

When Alexis Met Rex

Grand Duke's 1872 Grand Tour and Mardi Gras Visit Left Lasting Memories Here

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This month marks the sesquicentennial of the Carnival-time visit of Russian Grand Duke Alexei (Alexis) Alexandrovich Romanov, an event well-remembered locally for its association with the inaugural parade of the Krewe of Rex.

That 1872 encounter of real and imaginary royalty gave rise to various stories which have since become part of Mardi Gras lore. The visit also embodied a geography, in its national and local routing, that reflected the society we were 150 years ago, and to some extent, still remain.

Tours of foreign celebrities resonated with Americans in the nineteenth century, who were all too aware that Europeans viewed them as rubes, and appreciative of those whose presence evidenced otherwise. Those organizing the tours selected the routes thoughtfully, targeting key cities and honoring invitations while utilizing the best transportation options of the day.

Cosmopolitan New Orleans, largest city in the south, was a requisite stop. Among the touring luminaries who paid visits here earlier in the century was the Marquis de Lafayette, French hero of the American Revolution, who came in 1825, and singer Jenny Lind, "the Swedish Nightingale," who visited in 1850 and left lasting memories.



The Grand Duke Alexis in 1872, courtesy Library of Congress

Seeking similar goodwill, 21-year-old Grand Duke Alexis, fourth son of Russian Tsar Alexander II, set forth on the frigate *Svetlana* for a grand tour of the United States in the autumn of 1871.

Motivations were myriad. Diplomats wished to warm relations between the two countries, especially as their territorial interests were starting to intersect at Alaska. The Americans also sought to advertise their nation as reunified and healing, this being only a few years after the Civil War.

As for the Russians, the Romanov family endeavored to separate their son Alexis from his pregnant lover, Alexandra Zhukovskaya, whom Alexis' parents considered unsuitable. No better way to do that than to send him off to the wilds of North America—and New Orleans.

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According to historian Lee A. Farrow, whose 2014 book *Alexis in America* (LSU Press) provides a definitive account of the tour, Alexis and his entourage arrived at New York City on November 19, 1871 and were paraded down Broadway to greet exuberant throngs at various venues. Next came a train ride through Newark, Philadelphia and Baltimore to Washington, D.C., to meet with President Ulysses Grant.

The entourage then headed through New England and into Canada, and back into the U.S. for what was described as “roamin’ off to the Midwest,” including a New Year’s visit to Chicago, in ruins from the great fire of three months earlier.

Next came a foray to the Western frontier on the recently completed transcontinental railroad, which culminated with a bison hunt involving William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, and staged hunts by Sioux and Pawnee warriors.

The party then returned eastward and south into the former Confederacy, again to warm welcomes. “Even Alexis was surprised by the invitations from southern cities,” wrote Farrow, “given the fact that Russia ‘had continually been for the North...’ But in this case it seems that southerners were willing to set aside old animosities for the privilege of hosting a celebrity.”

The party, now accompanied by Custer and other notables, rolled through Kentucky and Tennessee, greeting crowds along the way. They arrived at Memphis on February 2, 1872 and attended a ball at the Peabody Hotel, after which Alexis spoke at length with a formerly enslaved artist named Tom as well as former Confederate president Jefferson Davis.

Because unusually cold temperature had iced the Mississippi upstream, organizers considered taking a train to reach New Orleans in time for Mardi Gras. Instead, they booked the *James Howard*, a 318-foot side-wheel the historian Farrow described as “the largest inland steamboat ever built,” and set off downriver. Alexis wrote his mother that he enjoyed the trip on the luxury vessel, but “apparently told his father that the Mississippi itself was boring in comparison with the Volga,” the great river draining much of Russia.

The party’s first stop in Louisiana is said to have been the LeBourgeois family’s Belmont Plantation in St. James Parish, after which the *James Howard* docked for the night in Carrollton (a separate city at the time), to ensure a grand daytime entry into New Orleans proper.

That moment arrived on Lundi Gras, February 12, as upwards of 15,000 people crammed the steamboat wharf, from where now stands the Four Seasons Hotel down to the Riverwalk Mall. The *James Howard* docked at the foot of Girod Street, where the Grand Duke disembarked to meet Mayor Benjamin Flanders and his associates. As he did, he “expressed surprise that [they] were not French,” wrote Farrow, “since he



The Grand Duke Alexis arriving in New York City in late 1871, courtesy Library of Congress.

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was under the impression that New Orleans was a French creole city and everyone would be speaking French.”

Now it was New Orleans’ turn to regale the royal. Through enthused multitudes, the procession rolled along Poydras Street, to Magazine, onto Canal, turning onto Carondelet to Common and pulling up to the magnificent St. Charles Hotel, where now stands the Place St. Charles skyscraper.



NEW ORLEANS, TUESDAY MORNING, FEBRUARY 13, 1872.

<p>EDICT NO. XI. BY H. R. H., THE KING OF THE CARNIVAL.</p> <p>To all whom it may concern—Greeting:</p> <p>The thirtieth day of February, 1872, having been set apart as one dedicated to his Majesty's glory, for the better enjoyment of his loyal subjects, it is hereby ordained and decreed that all persons or parties owning allegiance to his dynasty will join, according to the following rules and regulations, in</p> <p>A GRAND STATE PAGEANT.</p> <p>His Royal Highness, the King of the Carnival, will command in person, assisted by the Grand Marshal of the Empire, and the Lords of the Hens, Carriages, Vans, Yeomanry and the Unsuttled—all of whom, with their Aids, will appear at the City Square at 2 o'clock, P. M.</p>	<p>VIVE LE MARDI GRAS!</p> <p>Gentlemen attending the</p> <p>Mistick Krewe of Comus Festival, Y. M. H. Association Ball, St. Charles Theatre Ball, Academy of Music Ball, Grand Mask Ball, Opera House, Louisiana Fire Company No. 179 Ball, Volunteer Fire Company No. 17A Ball, United Brethren Association Ball, Masonic Hall Ball,</p> <p>or any of the festivities of Mardi Gras evening, should remember that the</p> <p>LARGEST AND CHEAPEST ASSORTMENT</p> <p>GENUINE JOUVIN'S KID GLOVES, (White, Lavender, Party and Light Colors.) Full Dress CHAMPION SHIRTS.</p>	<p>THE UPPER CITY</p> <p>DRY GOODS HOUSE</p> <p>— OF —</p> <p>O'DONNELL, WELLET & CO.</p> <p>Are now offering GREAT BARGAINS in their immense stock of</p> <p>DRESS GOODS, PIQUES, TABLE LINENS, NAPKINS, TOWELS, HOSIERY, EMBROIDERIES, LACES.</p> <p>A full assortment of SPRING DRESS GOODS, at 25 cents a yard.</p> <p>442 and 444 Magazine street.</p>	<p>The Daily Picayune.</p> <p>AMUSEMENTS THIS EVENING.</p> <p>ST. CHARLES THEATRE— "Knight of Atr."—Mardi-Gras Festival.</p> <p>ACADEMY OF MUSIC—Mardi-Gras Festival.</p> <p>OPERA HOUSE—At 7 o'clock: "La Dame Blanche." At 9 o'clock: Mardi-Gras Festival.</p> <p>VARIETIES THEATRE—Festivities of the Mardi-Gras Festival.</p> <p>PARIS PAVILION CIRCUS—Washington Square, Third District.</p> <p>Vicksburg Agency of the Picayune.</p> <p>The Daily and Weekly Picayune can be obtained from H. C. Clark, at his news depot in Vicksburg.</p> <p>See Supplement to To-Day's Paper.</p> <p>Do merchants expect capital to come to New Orleans? Do they expect...</p>	<p>ARRIVAL OF THE GRAND DUKE</p> <p>Welcome by the City Authorities and the Multitude.</p> <p>The Grand Duke Alexis and party arrived on Sunday night, at 9 o'clock, at Carrollton, on board of the steamer James Howard, which was moored there for the night.</p> <p>A member of the Grand Duke's suite, Mr. Waldemar De Bodisco, late First Secretary of the Russian Legation at Washington, now Consul General for the United States, a nephew of the late very distinguished diplomat and statesman, Count De Bodisco, who represented the Russian Government at Washington for</p>
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There, Alexis received a written welcome from Rex, the King of Carnival, announcing a special reception in his honor to be held at sunset the next day, Mardi Gras.

That evening, Alexis dined with Custer and his wife Libbie and, at 7:30 p.m., boarded carriages for a ride down Bourbon Street to the French Opera House. Inside, the orchestra opened with the Russian national hymn, and the packed house enjoyed Verdi's *Il Trovatore*.

Mardi Gras, February 13, dawned clear, breezy and mild, as throngs awaited that afternoon's events. At three o'clock, canon signaled the roll of the first parade of the Krewe of Rex, starting with costumed marchers preceding the King of Carnival, followed by the Lords of Yoemanry and a live *boeuf gras*. Next came hundreds of marchers dressed, according to a local press report, as "kings and peasants, devils and saints, Indians and negroes, women of high and low degree, clowns and harlequins, birds, beasts and fishes." There were also spoofs of President Grant, Reconstruction politicians, those derided for "carpet-bagism," and, according to Farrow, "in a kind of role reversal that was typical of carnival celebrations, even the grand duke himself."

Alexis and his consorts arrived at City Hall, today's Gallier Hall, at 4 p.m., where they met Gov. Henry Warmoth and Lt. Gov. P.B.S. Pinchback, the highest-ranking person of African descent in Louisiana.

As Rex arrived, the dignitaries hailed the king and laughed with giddy revelers, among them a wagonload of "fantastically dressed" children. Alexis next enjoyed the parade of the Krewe of Comus, which one observer described as "incomparably grander and more beautiful than anything previously presented by that famous fraternity." Later came the grand ball—two in fact, the latter at the St. Charles Theater, lasting into the wee hours.

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After sleeping in on Ash Wednesday, Alexis met with various foreign consuls, among them Nicholas Benachi of Greece, who had founded the Greek Orthodox Church on North Dorgenois Street (now Holy Trinity on Bayou St. John). Benachi thanked Alexis for his mother's support of the congregation, which included some Russian Orthodox members.

For the rest of the week, Alexis attended performances, enjoyed a midnight musical serenade, strolled the city on his own, took in a circus in the former City of Jefferson (now Uptown), and dined with the Louisiana Jockey Club in the Luling Mansion off Esplanade Avenue. During one of these evenings, the English burlesque artist Lydia Thompson performed *Bluebeard* at the Academy of Music, which featured the popular ditty "If Ever I Cease to Love." Press reports had concocted a romantic interest between the duke and the entertainer, and the song's lovesick lyrics did little to quell the rumors.

In fact, the Duke's true love, Alexandra Zhukovskaya, was thousands of miles away, and had already given birth to his child. As for "If Ever I Cease to Love," Rex probably selected it as the anthem of Mardi Gras for its cheerful melody and sheer popularity.

Alexis bade farewell to New Orleans on February 19, 1872. His train took him eastward to Mobile, where he boarded a steamer for Pensacola. There, the *Svetlana* took the young royal to Havana, Cuba, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and later to South Africa, Jakarta, Singapore, China, Japan, and back to Russia by year's end.

Alexis' American tour did not go perfectly. As a monarch visiting a democracy, the duke drew his share of criticism, though rarely was it personal. Likewise, Alexis did not always have flattering views of Americans, though he generally confided them to personal correspondence.

In the Southern communities he visited, racial tension often arose in public meetings, as whites worried that black politicians would gain stature through association with a visiting dignitary.

Those involved in the event had various fates. Warmoth ended up in impeachment hearings; Pinchback became the only black state governor in the South during Reconstruction; Custer was killed along with all his cavalrymen in the Battle of Little Bighorn ("Custer's Last Stand") in 1876; and barely a decade after the duke's famous hunt in Colorado, nearly all bison had been slaughtered. Buffalo Bill went on to national renown with his Wild West Show, which paid an influential visit to New Orleans in 1884. Both the St. Charles Hotel and Old French Opera House succumbed to fires, in 1894 and in 1919.

As for Alexis, his reputation would later plummet amid accusations of "fast women and slow ships"—that is, lavish living, and responsibility for the defeat of the Russian Navy during the Russo-Japanese War. He died in Paris in 1908 at age 58, and ten years later, Romanov family members were executed by Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution.

But in New Orleans, the visit of the Grand Duke Alexis, 150 years ago this month, lives on as a prideful memory—in the form of the ever-popular Krewe of Rex, in this city's stature as a cosmopolitan world port, and in the nature of the celebrity visitor's Mardi Gras experience, which was not all that different from what transpires today.

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