THE MATERIALITY OF FESTIVITY

Mobile, Alabama’s Joe Cain Procession: A Confederate Memorial or The People’s Parade?

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the contradictions that characterize Mobile, Alabama’s modern Joe Cain Day celebration. We look first at the official narratives that established Mobile’s Mardi Gras origin myths and the 1967 invention of a new tradition with a People’s Parade centered around Cain’s redface character, Chief Slacabamorinico. Then we discuss the complicated and ever-evolving symbolism surrounding the character by discussing more recent iterations of this public performance. In its inception, the Joe Cain celebration was a clear example of Lost Cause nostalgia, yet it has been adopted, adapted, and embraced by historically marginalized people who use it as a way to claim their space in the festivities. Employing both historical and ethnographic research, we show that carnival can simultaneously be a space for defiance and reaffirmation of social hierarchies and exclusionary discourses. We discuss here some of the concrete material elements that lend this public performance its white supremacist subtext, but we also want to complicate the definition of “materiality” by claiming a procession is a Confederate monument/memorial.

KEYWORDS
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Introduction

Since its creation as a “public platform for exploring [Mobile, Alabama’s] authentic cultural heritage as the foundation for a sustainable and prosperous future” in 2016, the “Mobile History Project” Facebook page had been mostly devoid of political controversy.1 Yet, in 2020, the political chasm that currently characterizes US society finally reached this discussion forum. On June 15, 2020, a group member posted the iconic 1956 Gordon Parks photograph depicting a Black family in front of a department store, the father holding up his little girl as she drinks from a water fountain marked “Colored.” Below the image captions, they wrote: “So much more in Mobile’s history to cry about than the loss of a statue.” The post was likely a response to the removal of Admiral Semmes’s statue ten days earlier.2 While some commenters tried to focus on less controversial topics, such as the elegance of the women’s dresses, others were ready to engage in the discussion of the painful past captured by the beautiful image. One of them remarked: “So if it is the thing to Erase the past by tearing down statues, changing names on buildings, tunnels etc, why is it OK to remember the past thru this picture?? Communist Liberals cannot have it both ways at your convenience!” A few days earlier, on June 4, 2020, in another Facebook group, “Downtown Mobile Word of Mouth,” Chris Singleton, who is MOWA Choctaw, questioned the emblem of the city’s defining festival: “Since we are talking about racism. We should remove Joe Caine [sic] also. He dresses up as a Native American. Isn’t that the same as dressing in black face?”3
Well, Joe Cain is complicated. On the one hand, his image and the whole mythology surrounding him serve as a Confederate memorial. The process of “invention of tradition” that enshrined Joe Cain as the most emblematic figure in Mobile’s Mardi Gras is rooted in Lost Cause nostalgia, or the revisionist ways in which the Confederacy is remembered as a noble endeavor, perpetuated by white writers and commentators. Yet unlike other Confederate symbols and monuments such as statues, buildings, or street signs, he has been embraced by people from historically marginalized communities in Mobile who proudly defend their city’s position as the “birthplace of Mardi Gras.”

The current embodiment of Joe Cain is a mimetic one—technically, a white man dressed as another white man dressed as an invented Native American character—and is a complex combination of redface-by-proxy and Lost Cause pageantry. Yet, both the man who portrays Cain and the people of Mobile at large perceive him as a symbol of joy and unity and celebrate the character with pride (figs. 1–2). A younger generation involved in the current wave of antiracist protests and which has been advocating for the removal of white supremacist symbols is starting to question that narrative.

Investigating the origins of the Joe Cain Day celebration as well as its current reinterpretations, this article explores the contradictions that characterize the event. We look at the official narratives that established Mobile Mardi Gras’ origin myths and discuss the event’s tradition invention in 1967 with a People’s Parade centered around Cain’s redface character, Chief Slacabamorinico.5

Collaborating on this article as outsiders-insiders to Mobile’s Mardi Gras, we seek here what historian Aurélie Godet calls the theoretical ”middle ground,” which calls for nuanced, concrete discussion to properly theorize carnival.6 Employing both historical and ethnographic research, we agree that carnival can simultaneously be a space for defiance and reaffirmation of social hierarchies and see the Joe Cain celebration as a great example of that theory in practice. In its inception, the Joe Cain Procession was a clear example of ”Confederate Culture,” yet it has served as a way for historically marginalized Mobilians to claim their space in an otherwise elitist celebration.7

While there is vast literature dealing with pre-Lenten festivities in other places, not much scholarly work has been dedicated to the analysis of Mobile’s carnival. Most published accounts that exist have been produced by people involved in the city’s Mardi Gras celebration.8 Although their research provides a useful foundation for learning about important events and people in Mobile Mardi Gras history, such literature usually does not critically engage with its racial politics. The topic warrants further study, as Mardi Gras has a significant impact on how Mobilians have imagined themselves and is therefore a good place to explore how invented traditions create and support narratives about the spaces different groups of people have the right to occupy in a society.9

Mobile’s Carnival

In Mobile, carnival manifests itself mainly as a series of parades and balls conducted by formal organizations known as mystic societies. While the balls tend to be more private affairs, Mardi Gras parades are open to the general public, to whom only the role of spectator is usually reserved. One of the most notable features of the city’s carnival celebration, which has been the subject of an award-winning documentary, is the sanctioned segregation of its public performances and private events.10 Mobile’s Mardi Gras parades and balls are organized by private organizations with “secret” membership rather than by public institutions, which operate under a parent organization, either the Mobile Carnival Association (MCA) or the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association (MAMGA—formerly known as the Colored Carnival Association). While individual mystic societies crown their own monarchs during the festive season, the city has two separate (Black and white) pairs of official monarchs for the two umbrella organizations, the MCA’s King Felix and MAMGA’s King Elexis with their respective queens. In both cases, the monarchs and their courtiers (figs. 3–6) are prominent members of the city’s Black and white societies, usually people whose ancestors were involved in previous courts.
7. Karen L. Cox uses the term Confederate culture “to describe those ideas and symbols that Lost Cause devotees associated with the former Confederacy.” She argues that those “ideas and symbols are based on a hierarchy of race and class and often reflect the patrician outlook of Lost Cause leaders.” See Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 1.


Confederate Monuments/Memorials on Parade

The People’s Parade (a.k.a. the Joe Cain Procession) started in 1967 under the guidance of novelist Julian “Judy” Lee Rayford to celebrate the man credited for reviving carnival after the Civil War. Today it remains the only formal Mobile Mardi Gras procession in which anyone can theoretically register to march. The rise of the People’s Parade exemplifies how traditions tend to be invented in moments of crisis and change. According to the local narrative, Mobile’s “modern” Mardi Gras was ushered in by a former Confederate soldier, Joseph Stillwell Cain Jr. (Joe Cain), in the 1860s, while the process of reinvention of Joe Cain’s mythology was enshrined in the 1960s, as the state of Alabama and the city of Mobile dealt with the upheaval of what is often referred to as the Second Reconstruction period. Joe Cain is credited as the man who “brought back” Mardi Gras after the Civil War, taunting the Union “occupiers” dressed as an “undefeated Chickasaw chief.” Mardi Gras, in this context, is associated with Mobile’s (and the US South’s) resilience in the face of Union “oppression.” The many retellings of his story heavily borrow from Lost Cause language and ideology.
Although it is hard to establish if this was a conscious process, the connection between the celebration of "Union defiance" and the civil rights protests and passing of civil rights legislation, which some southerners understood as another unwelcome incursion of federal authority into their business, seems self-evident. The Southern Poverty Law Center’s "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy" project identifies “two distinct periods” that saw “significant spikes” in the dedication of Confederate monuments. The first coincided with the post-Reconstruction enactment of Jim Crow laws (roughly 1900–late 1920). The second spike happened during the modern civil rights movement (mid-1950s–late 1960s), around the time this new Mobilian tradition was being invented. 

Since 1967 the Joe Cain invented tradition has served different symbolic functions. It can be read as a monument to the vision Mobilians have of their defining celebration since there is an actual statue of the character in Mardi Gras Park materializing his commemoration (fig. 7). But it also serves as a memorial for the city's Confederate past, even if many of the people who partake in the celebration do not deliberately adhere to Lost Cause nostalgia. It does so by reinforcing the narrative that depicts Reconstruction as a dark period in the city’s and in the US South’s history. Many descendants of enslaved people, however, have a different perspective on the historical significance of the Reconstruction period and its aftermath.

Although the terms “monument” and “memorial” are often used interchangeably, in general, monuments are understood as the material structures that commemorate a historical event or character, and memorials are often related to public grief and remembrance. Yet scholars have pointed out the blurred lines between these definitions. Public historian Seth C. Bruggeman sees both monuments and memorials as “expressions of public memory,” noting that audiences “are instructed—both by watching and by participating—in the performance of fealty to a shared set...
of ideas about the past: the war was noble, our ancestors were great, remembering is patriotic.”

Geographers Derek H. Alderman, Jordan P. Brasher, and Owen J. Dwyer agree that they serve as “symbolic conduits” for “certain versions of history ... casting legitimacy upon them.” This “process of remembering the past” also entails a “process of forgetting,” which excludes and erases divergent historical narratives, experiences, and perspectives. The authors characterize this as “epistemic violence,” and show how monuments that memorialize white-dominated historical narratives tend to be placed in prominent and central spaces of the city, while markers dedicated to memorializing African American history (MLK avenues, for example) are located in historically Black (often poor) neighborhoods at the peripheries of the city. Similarly, the history, the parades, and the festive markers of Mobile’s African American Mardi Gras have historically occupied the margins. It should be noted, however, that there have been recent efforts to move Black Mardi Gras to the center, even if they often create a “separate but equal” compromise rather than true integration. A good example would be Mardi Gras Park, created in 2016. The permanent exhibition contains eight statues which represent five white figures (the MCA monarchs, Joe Cain/Chief Slacabamorinico, and two jesters) and three Black figures (the MAMGA monarchs and a trumpeter resembling the famous Louis Armstrong statue in New Orleans).

While scholars who analyze memorials and monuments usually refer to physical historical markers, the pageantry and recurrent imagery paraded in Mobile’s Mardi Gras have served a similar purpose. Performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and theater historian Brooks McNamara note how a procession’s symbols are central to its meaning and are “generally presented in ways that are comprehensible” and usually “familiar, simply stated and visible.” Folklorist Jack Santino explains that carnival and ritual are “idealized constructions,” and the difference between them is “blurred and porous.” Santino views the carnivalesque as a liminal state that usually does “not spur actual direct action” and ends in the world turning “right side up again,” while he defines the ritualesque as “actions that are intended to have direct effects and consequences that will be maintained after the event itself is memory.” Yet, he notes, “carnival is capacious and may frequently include ritualesque dimensions,” as “the carnivalesque is often, but not necessarily, put to ritual purposes.” That is the case in Mobile’s carnival celebration. Some elements of its pageantry are not ephemeral, spontaneous, or variable over time (carnivalesque). The repetition of the same symbols every year for decades, such as Joe Cain’s Chief Slacabamorinico, performs a “ritualesque function.”

The Invention of Mobile’s Mardi Gras Tradition

The origin myths sustaining Mobile’s Mardi Gras tradition often serve the purpose of establishing the city’s position as the first to celebrate carnival in the United States and, more importantly, before New Orleans (fig. 8). This article is not concerned with the origins of the celebration or with “who did it first.” Instead, it focuses on how the narrative that defines carnival traditions in Mobile informed the invention of the Joe Cain tradition in the second half of the twentieth century.

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18. Samuel Kinser articulates connections between Mardi Gras and the Confederacy. Kinser, Carnival, 318. This article focuses on parades, but there is also much to be explored concerning ball pageantry’s ties to the Confederacy. See Jennifer Atkins,
New Orleans Carnival Balls: The Secret Side of Mardi Gras 1870-1920 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 81. More recently, monuments were part of 2020 Mobile balls: "Surrounding the arena's dance floor are six installations that [designer Ron] Barrett described as 'monuments to things only indicative of Carnival in Mobile, Alabama.' Atop each is a replica of a fallen Confederate obelisk." Michael Dumas, "Unified Decorations Frame Mardi Gras Performance Art," Mobile Press Register, February 24, 2020, Newsbank.


22. As David Glassberg notes, the "southern religion of the lost cause" in the decades after the Civil War developed its own pantheon of heroes, rituals, and holidays. Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 12.

There are two main origin myths placing Mobile as "the birthplace of Mardi Gras." The first one claims that Mobile, which was founded in 1702 (sixteen years before New Orleans), celebrated Mardi Gras as early as February 1703. The second, more elaborate narrative presents Mobile as the "Mother of Mystics." Although this version recognizes that New Orleans possibly had some sort of pre-Lenten celebration before Mobile, it argues that the true US version of carnival was only established with the advent of mystic societies created in Mobile in the 1830s and then exported to New Orleans a couple of decades later. The Mother of Mystics narrative insists on the creation of the Cowbellion de Rakin Society by Michael Krafft in the 1830s—framed as the first US mystic society—as the genesis of Mobile’s (and North America’s) carnival tradition. Despite disagreements over the exact time frame for its beginning, Mobile Mardi Gras mythology connects the celebration’s history to different usable pasts: it has French/Spanish/Creole origins; was birthed by a Pennsylvania enslaver (Michael Krafft); was killed by Union "invaders;" and then resurrected by a Confederate soldier (Joe Cain). It was therefore clearly created for and by white people and has ties to white supremacist ideals and Old South nostalgia.

Confederate Rebirth, Lost Cause Nostalgia, and Colonialist Fantasies

According to Mobile’s Mardi Gras mythology, in the immediate aftermath of the "War of Northern Aggression," the celebration was resurrected by defiant Confederate soldiers (possibly in blackface) led by the man who would become one of the city’s most emblematic figures. Joseph Stillwell Cain Jr. was born on October 10, 1832, to Joseph Stillwell Cain Sr. and Julia Ann Cain in Mobile and died on April 17, 1904, in Bayou la Batre, Alabama. His first notable pre-Lenten activities started in a New Year’s Eve mystic society, the Tea Drinkers Society, sometime in the late 1840s or early 1850s before he went on to form his Mardi Gras group, the Lost Cause Minstrel Band (LCM), around 1868. Cain was active in Mobile civic life. He was in the
Washington Fire Company No. 8 and served as clerk of the city's market. Of question is whether Cain served in the Confederate Army or was exempted from service because of his position as clerk. What we do know is that he was First Sergeant of the Cadet Rifles from 1861 to 1862. Yet this article is not primarily concerned with Cain in the nineteenth century, but rather with this historical figure's 1960s revival.

The Joe Cain myth was largely perpetuated by novelist Julian "Judy" Lee Rayford. He is responsible for enshrining Joe Cain as the celebration's most iconic figure and played a decisive role in the festivities' post–WWII reinvention. Although Joseph Stillwell Cain's story has been passed down with degrees of variation and some of it has been challenged by more recent studies, most Mobilians know about the Confederate soldier who "brought back" Mardi Gras after the Civil War in defiance of the Union troops, dressed as an undefeated Chickasaw chief and accompanied by a group of fellow "veterans who called themselves the Lost Cause Minstrels." In the 2012 *All about Mardi Gras* pamphlet currently sold at the Mobile Carnival Museum with the purpose of introducing the festivities to the uninitiated, the fictional character Miss Abigail Beauregard explains that after the Civil War, the "wretched Yankee soldiers ... took our land, our property, and Carnival as well! Poor souls, they just didn't understand." But, as soon as the war was over, a Confederate soldier and a "Rebel through and through" brought it back.

The most iconic surviving photo of Cain perpetuates the idea that he was dressed in a Native American chief costume while leading a parade in defiance of Union occupation. While local historians believe that the photo was taken in his friend Henry Hughes's studio, it is still not clear when it was taken and for what purpose. While the Slacabamorinico character was part of the LCM, it is also not clear whether it was actually a Chickasaw redface character or some other type of figure(s). Mobile independent historian and Joe Cain specialist Wayne Dean explains, “None of the extent [sic] newspaper accounts ever refer to him as Chief. Many refer to Cain as Slacabamorinico and describe his attire but none as being dressed as an Indian.” This is not to say Cain and his LCM never performed in redface, but it is unclear how the specific notion of a Chickasaw chief became associated with Cain's Slacabamorinico and the famous photo. Regardless, that is the story that has been passed down throughout the decades, connecting Mobile's Mardi Gras pageantry to what is perceived as a heroic Confederate past.

Integrated with Joe Cain's mythologized redface are clear references to Lost Cause rhetoric. In *Mobile: City by the Bay* (1968), Jay Higginbotham describes a "dismal day in February in the year 1866," when a "blanket of gloom ... hung heavy in the air over Mobile." Startled by the sound of a drumbeat, a Union soldier turned around and was surprised by the image of an "Indian chief outfitted in all his trimmings ... sitting on top of a charcoal wagon, yelling and waving a pair of drumsticks," accompanied by "six more Indians." The soldier and his companions feared a "Confederate plot to seize the city," but when he asked the "Chief" what they were doing, the latter replied: "Just raisin' hell." Similarly, Rayford explains Joe Cain's Confederate symbolism:

... in that year of doom for his Southland, when all his region had been defeated and were being ground under by Reconstruction—Joe Cain in his poverty-stricken wagon, a symbol of the South, dressed as a Chickasaw—and the Chickasaws were never defeated. And Joe Cain could not wave the Confederate Banner in the face of the Union authority. It was a delicate twist of irony, a delicious bit of symbolism. It meant more than a masquerade, more than simple Mardi Gras. It meant a whole people could still look up—look up in pride—and still keep going on.
Recent works have challenged the Joe Cain narrative. Steve Joynt, editor of the Mardi Gras magazine guide Mobile Mask, shows that Cain was actually in New Orleans on the date he was allegedly “bringing back” Mobile’s Mardi Gras. To Joynt, a more accurate date for the beginning of organized Mardi Gras Day parading in Mobile would be 1868, when Cain and his LCM were joined by the Order of Myths, a prominent white parading organization that still exists today. Although Joynt and other recent investigators have attempted to correct some inaccuracies in Mobile’s Mardi Gras mythology, they do not confront its racist implications. Other popular contemporary publications, such as the aforementioned All about Mardi Gras pamphlet, reinforce the Confederate narrative. In a piece entitled “De Story of De Mardi Gras,” someone using the nom de plume Boudreaux educates readers on US Mardi Gras history. The Cajun columnist explains that Mobile celebrated the first Mardi Gras in 1703 and narrates what happened “long ‘bout 18 and 61” when “dem in charge” declared that “dere would be NO MORE CARNIVAL. And there wasn’t for a few years.” Boudreaux continues,

After the dust settled in Mobile, and the Yankees had done took over, de Carnival Spirit seemed to have disappeared. No one felt much like celebratin.’ Den came on the scene a fella’ named Joseph Stillwell Cain. He was den a Confederate soldier havin’ to put up with dem Union soldiers. He was a bold man with a good heart, and he hated seein’ his friends and neighbors so down an’ out, so he decided to do somethin’ ‘bout it. Ole’ Joe Cain thought highly of dem old Chickasaw Indians dat all them folks tried to run off, but them Chickasaws, dey never gave up. So Ole’ Joe wanted de same for Mobile. When Mardi Gras carne, Ole’ Joe, he dressed up like a Chickasaw Chief, rounded up some six of his friends. Dey was gonna show dem Yankee soldiers what it was all about… De best part was, de “Locals” understood ‘bout de Chickasaw outfit and what it stood for, while dem Yankees was scratchin’ dey heads.36

We have not yet encountered any evidence of Mardi Gras being banned by the federal army and assume that the festivities were cancelled because of the conflict, just as they were later in WWI, WWII, and, more recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic. While that is a fascinating topic that deserves to be further investigated, it is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we are interested here in how the story is retold and remembered in the city’s collective memory. But it is hard to dissociate this particular tradition invention from Reconstruction resentment, especially in light of the Lost Cause Minstrel Band’s likely use of blackface. In 1868, the first newspaper account of a Mardi Gras parade in Mobile provides a clue for their performance’s racist subtexts:

The Minstrels, who were gotten up as monkeys, were mounted upon a dilapidated wagon and discoursed wild and, we must say, most discordant music. They were followed by large crowds of boys, shouting and yelling, and presented a most ludicrous and laughable sight. After traversing different parts of the city, they halted in front of our office, and regaled our ears with a monkey serenade.37

“Discordant music” is a phrase consistent with descriptions of other street performances of blackface. The terms “Minstrels” and “monkeys” also suggest a blackface performance. Even the LCM caricature is similar to other nineteenth-century blackface iconography like the black dandy—based ad from Clark’s Mile-End Spool Cotton (figs. 9–10). The LCM icon is consistent with blackface because of the back leg’s curvature, devil’s tail, and exaggerated facial features, including a darkened face, wide eyes, and big lips (i.e., monkey-like features).40


34. Rayford, *Chasin’ the Devil*, 72–73.


38. Musicologist Dale Cockrell describes the various ways “noise” operates in blackface street theatre. See Dale Cockrell, “Blackface in the Streets,” in *Demons of Disorder: Early*

There is at least one representation of the LCM clearly in blackface (fig. 11). The top and bottom of the image feature illustrations of fifteen characters in different costumes, some wearing military uniforms and others wearing outfits associated with minstrelsy performance. A few of them are holding musical instruments affiliated with military bands (the drum) or minstrelsy (violin and banjo). At the center right, a lone figure seems to be leading the procession as a drum major in faux-Indigenous costume (likely a representation of Chief Slacabamorinico). All of the men have their faces darkened, and the caption explains that this is “the third Mardi Gras after the Civil War” and that these are “sixteen veterans” parading as “minstrals” [sic]. We believe this etching came from an 1872 issue of a local newspaper but have not yet been able to confirm this information.

In the carnival season, the LCM dressed up as all kinds of characters (from animals to mythical creatures), but often chose to embody racist stereotypes such as in this grotesque Orientalist performance:

As this gay and rollicking set of Minstrels, the Fathers of Mardi Gras, came forth, they were greeted with shouts of laughter—the oddity of their costumes, their excellent groupings upon two platform wagons, and, above all, their head-splitting music, all under the control of the great Mogul, Slacabamorencio [sic]... This time they "went for the heathen Chinco," and Ah it was no Sin they committed, when they donned the strange garb and pig-tails of the Celestials, so complete was their dress in every particular. 41 So perfect was it in every detail that, looking upon the group, the beholders could hardly realize that they were no genuine, rat-eating John Chinamen. Thus attired, provided with some kind of musical instrument, the Minstrels paraded through the principal streets of the city, varying the monotony of their wild and savage music—it was barbarous ... in a short time after the Chinamen made their appearance at the Register building, when the favorite Chinese war song "Yanktse-bang-she-long-washee-washee," was rendered with all its accompaniment of thundering sounds of gongs and cymbals.42

As filmmaker and historian Vivek Bald notes, "Orientalist ideas about a mysterious, mystical, and alluring East" were popular with US elites in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.43 So, it is not surprising that the Slacabamorinico character donned the Mughal emperor costume. Yet that fantasy is also clearly imbued with racist, anti-Asian sentiment.44 Orientalist performances were a common trope in the pageantry of white New Orleans Mardi Gras krewes in the nineteenth century.45 As Bald shows, krew members asserted dominance in a racist society by associating themselves through this "Oriental pageantry and performance" with British imperial power;46 The Slacabamorinico character yields the same idea of imperialism by being described as the "great Mogul" leading a group performing in yellowface and brownface.

Parading Indigeneity

While the Chickasaw redface character Chief Slacabamorinico is the primary form of parading Indigeneity in the "official" Mardi Gras narrative, it is not clear why and how the character specifically came to be designated as Chickasaw. Dean suggests that the Chickasaw–Confederate association may stem from allyship during the Civil War, citing the Battle of Pea Ridge and Fort Washita.47 Though some Chickasaw Indians fought in the battle, the majority of Native combatants were from the Cherokee Nation, along with people of the Choctaw and Creek Nations.48 The point regarding Fort Washita is stronger, though Choctaws also allied with the Confederacy for the same reasons, not just the Chickasaw Nation. Nevertheless, it also ties the Indigeneity being paraded to the Confederacy and to the Lost Cause.49

Although “Chickasaw” is the designation for Chief Slacabamorinico in the official narrative, the redface character comes off as more of a generic, essentializing figure (fig. 12). Chief Slacabamorinico represents two seemingly contradictory stereotypes, the “noble savage” and the “ignoble savage,” common tropes in nineteenth-century Indian plays and literature.50 The title character of John Augustus Stone’s popular Indian play Metamora (1829), for instance (fig. 13), reflects both stereotypes, being depicted as peaceful, heroic figure (a “noble savage”) until provoked by New England settlers, then becoming what theater historian B. Donald Grose calls a “red devil” (a.k.a. an “ignoble savage”).51 Chief Slacabamorinico operates similarly: he is deemed a heroic figure, a “noble savage,” and imbued with Lost Cause nostalgia for better times (including
According to the official narrative, Cain and his Lost Cause Minstrel Band performed in redface to express their "freedom" from Union "occupiers." The redface performances augmented their masculinity and whiteness, with these men visually and sonically performing their views of Native Americans. Historian Philip J. Deloria characterizes "Playing Indian" as "a persistent tradition in American culture" that has "been largely the domain of white males." This yet again resonates with Lost Cause qualities, as such "noise" in the face of Union occupiers could also be associated with the Confederate Rebel yell, further indicating the hybridity of Chief Slacabamorinico's Indianness and Confederate qualities.

Chief Slacabamorinico essentially functions as a mascot of Mobile's Mardi Gras. Such redface results in erasure, further perpetuating the "vanishing Indian" trope. Indigenous peoples are often historicized in a way that favors white narratives, as seen in the pageantry of Mobile mystic society Crewe of Columbus, which includes members "playing Indian" in blue feathers along with the Italian colonizer. This historical pageantry fails to account for the appalling violence inflicted upon Indigenous people by Christopher Columbus as well as other colonizers. Further still, the
very people after whom the city is named are mocked by a Joe Cain Day parading group, the Wild Mauvilians (figs. 14–15), another example of white male fraternalism that employs redface. To borrow from German scholar Katrin Sieg, these performances’ “ethnic drag” serves as a “technology of forgetting” that erases the historical violence and oppression experienced by historically marginalized groups of people and substitutes them with “fantasies of racial harmony that rework the terms of trauma.”


46. Ibid., 43–44.

47. Dean, Have a Good Time, 12.


52. See discussions of stereotypes about Indian chiefs and resistance in Sayre, The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero, 2.
Carnival pageantry such as these examples in Mobile informs the audience’s imaginary and defines whose values and voices are important. Racist caricature has a way of teaching racial hierarchies to audiences, including children, as seen in the haunting photo of a 1936 floral parade below (fig. 16). As historian David Glassberg notes, public historical imagery contributes "to how we define our sense of place and direction." Hence, people who participate in recurring pageantry that includes racialized masking and costuming can internalize and instill damaging perceptions of race.

Figure 16. White children in blackface at the Mobile Mardi Gras Floral Parade. Mobile, Alabama, 1936. Courtesy of the Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama.


57. See “Fraternal Indians and Republican Identities” in Deloria, Playing Indian, 38–70.


59. While the group has at least one African American member, it was started by white men and has predominantly white membership.

61. Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry, 2. Communications scholar Susan G. Davis also explains that parades contain “frequently repeated images [that] can be critical to political policies” and are “shaped by the field of power relations in which they place” and are “attempts to act on and influence those relations.” Susan G. Davis, Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 5–6.


63. There were references to him in the research collections of Mobilian François “Frank” Diard from the 1930s and 1940s, which, according to Mobile historian Ann Pond, is where Rayford’s “vision of Cain” comes from. See Pond, Cain, 22, 24, 28–29.


While current uses of Joe Cain’s mythology and imagery could be seen as part of the larger process of “Confederate exceptionalism” described by Nicole Maurantonio, that understanding is complicated by the fact that they are embraced not only by a specific neo-Confederate group, but by the city at large.62

As a historical figure, Cain (fig. 17) was not necessarily forgotten after his death in 1904, but he did not become an iconic figure in the city’s collective imaginary until the 1960s.63 Arguably, the most important step in the reinvention of tradition of Mobile’s Mardi Gras occurred in 1966 with the commemoration of the Joe Cain Centennial. While promoting the date, Rayford reinforced the important symbolism of Cain’s “act of defiance” in an interview for the Mobile Press Register. Explaining Cain’s costume choice, the author notes: “People who knew their history caught the significance immediately…. Cain obviously could not go through the streets flaunting the flag of the defeated Confederacy in the face of Union troops. But the Chickasaws were never defeated. The incident revived the drooping spirit of the city and swept aside the despair of defeat and depression.”64 Again, while we cannot confirm the intention, the fact that this effort to memorialize and celebrate Confederate “defiance” happened right after the passage of the Civil Rights (1964) and Voting Rights (1965) acts cannot be overlooked. As historian Madupe Laborde notes, Confederate monuments “not only honored individuals or common soldiers, but also asserted that the values for which the Confederacy fought, including white supremacy, had not been defeated.”65

Figure 17 Photograph of Joseph Stillwell Cain Jr./Joe Cain in civilian clothes. Possibly taken in Henry Hughes’s studio, circa 1870. Courtesy of the Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama.
On February 05, 1967, Rayford inaugurated the tradition of dressing as Chief Slacabamorinico to lead Joe Cain's funeral procession.66 This event marked the beginning of the People's Parade, which takes place on the Sunday before Mardi Gras and is an attempt to rearticulate Mobile's carnival as a more popular and democratic celebration. The procession, or his "homecoming ceremony," began with a funeral march that started at City Hall and ended with "eloquent eulogies" at his Church Street Cemetery grave. The event's master of ceremonies, Martin Johnson, underscored the Lost Cause theme of the event, describing Cain as the man "who had the courage to start anew ... that season of fun and frivolity and gaiety and gladness known as Mardi Gras" when Mobile was "occupied by an invading army and held as 'a hostage.'"

After the centennial commemoration, the Joe Cain Procession grew yearly, attracting not only people involved in official Mardi Gras organizations but also regular folks who wanted to have an active part in the festivity. By 1977, the tradition had been enshrined, and Joe Cain Day was understood as the epitome of popular participation, a democratic event that counteracted Mobile Mardi Gras' exclusive and elitist revelry. In July 1977, J. B. "Red" Foster, Rayford, Mrs. Jimmy McWhorter, and Wayne Dean signed a report that suggested the procession should be officially "led by the Indian 'Chief Slacabamorinico,' followed by the City Celebrities and members of the society, the Excelsior Band and others to follow accordingly."68 This is an important detail, as it formalized the Joe Cain (invented) tradition, showing that it was something discussed, negotiated with, and sanctioned by the city's authorities. On September 12, 1978, segregationist governor George Wallace signed a proclamation establishing February 25, 1979, as Joe Cain Day in Mobile (fig. 18). For the occasion, he received from Foster (dressed as the Chief) and Wayne Dean a plaque of honorary membership in the Joe Cain Society.69 As Mobile architect and Mardi Gras specialist L. Craig Roberts notes in his 2015 book Mardi Gras in Mobile, by the late 1980s Joe Cain Day had been established as "a spectacle to watch as well as in which to participate."70

Figure 18. Photograph of J. B. "Red" Foster, Governor George C. Wallace, and Bennett Wayne Dean Sr. holding the honorary plaque, September 12, 1978. Courtesy of the Mobile Municipal Archives.


66. Rayford embodied the character until 1970, when he "passed the feathers" to fireman J. B. "Red" Foster. Since 1985, Wayne Dean has been the Chief.


68. Report written by Julian Lee Rayford, Mrs. Jimmy McWhorter, Wayne Dean, James B. "Red" Foster, addressed to Chief Ed. J. McLean, chair of the Mardi Gars Special Events Committee and Members, July 1, 1977, MOBILE MARDI GRAS 1977 folder, RG6, S-24, B3, MMA.

69. Photograph of J. B. "Red" Foster, Governor George C. Wallace, and Bennett Wayne Dean Sr. holding the honorary plaque, September 12, 1978, Mobile Mardi Gras Committees: 1968–1981 folder, RG6, S-24, B3, MMA.

70. Roberts, Mardi Gras in Mobile, 75.
While it is unlikely that all (or even most) of the folks celebrating this invented tradition were consciously and actively paying homage to the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, the connection between Mobile Mardi Gras and the Confederacy is not a hidden secret. In 1987, Wayne Dean gave a talk entitled "Confederate Symbols in Mobile's Mardi Gras" at the Sons of Confederate Veterans and Military Order of Stars and Bars 87th Annual Reunion, later published in their periodical, Confederate Veteran.71 Dean states, "These familiar symbols are a yearly part of Mobile's annual pre-Lenten Mardi Gras celebration, but usually go through the streets totally masked as to meaning. Spanning centuries of symbolic imagery, they related directly to the Old South and the late Confederacy."72 Considering the history and ideology of these organizations, we can assume that they perceived this as a positive revelation.

While the Joe Cain parade and adjacent events as imagined and developed by official organizers were imbued with Lost Cause nostalgia and Confederate mythology, they have been adopted and adapted by marginalized people as a time and space to perform resistance and exercise difference. According to an Ash Wednesday 1978 issue of the Mobile Register, before this tribute to the man who revived Mardi Gras in Mobile after the Civil War, the carnival season had little or nothing to offer the general public. Only those who could afford the usually considerable expense of belonging to a mystic society enjoyed the role of participant... But there were more participants than spectators Sunday as the Joe Cain Procession firmly entrenched itself as an integral part of Mobile Mardi Gras.73

Hence, unlike other Confederate memorials and monuments, while this particular symbol has been devised and repeatedly reinforced as an emblem of Lost Cause nostalgia, it has also served in recent memory as a democratized space in an elitist celebration. The "Chief" is also popular in Black organizations’ events, and African American narrators interviewed by Isabel Machado for the "Mardi Gras and Social Change Oral Histories" project mentioned Joe Cain Day as the most anticipated day of the festive season and as a time of communion in Black neighborhoods.74
Original members of the city's oldest surviving LGBTQ+ organization, the Order of Osiris, as well as other queer-identified folks (fig. 19) remember using the People's Parade as a space to safely defy gender and sexuality normativity in public, even if some also wore stylized outfits inspired by (or appropriated from) Native American culture.75

Wayne Dean, who currently embodies Chief Slacabamorinico, has documented the character's reception in his book, Have a Good Time but Don't Get Bad. Dean mentions that Joe Cain has been voted “Best Mobilian Ever” and Chief Slacabamorinico as “Best Mobilian Right Now” in the popular poll organized annually by the independent weekly newspaper Lagniappe.76 He also discusses Chief Slacabamorinico's presence in civic life, such as mystic society balls, weddings, charity and ribbon-cutting events, along with the character's representation in social media, tourism promos, and artistic works. He describes his experiences as the character: “The old guy’s pretty popular in Mobile. … Like Joe Cain Day, I could, as the Chief, probably go to 25 parties that day. … I try to mix them so it doesn't appear that I’m favoring groups because this character gives back. He’s a character for all the people. He wades into the crowd, no matter what the crowd is. And I enjoy that.”77 This is consistent with Dean’s role in promoting and supporting popular participation in Cain traditions, as he has been heavily involved in the Joe Cain Marching Society, an organization that has paved the way for footmarchers in the People's Parade.

AL.com reporter Jared Boyd explains what Dean and Chief Slacabamorinico represent in the city: “Wayne Dean [is] a former minister better known around Mobile for his portrayal as Chief Slacabamorinico, Mobile’s ‘official. unofficial’ [sic] mascot of Mardi Gras for over three decades now, beginning in 1985. He’s our Santa Claus. Better yet, he’s our Punxsutawney Phil.”78 The lack of clarification on the pronoun “he” in this statement suggests that the Chief Slacabamorinico character has become in part tied to Dean, not just the mock Indian attire. Boyd goes on to discuss Dean's appearance in the “This is Mobile” video, with Dean shown “Not with his headdress, his feathers, and a crowd of people behind him, asking for pictures, anticipating the Carnival season.”79 This demonstrates that the communal significance of Cain's legacy goes beyond the redface character.

The Joe Cain Procession has, on occasion, presented a Joe Cain figure without the faux-Indigenous dress. In 2015, two Cain-derived characters appeared: Dean as Chief Slacabamorinico and Thomas Watts as “Citizen Cain,” characterized by a white man in a black suit (fig. 17).80 It seems that Dean is open as to how the Chief Slacabamorinico character will appear in its next iteration, as he said to Emily Ruth Allen: “At some point, I’ve got to name somebody. I’m not ready to yet, but at some point, I’ve got to do that. We know that that person’s not going to be the same type of person. You can’t go back. It could be a woman. You can’t go back too far.”81

Dean's Chief Slacabamorinico has engaged with other iterations of parading Indigeneity. In the celebration of the city's tricentennial in 2002, Chief Wilford “Longhair” Taylor of the MOWA Band of Choctaw Indians “shared the wagon” with Dean, followed by fellow MOWA Choctaws walking along the parade route.82 There was also a crossover with another US carnival Indigenous parading tradition, the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians, who attended Mobile’s Celebrate the City event in 2017, participating in a second line with Dean as Chief Slacabamorinico at a concert.83

These interactions show different types of parading Indigeneity in contrast to the redface of
Cain’s Chief Slacabamorinico. While we can definitely argue that the presence of an actual Native American leader and of Black Masking Indians serve a completely different symbolic purpose than a white man in Indian costume, the fact that they participated in the pageantry together attests to the messiness of these embodied practices. Although we recognize the necessity of an in-depth comparison between these different forms of parading Indigeneity that considers the intersectionality of the identities of those performing, that is beyond the scope of this article. Yet these examples show the importance of going beyond archival sources and theoretical frameworks and engaging with the actual participants in an invented tradition to properly gauge its meaning.

Some of “the people” of the People’s Parade include the Joe Cain Secret Misters (figs. 20–23), a tradition that started in 2012 with a group of young misfits who work in and/or frequent the downtown bohemian scene and parade on Joe Cain Day in revealing gender-bending outfits, carrying rainbow flags and provocative signs. While the group was started by white, straight-identified men, the membership has diversified over the years. The way one of the organization’s founders, Stephen Gaudet, explains the Joe Cain story is emblematic of how people less invested in preserving Mardi Gras mythology reimagine symbols that have previously been attached to Lost Cause nostalgia:

So, post-Civil War, Mardi Gras had mostly left Mobile. There was, I don’t know if there were any societies left at all, but the parades had definitely stopped. And Joe Cain dressed himself as a Poarch Creek Indian and paraded down Broad Street with the intention of both protesting the Union and saying: “Hey, guys, We’re still, you know, us. Let’s have a party. This is our party. Let’s have a party.” And he kind of built it up year after year in Mobile. And, basically, I would say single-handedly brought Mardi Gras back to Mobile.84

Importantly, Gaudet’s retelling of the story leaves out the Confederate “heroism” and defiance found in other iterations of the story and stresses instead the celebration aspect of the event, further showing how the Joe Cain tradition is being “reinvented.” This version of the story still relies on “parading Indigeneity,” though in this case referencing the nearby Poarch Band of Creek Indians in Atmore, Alabama, rather than a Chickasaw chief character. These adjustments to the tale demonstrate how its details are susceptible to change according to different sociohistorical contexts.

Figure 20. Joe Cain’s Secret Misters on Joe Cain Day 2017. Mobile, Alabama, February 26, 2017. Authors’ photo.

84. Nick Shantazio and Stephen Gaudet, interview with Isabel Machado, March 5, 2017, Mobile, AL.


A Confederate Memorial or the People’s Parade?

The commercial use of Joe Cain’s mythologized Chickasaw character’s photo was recently the subject of online controversy. In 2019, the Haint Blue Brewing Company launched its new pale ale, Cain & Kazoola (fig. 24). To celebrate the occasion and promote the brew they posted on their Facebook page:

Since bringing “Cain & Kazoola” American Pale Ale to the Ice House, we’ve had the opportunity to share the stories of two Mobilians—Joe Cain & Cudjoe Kazoola Lewis. While we’ve heard more recognition of “Cain” (the founder of Mardi Gras), we can only hope to continue to spread awareness of the prominence of the name “Kazoola”—the last known survivor of the Atlantic slave trade, who was brought to Mobile aboard the Clotilda, & then went on to found his own community. Both men are deserving of deep respect, & both men help us depict our city as a whole with each pint we pour. Cheers to both Cain & Kazoola!85

The company contrasts a white Mobile historical character with a Black one, acknowledging the former’s prominence in the city’s collective memory. While the post might seem to be an attempt at epistemic inclusion, the comparison and association are problematic in that while the mythologized Cain represents resentment toward abolition via Lost Cause nostalgia, Lewis was a former enslaved man who helped establish the independent maroon community of Africatown and a survivor of the last slave ship known to have made the transatlantic journey, more than half a decade after the traffic of enslaved Africans was abolished.86

Figure 24. Haint Blue Brewing Company’s Cain and Kazoola beer label for their wefunder.com. crowdfunding campaign.

The absurdity of the pairing seemed to have been overlooked until the company released a gauche Instagram publicity campaign during Mardi Gras 2021. In a series of posts, they placed caricatures of the two men in different scenery and accompanied the image with “uplifting”
text in the comments. We see Cain and/or Kudjoe on Mobile porches, in famous international museums and landscapes, and even at the Lincoln Memorial. In a particularly jarring publication (that has since been deleted), they placed the man who was once trafficked in a slave ship in a boat and captioned the image: “It’s best to travel while you’re alive.” One comment (that has also since been deleted) on a Facebook post from February 2, 2021, on Haint Blue’s page, stated, “I can appreciate the sincerity of your goal but to even utter the name of the racist, Confederate, culture-appropriating mess that was Joe Cain in the same sentence as Kazoola is a mistake. Let’s not glorify the skeletons in our closet.” This further attests to how people in Mobile are beginning to reconsider Cain’s representation at a time when the United States is experiencing what some have deemed its Third Reconstruction period.87

The Joe Cain Procession and commercial uses of the figure show that Confederate memorials and monuments across the US South take on different forms. They also illustrate how the present informs the way people interact with and recreate the past. Glassberg explains that “public historical imagery” and “commemorative rituals” are “handed down from generation to generation, and often from an elite to the masses” and are “not only subject to struggle for definition and interpretation but also to change over time.”88 Chris Singleton, the man who posted in the Downtown Mobile Word of Mouth Facebook group, remarked: “I whole heartedly [sic] believe he [Joe Cain] did it as a version of black face. The way people joke on Halloween and dress up is what he was going for. It was a joke to him that people have been ok with for 150 years.”89 Singleton’s remarks, as well as the pointed reaction to the Haint Blue Brewing Company’s “homage,” confirm that communities of color, as well as their allies, are aware of the elements of minstrelsy and Confederate nostalgia embedded in the Joe Cain tradition and its commemorative process.90 As Madupe Laborde notes, there is no “one-size-fits-all template for communities grappling with” Confederate memorials and monuments.91 This “cannot exist … because each community discussing these monuments must engage with both the local historical context and the larger historical trends.”92 Over the course of the article, the Joe Cain celebration has been considered both within its locality and within larger historical trends not fully addressed in Mobile Mardi Gras historiography, exposing the epistemic exclusion of historically marginalized people in the invented tradition of the city’s defining festival and serving as a starting point for further reinvention.93

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