

# The History of Mardi Gras

History.com, adapted by Newsela staff



Parade-goers vie for beads and trinkets during the Krewe of Proteus Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans, Louisiana, February 16, 2015. The day is known as Lundi Gras, the day before Mardi Gras. Photo: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert

A Christian holiday and popular cultural phenomenon, Mardi Gras dates back thousands of years to pagan spring and fertility customs. Pagan typically refers to belief in multiple gods or goddesses from a time before Christianity spread. Also known as Carnival, Mardi Gras is celebrated in many countries around the world on the day before the religious season of Lent begins. Mostly, it is held in countries with large Roman Catholic populations. Brazil, Venice and New Orleans play host to some of the holiday's most famous public festivities. They draw thousands of tourists and revelers every year.

## Origins of Mardi Gras

According to historians, Mardi Gras dates back thousands of years to pagan celebrations of spring and fertility, including the noisy Roman festivals of Saturnalia and Lupercalia. When Christianity arrived in Rome, religious leaders decided to merge these popular local traditions into the new faith, an easier task than abolishing them altogether. As a result, the excess and debauchery of the Mardi Gras season became a prelude to Lent. These are the 40 days of repentance between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Along with Christianity, Mardi Gras spread from Rome to other European countries, including France, Germany, Spain and England.

Traditionally, in the days leading up to Lent, merrymakers would binge on all the meat, eggs, milk and cheese that remained in their homes. This would prepare them for

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several weeks of eating only fish and fasting. In France, the day before Ash Wednesday came to be known as Mardi Gras, or “Fat Tuesday.” The word “carnival,” another common name for the pre-Lenten festivities, might also derive from this vegetarian-unfriendly custom: In Medieval Latin, “carnelevarium” means to take away or remove meat.

## Mardi Gras in the United States

Many historians believe that the first American Mardi Gras took place on March 3, 1699, when the French explorers Iberville and Bienville landed in what is now Louisiana, just south of the holiday’s future epicenter: New Orleans. They held a small celebration and dubbed the spot Point du Mardi Gras. In the decades that followed, New Orleans and other French settlements began marking the holiday with street parties, masked balls and fancy dinners. When the Spanish took control of New Orleans, however, they abolished these rowdy traditions. The bans remained in place until Louisiana became a U.S. state in 1812.

On Mardi Gras in 1827, a group of students donned colorful costumes and danced through the streets of New Orleans, imitating the celebrations they had observed while visiting Paris. Ten years later, the first recorded New Orleans Mardi Gras parade took place, a tradition that continues to this day. In 1857, a secret society of New Orleans businessmen called the Mistick Krewe of Comus organized a torch-lit Mardi Gras procession with marching bands and rolling floats. This set the tone for future public celebrations in the city. Since then, krewes have remained a fixture of the Carnival scene throughout Louisiana.

Other lasting customs include throwing beads and other trinkets, wearing masks, decorating floats and eating King Cake. The cake has a plastic baby stuffed inside. Whoever gets the slice with the baby in it has to host the next party.

Louisiana is the only state in which Mardi Gras is a legal holiday. However, elaborate carnival festivities draw crowds in other parts of the United States during the Mardi Gras season as well, including Alabama and Mississippi. Each region has its own events and traditions.

## Mardi Gras around the world

Across the globe, pre-Lenten festivals continue to take place in many countries with significant Roman Catholic populations. Brazil’s weeklong Carnival festivities feature a colorful mix of European, African and native traditions. In Canada, Quebec City hosts the giant Quebec Winter Carnival. In Italy, tourists flock to Venice’s Carnevale, which dates back to the 13th century and is famous for its masquerade balls.

Known as Karneval, Fastnacht or Fasching, the German celebration includes parades, costume balls and a tradition that empowers women to cut off men’s ties. For Denmark’s Fastevlan, children dress up and gather candy in a similar manner to

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Halloween – although the parallel ends with the tradition of "beating" their parents to wake them up on Easter Sunday.

## **When is Mardi Gras?**

Mardi Gras dates:

2017: February 28

2018: February 13

2019: March 5

2020: February 25