

# **Mardi Gras comes to Virginia... in 1862**

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As the Civil War began, soldiers from all the Southern states arrived in Virginia, to protect the new Confederate capital at Richmond. Some of the most notorious of these visitors were from Louisiana, which ultimately provided over ten regiments of men for service in Virginia. Several of these were stationed on the Virginia Peninsula to defend the Tidewater area from any Federal invasion.

Their arrival excited quite a lot of interest in the Williamsburg area and they proved to be a truly exotic group of volunteers. Within their ranks were soldiers of fortune, gamblers, poor farmers, and gentlemen planters. Wearing gaudy uniforms, all of them seemed to have a bowie knife and a “devil-may-care” attitude toward military discipline. One regiment, on their way to Virginia, hijacked their own train and had a drunken spree in Montgomery, Alabama. The city officials had to call out troops with fixed bayonets to contain the intoxicated Louisianans.

Their manners in Williamsburg still left much to be desired... They killed and ate livestock at such a prodigious rate that one observer noted that after only twelve hours on nearby Jamestown Island, they had managed to “eat up every living thing on the Island but two horses and their own species.”

They also seemed to have a talent for being arrested and confined. Crimes listed against them were robbery, desertion, forgery, and fighting. In just a few weeks, one unit reported several fights amongst its men, two of which resulted in stabbings. The military jails around the Williamsburg area seemed to be full of Louisianans.

In February of 1862, however, these same soldiers introduced Williamsburg to a New Orleans tradition, as they offered a "burlesque circus" or Mardi Gras celebration to the people of the local area. After collecting material and props for costumes from the ladies around town, over two hundred "New Orleans boys" marched down the Duke of Gloucester Street in a grand Mardi Gras parade, "rigged out in as fantastic manner as it was possible to accomplish."

Then, at the City Hotel, several of the revelers carried out an elaborate practical joke on the Confederate commander, General John Bankhead Magruder. Magruder and his staff were enjoying a special meal offered by the Louisianans, when one of the young soldiers, dressed as a woman was introduced as a visitor from New Orleans. The general gallantly sat "Miss Campbell," as she called herself, on his right, and began to attempt to charm her. It was noticed by many present, that "Miss Campbell" freely partook of all the alcohol present.

How long the charade could have been carried on is questionable, but it ended in an abrupt manner... It seems that several other soldiers had ripped up a featherbed, which they dumped through a hole in the floor above the dining room. As feathers floated down on the dinner party, they quickly ran downstairs through the commotion shouting out that it was a Louisiana snowstorm, as they grabbed "Miss Campbell" and quickly departed.

And so Virginia had a wartime Mardi Gras celebration... At least they weren't throwing beads...