

1896: A Lustrous Leap Year

On January 1st of that momentous year, German physicist Wilhelm Röntgen announced to the world his discovery of x-rays. By June, Henry Ford drove his first Ford automobile through the streets of Detroit, Michigan; and on November 7th, the Louisiana Society was incorporated and admitted to the National Society of The Colonial Dames of America.



*Seal of the National Society of
The Colonial Dames of America*

Also in 1896, the LSU Tigers (now members of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association), went undefeated, winning against Centenary College, Ole Miss and Tulane, among others. Louisiana's own Edward Douglass White was Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, and Murphy J. Foster won re-election as Governor of Louisiana in 1896 with 116,216 votes to 87,698 for John N. Pharr, the Populist-Republican candidate. A century later on January 8, 1996, his grandson, Murphy J. "Mike" Foster, Jr., was inaugurated as Louisiana's 49th governor since the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

The year of the first modern Olympic games, 1896 was also a big year in the development of the motion picture industry. In Britain, Birt Acres and Robert W. Paul developed their own film projector, the Theatrograph (later known as the Animatograph) in January. The same month in the United States, a projector called the Vitascope was designed by Charles Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat. Armat began working with Thomas Edison to manufacture the Vitascope system of

movie projection, which was first publicly exhibited on April 23, 1896, at Koster and Bial's Music Hall, New York City.

It wasn't long before the Vitascope came to New Orleans. The first film shown in the Crescent City was on a large outdoor canvas screen at the lakefront (unrolled in front of the bandstand) on June 28, 1896, by Allen B. Blakemore, an electrical engineer for the New Orleans City and Lake Railroad. He had the know-how to rig up Armat and Edison's projection system. Blakemore reduced the five-hundred-volt current from the trolley line for his "Wonderful Vitascope" machine by way of a water rheostat. He also set up a small, square booth six feet above the decking of the resort to house the projector, and an old-time circus man named Billy Reed cranked out the first flicks.



On July 26, 1896, the first permanent theater in the United States dedicated exclusively to showing motion pictures was William "Pop" Rock's Vitascope Hall. It was located on the corner of Canal Street and Exchange Alley in New Orleans, and admission was only ten cents. The very first movie house in the United States, it only slightly preceded the city's first silent film studios.

Vitascope Hall,

623 CANAL ST. AND EXCHANGE PLACE.

THE GREAT CRAZE OF THE DAY,
EDISON'S VITASCOPE.

New series of thrilling views. Photographic motion at last perfected. The dream of a century realized. The whole town startled and Vitascope Hall crowded to the doors by brilliant audiences, day and night.

ADMISSION, 10 CENTS.

WAINWRIGHT & ROCK,

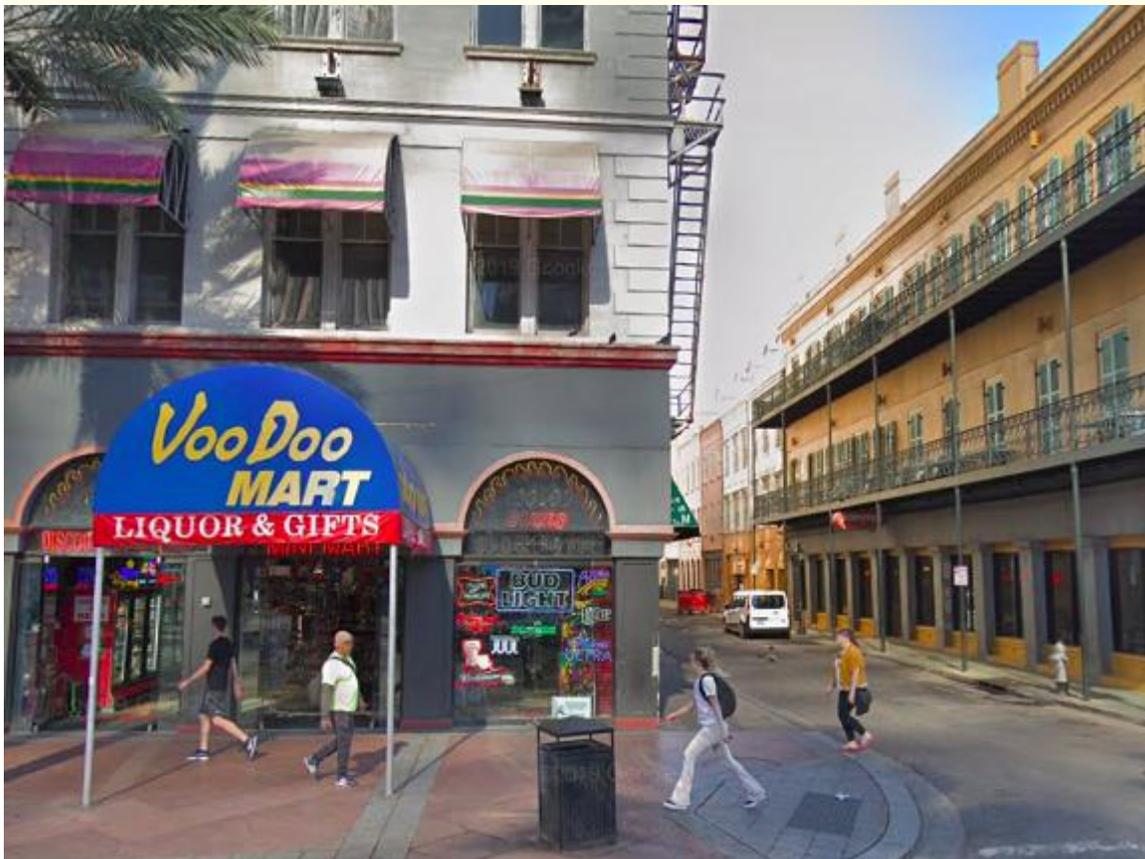
SOLE OWNERS AND MANAGERS.

Southern states and territory rights for sale.

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*Vitascope Hall ad, Picayune, August 2, 1896,
admission only 10 cents*

Canal Street movie house was first in the nation



*Vitascope Hall today, 623 Canal Street corner Exchange Alley,
today the VooDoo Mart*

Siegmund Lubin, an early motion picture pioneer, visited "Pop" Rock's Vitascope Hall in New Orleans and in 1896 began distributing films for Edison, including the first screen kiss between Canadian actress May Irwin and John Rice. Entitled "The Kiss", popular short films like this were extremely popular at Vitascope Hall.

It is believed the tradition of women being allowed to propose to men on February 29 began in 5th century Ireland when St. Bridget complained to St. Patrick about women having to wait too long for a man to pop the question. In keeping with this leap year theme, a number of prominent society women planned and gave a very elegant ball. These role reversal *rebelles* called this first all female krewe "*Les Mystérieuses*", and Mr. Willie Stauffer was chosen king. Mrs. A. A. Brittin served as president of the organization. In all respects the usual positions of men and women were turned around, the former being "called out" by the latter. *Les Mystérieuses* was the forerunner of all-women krewes such as Iris, Muses and Nyx.

In addition to *Les Mystérieuses*, 1896 saw the Crescent City's Carnival growing ever larger and more diverse. The Twelfth Night Revelers' tableau of "Cloudland" was reigned over by Miss Bertie Hayward, who got the golden bean. On February 3, 1896, a totally new group, the Krewe of Nereus, made a very successful *début*. "Sea Views" were presented in tableaux at the ball, and the first Queen of Nereus was Miss May Van Benthuisen.



Canal Street in the 1890s

The Atlanteans illustrated "Loves of the Angels", and the Elves of Oberon (formed just the year before) gave "Visions in Marble". Momus burlesqued Carnival with a miniature parade on stage, and Proteus chose the "Animal Kingdom" as its subject. The Phunny Phorty Phellows gave a ball described in Henry Rightor's *Standard History of New Orleans* as a "medley of grotesque and mirth-provoking maskers".

Mardi Gras Day was on February 18th that year and Miss Vira Boarman reigned as Queen of Proteus the previous evening, and (quite in keeping with the leap year theme) was a leader in securing suffrage for New York women in November 1917. Educated at Newcomb College in New Orleans, she married Norman Whitehouse, a New York stockbroker, on April 13, 1898. In 1918, she became director of the Swiss office of the United States Committee on Public Information in order to "combat the German propaganda and make plain the aims of the American people". She wrote a book recounting that experience, *A Year as a Government Agent* (1920). She was later president of a leather company that she sold before the stock market crash in 1929.



Krewe of Nereus, founded 1896

Rex (with monarchs Mr. Charles Janvier and Miss Arthemise Baldwin) had as its theme "Planets" while Comus finished the Carnival season with "The Seasons" alongside Miss Alma Kruttschnitt as his queen.

These reigning monarchs may have said "Let them eat king cake," but instead the Crescent City got a master baker from Deidesheim, Germany, named George Leidenheimer. He founded the bakery that bears his name in 1896. Originally baking the dense and heavy brown German loaves, Leidenheimer found fame producing New Orleans style French bread with its crisp outer crust (and continues to do so today).



There were some notable departures, as well. Captain Thomas Paul Leathers of the steamboat Natchez (which lost to steamboat Robert E. Lee in a famous 1870 race from New Orleans to St. Louis) died on June 13, 1896, at the age of 80 after being run over by a bicyclist on St. Charles Avenue.

February saw the death of George Nicholson, whose widow and boss, Eliza Jane Poitevent Holbrook Nicholson, poet, newspaper owner and editor of New Orleans' *Daily Picayune* since 1876, caught pneumonia and followed him in death eleven days later. Writing under the name Pearl Rivers, she was the first woman owner of a major newspaper.

1896 was the founding year of the Era (Equal Rights Association) Club, New Orleans, formed by Kate Gordon. The organization successfully pushed for the right of women to vote on matters of taxation. Like Vira Boarman, Kate and Jean Gordon were suffragists and social reformers (among the South's few), well known and respected for furthering women's rights in the areas of political and social reform.



Sisters Kate Gordon (1861 – 1932) and Jean Gordon (1865 – 1931)

Minor League baseball team, The New Orleans Pelicans, won the pennant in 1896; and landmark Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation laws for public facilities under a doctrine that came to be known as “separate but equal”. The case came about four years earlier when Homer Plessy, recruited to challenge a Louisiana segregation law, bought a first-class train ticket at the Press Street Depot in New Orleans and intentionally revealed he was of mixed race. Though only 1/8th African-American, he was arrested after refusing to vacate the “Whites Only” railway car.



Kingsley House of New Orleans, which “educates children, strengthens families and builds community” was founded in 1896 by Trinity Episcopal Church pastor Dr. Beverley Warner and guided by its head resident and progressive reformer Eleanor McMain. With a non-sectarian board, it became the largest and most influential settlement house in the American South.



Kingsley House, founded 1896

1896 in Louisiana was far and away a vitally important year, especially for (and, in no small part, thanks to the active participation by) women.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“A Lustrous Leap Year”
Ned Hémard
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