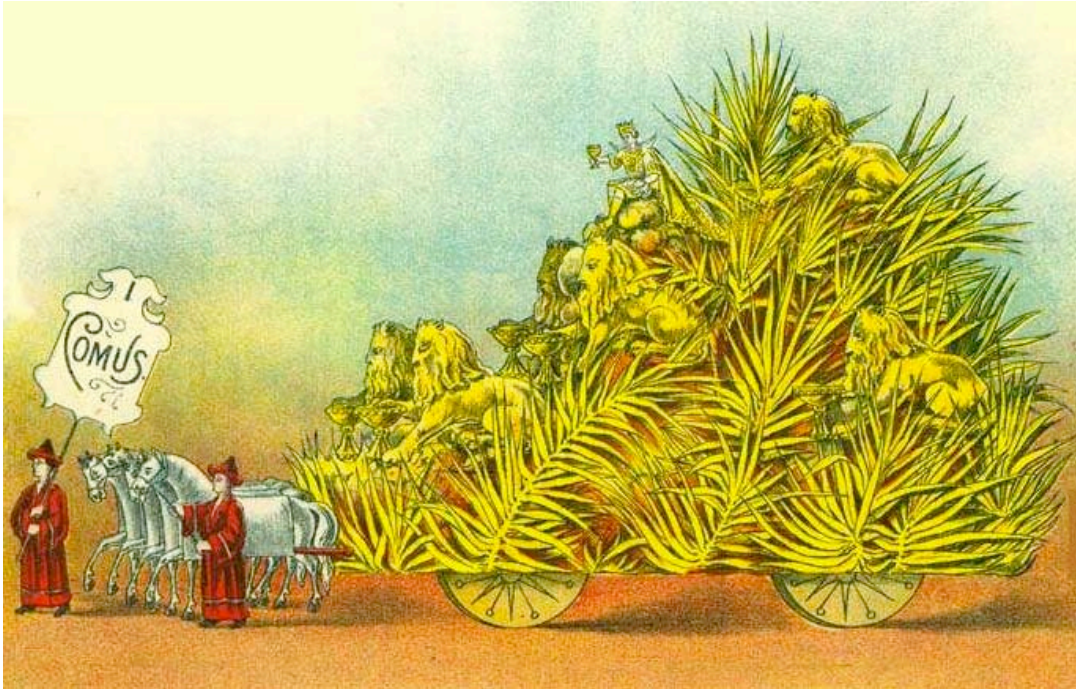
It reported "a famous Mardi Gras mummer, while charging through St. Charles street last evening" that happened to knock down a lady and child who happened to be crossing the street; a "wild Indian mummer, named John Kelly," who struck a man "over the head with a huge stick, for which he was arrested"; a gentleman who gave "two worthy mummers a sound drubbing on Chartres street for throwing flour on him"; and a description of Carnival activities at the Orleans Theatre, where the "masks and mummers came there in hundreds, and the fairer portion of the community never looked more beautiful than in their gay attire".

The day after Mardi Gras that year, the *Daily Delta* informed readers, "Various mummers were arrested yesterday for carrying the Carnival to extremes."

It was still two years before a handful of Anglo-American businessmen would form the Mystick Krewe of Comus at the Gem Restaurant on Royal Street in the French Quarter, yet the newspaper bemoaned Mardi Gras evening being the "most brilliant night passed in our city since it became Anglo-Saxonized":

"This is Mardi-Gras, or the last day of the Carnival! a day that, in times gone was wont to be celebrated in New Orleans with great *eclat*; but the march of Anglo-Saxon innovation has made sad havoc with the time-honored customs of our ancient population, and to-day Mardi-Gras is the Carnival but in name." This was all before Comus.

Comus was an outgrowth of the *Cowbellion de Rakin Society*, a group of Mobile revelers first celebrating New Years Eve a quarter of a century earlier and whose leader, Michael Krafft, was likely influenced by his Pennsylvania mummer traditions. The noisy group celebrated the coming of the New Year in a parade manned with cowbells, rakes and hoes. These mummer-oriented festivities would eventually make their way to New Orleans.



The pageantry of a Comus Parade, 1907.

Comus takes its name from the 1634 work written by John Milton, a masque in honor of chastity. Although the original six founders of Comus were John H. Pope, S. M. Todd, L. D. Addison, Frank Shaw, Jr., Joseph and William P. Ellison, not one was a native of New Orleans or Louisiana. These men were friends who regularly gathered at John Pope's apothecary on the corner of Jackson Avenue and Prytania Street to discuss current issues. Only three lived at some point in Mobile, though none of them were natives. Most were Yankee businessmen whose activities brought them to the port city of New Orleans, where they would transform the city's French Carnival into a Mardi Gras that would become distinctively Anglo-American (and steeped in mummer traditions).

But just what were these mummer traditions?

Philadelphia is home to the annual "Mummers Parade". To define them simply, mummers are "actors engaged in pantomime" or "costumed merrymakers in disguise, especially during festivals", very often (as in Philadelphia) "costumed entertainers welcoming the New

Year". From the Middle French *mommeur* or *momeur* for masker, from the Old French *momeor*, from *momer* to go masked, the term mummer has ancient origins. These traditions date back to early Egypt, pagan Rome and Greece and later medieval Europe. In medieval England, troupes of costumed performers roamed from house to house presenting a mummers' play - a folk drama - at Christmas time.



Medieval Mummers from a Bodleian Library manuscript

Philadelphia Mummary began in the late 1600s as a continuation of the Old World customs of ushering in the New Year. The Swedes were Philadelphia's first settlers, with settlements started there as early as 1639. Gradually, they moved west of the Delaware River to the surrounding suburbs. Tincum Township, just outside the city, has the distinction of being the site of the first recorded European settlement in Pennsylvania. Fort Nya Gothenborg, situated on the South River, served as capital of the New Sweden Colony. When they arrived in Tincum, the Swedes brought with them their custom of visiting friends and neighbors on "Second Day Christmas", December 26 (what we know as "Boxing Day"). Later they extended this period of merriment to include New Year's Day, and welcomed the New Year with masquerades and the parading of noisy revelers.

Most of the Swedish populace carried firearms for protection in those early years, and it did not take long before pistols and muskets joined with bells and noisemakers and the banging pots and pans to create the sights and sounds of a Philadelphia New Year's celebration. Those who "shot in" the New Year became known as "New Year's Shooters". This boisterous Swedish custom of celebrating the end of the calendar year with making lots of noise and shouting was combined with the

tradition of the mummers' play celebrated in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. These plays were always a battle between light and darkness (or good and evil). Five to twenty mummers grouped together, their faces blackened, would travel from house to house reciting doggerel in return for cakes and ale. They'd shout and discharge firearms into the air while burlesquing the English mummers' play of *St. George and the Dragon*. The shouting and shooting of guns was a Swedish and Finnish custom while the reciting of traditional rhymes was English and Welsh.



British Medieval Mummers, one of the UK Royal Mail stamps, 1981

In 1790, Philadelphia became the capital of the United States, and (while there) President George Washington began a tradition of receiving visits from mummers at his residence.

Philadelphia's oldest house was built by Swedes in 1660. Peter Rambo was one of its early citizens and leaders. He chose the distinctive surname of Rambo from his place of origin, Hisingen, the northwestern section of Gothenburg, which is dominated by Ramberget (meaning, raven's mountain) with its beautiful view of the harbor.

Born in 1612, Peter Gunnarsson Rambo was 27 years of age when he sailed to New Sweden as a laborer. After becoming a freeman, he had a prosperous farm and served on the Governor's Council and continued to serve as a justice under both Dutch and English rule. He was the longest living of the original settlers and became known as the Father of New Sweden. This was all before William Penn arrived in 1682.

The Rambo family is still recognized as one of Philadelphia's first families. Perhaps Peter Rambo (who died in 1698) participated as an early mummer.

One can see the similarities to be found in Philadelphia's mummers' festivities compared to what occurred with the *Cowbellions* in Mobile in 1830. These New Year's traditions travelled to New Orleans where they were incorporated into the European Mardi Gras that the Creoles of the city had long celebrated.

The earliest known Philadelphia Mummers club, the Chain Gang, formed in the 1840s, and soon other clubs got together in various parts of town. By the 1870s, what had been uncoordinated neighborhood group celebrations evolved into a citywide parade with two main participating groups: Fancy Dress and Comic clubs. Today there are four distinct divisions: Comic, Fancy, Fancy Brigade and String Band. String bands offer the most elaborate performances and are the crowd's favorite part of the parade. Unlike New Orleans, parade rules do not permit the use of brass instruments in a String Band. Banjos, saxophones and accordions are just some of the instruments used to create a unique sound. Mummers String Bands (like our own Mardi Gras Indians) wear expensive and elaborate costumes of glitter, sequins and feathers.

Comic division clubs (like New Orleans' satirical krewes) lampoon current local and national social and political topics. The Fancy division clubs wear grandiose, ornate costumes and perform with floats and props. Many of the floats are reminiscent of a New Orleans Mardi Gras parade. The City of Philadelphia organized the first official Mummers Parade in 1901.

To end this tale of mummery, here are a few words from the past:

"In comes I, Old Father Christmas. Am I welcome, or am I welcome not?"

So begins many an English mummers' play of old as the words echo throughout the halls in celebration of Twelfth Night! Twelfth Night, a feast still celebrated in parts of the British Isles, that time when fools, children (and a few grown children) are kings, and bosses and adults are fools and children; when the forces of Light and Darkness meet in a climactic moment; the night when the Three Kings visited the Christ child; the celebration for which Shakespeare penned a wonderful play; and the beginning of the Carnival season in New Orleans, where and when king cake consumption begins in earnest - all its observances include some form of mummery.



1873 Comus Ball at the Varieties Theater

But the Swedish influence in Philadelphia shifted the day for mummers to New Year's, and so it is today. So it was in Mobile for a time, until a few Anglo-Americans created an organized krewe in New Orleans for Mardi Gras. Mobile has their celebration on Mardi Gras now, too, instead of New Year's. And both cities founded by the brothers LeMoyne (Mobile in 1702 and New Orleans in 1718) continue to have a friendly argument as to who had the first Mardi Gras.

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