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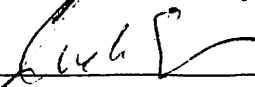
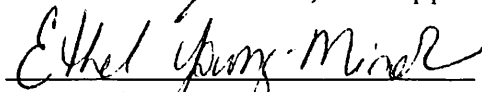
A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2013

Approved by



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Advisor: Dr. Ted Ownby

  
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Reader: Dr. Jodi Skipper

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## ABSTRACT

KATHERINE HITT KENWRIGHT: Memphis Carnival Tradition: Maintaining Identity  
in Changing Society  
(Under the direction of Dr. Ted Ownby)

The Memphis Cotton Carnival began in 1931 as a way to use the main product of Memphis—cotton—to bring the city out of the Great Depression. Through various incarnations, Carnival has endured and today stands as one of the longest-standing traditions in the city. Its founders envisioned a meeting of the minds of the city's industry leaders accompanied by a series of events as a celebration for Memphis residents, as well as a way to increase tourism in the city. Cotton Carnival and Cotton Maker's Jubilee, a celebration started in 1935 for the African American community in Memphis, have changed and adapted in the decades since their foundings. This thesis attempts to examine this adaptation and its effects, specifically regarding race, gender, and social structure in Memphis and the Mid-South. It also examines how the celebration has changed and why citizens of Memphis still see importance in enacting this celebration annually.

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## Introduction

I began this project as a summer fellow at the Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive housed at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. As I scanned and transcribed documents in order to place them on the website, I became captivated by Cotton Carnival programs. The elegant language of the programs told a history of Memphis through the eyes of the upper class. These words coupled with images of college-aged girls in elaborate dresses, the royal court in full regalia, and massive floats in a parade now frozen forever fascinated me. It wasn't until about halfway through the summer that I connected this "Cotton Carnival" with what I knew as Carnival Memphis today.

As a white southern woman, the concept of Carnival Memphis is not a novel concept to me. I know sorority sisters and family friends who participate in these events, in an organization that advertises as "the party with a purpose." They and their families pay dues to groups that I later learned are called grand krewes for the privilege of attendance at exclusive balls as well as the possible prestige of serving as a queen or a member of the royal court. I was surprised, however, when I realized how little the rituals and ceremony of Cotton Carnival have changed since it's founding in 1931. I wondered how and why a certain class of Memphians saw enough importance in this festival to continue it annually, even as the city changed and attendance declined.

Inherent in the culture of Carnival Memphis today is a resistance to change. Though the celebration has proved adaptable, the fact that this ritual is continued at all shows fear—the city, especially the upper class, are afraid of what will happen without Carnival Memphis to enforce the social structure of the city. In *Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit*, Roger Lyle Brown's examination of small southern towns and their

festivals echoes this idea of fear. Brown found that, “most of the public rituals in small southern towns are productions of the white communities, and I saw a subtext of mourning haunting the celebrations as towns and families and lives were being wrenched by change... the community festivals seemed to me to be responses to the economic restructuring and the transforming conceptions of time and space that characterize the late twentieth century. It seemed that a certain segment of the southern population was creating and perpetuating these festivals as part of a nativistic revitalization movement.”<sup>1</sup>

The need to maintain Carnival Memphis is somewhat psychological—attempting to continue this festival that was integral to the community in a time when everything was seemingly wonderful and content (at least for the white elite) is a way for participants to face the adversity of today’s times that are very unlike the golden years that they remember. The act of remembering Carnival of the past is as important as continuing it today. Memory and remembering are not like history, which is a representation of the past. Memory is comprised of shared experiences and personal experiences combined with social and individual circumstances. When we remember history, it becomes this sort of memory—the kind of memory that would prompt a community to continue a festival like this. Although these shared experiences mean different things to different people, Carnival Memphis is important enough to the community that when it perhaps would have been easier to let the festival die, it has been remodeled and continued.

The history of Memphis holds great importance in the legacy of Memphis Carnival. When placed in a historical context, Memphis Carnival and its evolution serve

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<sup>1</sup> Rodger Lyle Brown, *Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), xi.

as a way to examine social issues in the region at the time. I used many of the programs I dealt with during my fellowship to tell this story, and other documents from the Memphis Room of the Shelby County Public Library, particularly from the A. Arthur Halle collection and the Dr. R. Q. and Ethyl H. Venson Cotton Makers' Jubilee Collections. These sources show not only a history of Memphis Carnival, but through its struggle to adapt and remain relevant, how Memphis society and thus southern society has changed in the past century.



## **Section I**

### **Memphis History and Carnival Beginnings**

The city of Memphis has deep roots in cotton. Established in a rich farming region, Memphis has remained one of the leading cities in the American South despite a difficult history. A city with a reputation for violence, Memphis has seen its share of controversy—political problems under Boss Crump, the yellow fever crisis, social disparity under Jim Crow, and the economic successes and failures of a cotton economy. Because the city relied so greatly on the cotton industry, it was natural that the solution to Memphis out of the Great Depression was cotton. Thousands of Memphians were out of work and the city needed something to look forward to as well as to enhance the city's reputation. In 1931 Cotton Carnival, today called Carnival Memphis, was created by four Memphis businessmen to bring Memphis out of depression and to promote the city as a great place to live and visit. Carnival was an opportunity for excitement, and a chance to forget the city's troubles for a week and celebrate the crop upon which Memphis was built. In a more practical sense Carnival was an outward expression to the rest of the nation, and the world, that Memphis was capable of hosting a festival that celebrated both commerce and community. Cotton Carnival would be a sign that Memphis was a modern city. In subsequent decades Carnival has gone through many changes—changes that are telling of how the city and region itself has changed since the early twentieth century.

In 1818 the Chickasaw Indian tribe sold over six million acres of land to the US, including the Fourth Chickasaw Bluff, which would become the western district of Tennessee. The land then sold to John Rice, and upon his death to John Overton, Andrew Jackson, and James Winchester. The three men joined together to lay out a plan

for the area, and in 1819 they established Shelby County and in it the city of Memphis.<sup>2</sup> Named after the ancient capital of Egypt, the city grew to be one of the largest in the South due to its location near the Delta, a rich farming region. In designing the city, the three men insisted on plentiful public spaces, which led to the creation of Court, Auction, Exchange and Market Squares. Thirty-six acres of land were later set aside and dedicated for a public promenade, meant to extend from Jackson Avenue south to Union Avenue.

Signs of connections between the sister cities still exist. A pyramid with a statue of the Egyptian god Ramses overlooks the Mississippi River, mirroring the relationship between Memphis, Egypt and the Nile River. In his 1980 book *Memphis Memoirs*, Paul Coppock remembers “two engraved stones from a temple that stood in ancient Memphis on the Nile. These stones are the first things seen in the lobby of City Hall, an appropriate link to the original Memphis.”<sup>3</sup> While for many these links are indiscernible or and they may seem unimportant in the daily lives of Memphis residents currently, the founders of the city clearly hoped that their own Memphis would be as important commercially and politically as its Egyptian counterpart.

Located in the southwest part of Tennessee just where Mississippi and Arkansas converge, it is no surprise that Memphis became the heart of the southern cotton belt. The founders of Memphis saw their city as the center of the region, similar to the importance of Memphis, Egypt to trade and commerce in its region. This imitation was achievable in theory. An ideal stop for river traffic as well as a center for east-west rail travel, Memphis was a hub of activity, especially for the cotton industry. Often called a “Southern backwater” or a “provincial river town,” the city is and has long been an

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne G. Dowdy, *A Brief History of Memphis*, (Charleston: The History Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Paul R Coppock, *Memphis Memoirs*, (Memphis: University of Memphis Press, 1980).

interesting mixture of urban and rural, of black and white, of locals and outsiders.<sup>4</sup>

Because of its agricultural roots Memphis is unique as a place because at its most productive, most industry was not coming from the city itself but from the surrounding plantations and farms. Even more than most of the South, traditionally the most rural region in the United States, Memphis continued to perpetuate a plantation-style, cotton-based agricultural economy much longer than its counterparts, perhaps to the detriment of the city's urban development. As an important link between the region and the rest of the world, it is puzzling that Memphis was and remains behind other southern cities economically. It is a city of contrasts: poverty versus power, innovation versus traditionalism, rural versus urban—and has been greatly shaped by its location on the Mississippi River, racial tensions, and political and societal tensions.

Although the concept set out by the founders of Cotton Carnival saw Carnival as an outward expression of the modernity of Memphis, it did not have a reputation as a modern city. Memphis in the early twentieth century was unlike most other metropolitan areas. Based mostly on an economy of agriculture, Memphis was different in a sense that it derived much of its character from farmlands and small, surrounding towns in other parts of Tennessee, Arkansas, and even Alabama. Its modernity juxtaposed with rurality in habit as well as in prejudice prompted H.L. Mencken to comment in the 1920s that Memphis was the “most rural-minded city in the South.”<sup>5</sup> Cotton Row, located on Front Street, was the headquarters of social and cultural life in the city and its outlying districts. Life revolved around the industry—the growing, picking, selling, and shipping of cotton

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<sup>4</sup> Wanda Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). 22.

<sup>5</sup> Shields McIlwaine, *Memphis Down in Dixie*, (New York: Dutton, 1948). 185.

put food in the mouths of most Memphians and north Mississippi residents. As the nation's largest inland cotton market the prosperity and mood of the city rose and fell with fluctuations in cotton prices.

After the Civil War, a new Memphis began, a Memphis indicative of the new South that was emerging. The population of Memphis grew substantially after the war. After surviving unscathed (Memphis was of little importance to the North or South strategically), Memphis was upset by recurring epidemics of yellow fever. Although the city dealt with post-war poverty, like many cities in the South, it did not suffer the economic decline common in many parts of the region. Memphis displayed rapid growth after the Civil War, especially because damage was light compared to the surrounding Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Although city leaders had supported secession and the Confederacy, the city surrendered after a brief river battle on June 6, 1862. Commercial trade resumed almost without interruption. The city's population went from 22,623 in 1860 to 40,226 in 1870.<sup>6</sup> Foreign immigrants as well as newly freed slaves flocked to Memphis looking for opportunity in the city. It looked as though Memphis would become the next great American city as well as the commercial center of the rebuilding South. Had the yellow fever epidemic—occurring in three sweeping outbreaks in 1873, 1878, and 1879—not hit Memphis, the outcome for the city perhaps would have been different. These epidemics and their aftermath stalled or halted the momentum Memphis had gained as the preeminent city of the new South after the Civil War. Those who had the money to leave, in this case wealthy whites, fled quickly. Memphis' reputation suffered as well and the city was, as sociologist Wanda Rushing

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<sup>6</sup> Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox*, 14.

writes, “designated the unhealthiest city in the nation, harshly criticized by the New York financial community for “scandalous acts of dishonesty” related to debt repudiation when the city surrendered its municipal charter in 1879, and criticized for indifference to debt and disease. Memphis suffered from a discredited and stigmatized identity.”<sup>7</sup> Investors looking to Memphis as a new area for development lost interest, and high death rates as well as this outward migration left the city in shambles by the late 1800s.

So just when it seemed that Memphis would rise as a powerful city in the aftermath of the Civil War, yellow fever and worsening sanitary conditions kept Memphis from becoming the leading southern city that it was on track to become. Though in 1870 the Memphis population was double Atlanta’s 21,789 inhabitants and nearly double Nashville’s 25, 865 inhabitants,<sup>8</sup> after the epidemic both cities surpassed Memphis in population. Atlanta went on to become the regions leading city, known as the capital of the New South. Many Memphians who had left to avoid the epidemic stayed away permanently, and the city essentially started over again without tradition or history to draw from. The epidemic had driven away many of the foreign immigrants that had previously been attracted to Memphis, “Whereas first-generation immigrants constituted over 30 percent of the population in 1860, the figure declined to 12 percent in 1880, 8 percent in 1890, and 5 percent in 1900. By the turn of the century Memphis had become a city, roughly half-white, half-black, virtually devoid of the foreign-born, whose growth had been fueled largely by rural migrants.”<sup>9</sup> The population was replaced by

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<sup>7</sup> Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Biles, "The Persistence of the Past: Memphis in the Great Depression," *The Journal of Southern History*, 52, no. 2 (1986): 183-213, 185.

farmers and country people, and transitioned from a city made up of immigrants to a city of made up mostly of new residents from the rural Mid-South.

It was in this environment that Memphis Mardi Gras began. Just as decades later Cotton Carnival would bring Memphis out of the Great Depression, Memphis Mardi Gras was celebrated in hopes that a celebration would bring business to the city and uplift the spirits of its residents. After an influx of northern carpetbaggers as well as cholera and yellow fever epidemics in 1872, "ill feeling between newcomers, scalawags, Freedmen, and the old citizens kept local nerves taunt. Yet the town, like Old Man Cotton, refused to give up; instead, it gave a party and called it Mardi Gras. To everybody's surprise it proved to be just what Mid-Valley folk needed after eleven years of war and Reconstruction; 20,000 came to have some fun once more. The next year, yellow fever killed 2000 Memphians, but the frosts of early fall stopped the epidemic, and in February, Mardi Gras floats and maskers replaced coffins and mourners on the city streets."<sup>10</sup> Because the epidemics had received national attention, the organizers of Memphis Mardi hoped that such a festival would convince the rest of the nation that Memphis was not a dying town. In fact, newspaper editorials published on February 14, the day after the first Mardi Gras parades, read almost the same as those which would appear the day after the first Cotton Carnival about sixty years later.<sup>11</sup> The Mardi Gras festivities followed the model of larger celebrations in Mobile and New Orleans, as well as Mai Feste which had previously celebrated in Memphis. Although not as elaborate as the later Memphis Mardi Gras or Cotton Carnival, immigrants (mostly German) put on several parades and small

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<sup>10</sup> McIlwaine, *Memphis Down*, 289.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Emmett McLean, "Cotton Carnival and Cotton Makers Jubilee: Memphis Society in Black and White." (unpublished master's thesis, George Mason University, 1994), 65.

festivals from 1860-1916. These events generally coincided with political events or anniversaries of military events. Prohibition and the outbreak of World War I put an end to this tradition after 1916. Early traces of Carnival are visible in the celebrations, mainly the influence of European festivals and that all of these celebrations were held in early May.

The first Memphis Mardi Gras was celebrated in 1872 and continued to be a part of Memphis culture until the 1890s, although attendance declined in the 1880s and 1890s. Mardi Gras meant almost a month long series of events, consisting mainly of parades and masked balls. All who purchased a ticket could attend, and locals as well as visitors, both black and white, attended balls in large numbers. Despite the influence of the Ku Klux Klan in the event (they had their own parade) the events were open to all who wished to attend. Memphis Mardi Gras, though short-lived, had the desired effect—the visitors to the festivities meant more money for shopkeepers, merchants, railroads, and hotel owners.<sup>12</sup> These gains would be echoed decades later after the advent of Cotton Carnival.

Despite the decades of war and disease, at the end of the nineteenth century Memphis seemed to be thriving. The city, through emphases on health, safety, and education, sought to meet the needs of its residents. A board of health was established, and fresh water was provided to all Memphians. Race relations, however were strained at the turn of the century for Memphis. As late as the 1880s black and white Memphians were still working together in civic efforts—they served together on the school board and in the police force; they lived in the same neighborhoods and used the same public transportation. However this period of reform, though heartening for white Memphians,

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<sup>12</sup> McLean, "Cotton Carnival," 67.

“proved a degrading and disheartening time for many of the city’s blacks...although the Memphis record during this period was better than most of the South, it followed the general trend of promoting white racial supremacy and included widespread discrimination and considerable oppression.”<sup>13</sup> The city’s continued dependence on the one-crop system, focused on cotton, and what this meant for the city and regions poor black population meant that race relations would only spiral downward in the coming years.

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<sup>13</sup> John E. Harkins, *Metropolis of the American Nile*, (Woodland Hills: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1982), 109.



## Section II

### Memphis Carnival Through the Years

Memphis was known as the nation's largest spot market in the decade leading up to the stock market crash in 1929. However, Memphis was beginning to face foreign competition. In addition, synthetic fibers like rayon or celanase were growing in popularity and production, only adding to the competition in areas of consumption traditionally filled by cotton products. Increasing mechanization struck fear into the hearts of sharecroppers, "Negroes, mules, and cotton are an old Southern trinity. Yet in a Memphis factory unthought of by the Carnival crowd, the Rusts, John and Mack, the sons of a tenant farmer have a mechanical picker that works...One day, maybe soon, Negro pickers, some 15,000 every fall morning from late September till December, will no longer climb into hundreds of planters' trucks and jalopies to be taken to the cotton rows in Mississippi, Arkansas, Missouri and Tennessee, and returned that night with silver jingling in their pockets...After full mechanization of cotton what good will it do for H.L. Mitchell of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union to call a stay-at-home strike of cotton pickers? They will be at home anyway."<sup>14</sup> As the prosperity of the twenties came to an end, a sudden drop in prices meant a stagnant cotton market. Because the city and region relied so greatly on the cotton market, all businesses suffered. As unemployment increased, citizens were no longer abundant consumers—they were simply trying to get by.

It was in this time of uncertainty that a group of local businessmen conceived what they saw as the solution to all of the problems facing their city. They wanted to

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<sup>14</sup>McIlwaine, *Memphis Down*, 286-287

produce an event that would bolster the city's spirits as well as promote what their city had to offer—cotton. They hoped that a week-long celebration of the crop and its uses would increase local business as well as help repair the image of the city of Memphis. They believed that from the depression would rise a Memphis that was progressive and modern, a city that embodied both commerce and community. Memphis continued to function during the Depression and Federal spending for New Deal programs brought limited recovery,<sup>15</sup> but this celebration was a welcome effort to aid in the city's recovery. In 1931 four men—A. Arthur Halle, Frank Grout, Walter Acroyd, and Herbert Jennings, met in the Palace theater and planned a celebration that would become the backbone of the Memphis social scene for the next twenty to thirty years. Borrowing from other festivals but designed to specifically fit the needs of Memphis at this time (a precedent set by both Mai Feste and Memphis Mardi Gras), the four men began to envision an celebration that would change Memphis. They phoned Everett Cook, the city's chief cotton trader, who agreed to call a meeting at the cotton exchange. In his memoir Halle credits Cook with preserving the original intentions of the men's original vision, "it was going to promote businesses for everybody and should not be used by any one special group as a promotion...Carnival was going to be for ALL the stores, for ALL the people, for ALL kinds of professions and businesses, and for the city as a whole regardless of the size of the business, the social standing, wealth, prestige, family background, or anything else that would tend to make anyone feel that he or she would not be invited."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Charles C Crawford, *Yesterda'ys Memphis*, (Miami: E.A. Seemann Publishing, Inc., 1976), 111.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Halle. *Authentic History and Growth of the Memphis Cotton Carnival Association*. 1952, 22.

Borrowing from New Orleans Mardi Gras, the three-day event would begin a month later, on the first Monday in May.

This re-appropriation of ideas was not a new concept to the founders—Memphis was a city of European heritage before the yellow fever epidemic in the 1870s, and the festival drew from elements of primarily European but also African and Caribbean cultures. The selection of a king and queen as well as public parades would provide a link to Memphis Mardi Gras celebrations before the yellow fever epidemic and economic crisis, reminding Memphians of the city’s attempt at remembering civic pride and community-based celebration. In the official Cotton Carnival program of 1934 this connection is described as such, “While these festivals of the seventies [1870s] were never sumptuous as the present Cotton Carnival...they are in many ways strikingly similar. Both of them made their appearance during periods of depression; both of them came in a time of uncertainty and readjustment, and both had for their object the creating of a feeling of unity and cooperation in the Mid-South.”<sup>17</sup> Cotton Carnival would continue this link with New Orleans Mardi Gras for many years. The krewe of Comus provided robes and crown jewels for the king and queen of Cotton Carnival in the 1930s, and when they later transitioned into royal wardrobes made entirely of cotton, they continued to use the crown and scepter from previous Comus kings and queens.<sup>18</sup> The last known connection between Comus and Cotton Carnival was in 1935 when Cotton Carnival’s Grand Parade was made up entirely of floats from Comus’ Mardi Gras parade.

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<sup>17</sup> McCaskil, William. “Brief History of Memphis Mardi Gras.” *Official Cotton Carnival Program: Memphis Cotton Carnival Association*, 1934. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, A. Arthur Halle Collection.

<sup>18</sup> Halle, *Authentic*, 10.

The story of Carnival's beginnings would be rewritten and updated year after year by the festival's designers and subsequent Carnival Association leaders, especially Halle. That first year, despite organizing the festival in about a month, there was a parade, a fashion show showcasing cotton-made garments, and a King and Queen were chosen to preside over the festivities. The goals of the founders were clear—to use a week of fun as the foundation to revive the economy of a dying river town, and the fun-filled events reflected this desire. In the 1934 the Carnival Association president W. Neely Mallory reaffirmed this purpose, stating that, “a few days of entertainment and fun, as such, is of small value to anyone. It is the feeling of unity which is built up during such a period by people of common interest and common ideas gathering together which matters. Such a festival as the Carnival, repeated year after year, cannot fail to have its influence.”<sup>19</sup> A less discussed goal of the original founders that Mallory also emphasizes was an effort to increase cooperation between the cities of the South. Although such results are intangible compared to the concrete economic benefits of Carnival, the business leaders who created this celebration clearly wanted to collaborate with as well as compete with the leading cities in the region. When the first Carnival ended financial gains were felt by the city, particularly by its railroads, shopkeepers, and merchants, who had the most to benefit from outside visitors to the city.

In 1932, the festival was expanded into a weeklong model that would set the precedent for all Cotton Carnival celebrations to come. By 1935, crowds of over 200,000

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<sup>19</sup> Mallory, W. Neely. “Official Plans of the Cotton Carnival Association.” *Official Cotton Carnival Program: Memphis Cotton Carnival Association, 1934*. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, A. Arthur Halle Collection.

were expected at the larger parades.<sup>20</sup> Attendance continued to grow, as Cotton Carnival became a major touristic as well as corporate draw for the city. In 1948 Shields McIlwaine remarked on the increase in visitors and illuminates their importance to the city's economy in his book *Memphis Down in Dixie*, "With some 250,000 visitors coming to spend around four and a half million dollars in three days, why shouldn't the barkers go mad?"<sup>21</sup> It seemed that Cotton Carnival was just the solution that Memphis needed commercially as well socially, to improve both monetary prospects and morale.

The 1930s were a time of growth and expansion for Memphis, though a much more cautious and limited expansion than the heyday of the early 1920s. Going directly from the Great Depression into World War II, agricultural prices showed marked improvement. The cotton market had graduated from its first shipment in 1826, to nearly two million bales in the market one hundred years later in 1926, to recognition finally as the "world's largest cotton market."<sup>22</sup> And as cotton's position improved, "prospects for Memphis also bettered. By 1940, the population had increased to 292,942, and continued to grow."<sup>23</sup> But reliance on cotton as the source of all energy kept Memphis from progressing as a city. The city continued to rely on plantation style living because it was the center of cotton trade, and the lifestyle continued longer than in cities like New Orleans and Charleston. Tenancy and sharecropping supported this system that even New Deal programs did not shake, "For the past six years the loyal subjects of the Cotton Kingdom have watched with a mingling of fear, hope, and bewilderment the rapidly changing circumstances and events affecting their economic destiny...They have

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<sup>20</sup> McLean, "Cotton Carnival," 43.

<sup>21</sup> McIlwaine, *Memphis Down*, 283.

<sup>22</sup> Laura Cunningham, *Lost Memphis*, (Charleston: the History Press, 2010), 23.

<sup>23</sup> Crawford, *Yesterday's*, 125.

witnessed the price of their product soar and then drop, due to causes which they would neither comprehend nor correct. From the main laboratory of the New Deal they have watched the Federal Government attempt to restore stability to their industry, and they have cooperated...Such measures, however, can do no more than create a temporary stimulus, as was the intention. Private industry must then take up the battle and carry on.”<sup>24</sup> Carnival became a major aid to private industry with the establishment of the National Cotton Council of Memphis in 1938. With the growth of synthetic fabrics like rayon and celanese, the Cotton Council programming and promotions could not completely fix what had been broken before World War II, but the group did provide both leadership and unity to the industry, providing a forum for collaboration as well as a means of keeping individual businessmen communicating with one another.

Cotton Carnival traditionally combined both public and private events. Because the festival was originally founded to promote consumption of cotton as well as bring in visitors who would support local businesses, the public events were intended to entice visitors through exhibition. Public events included parades, a children’s Ball, a Midway, the royal barge landing, the Maid of Cotton Contest, and the National Cotton Show. An event held in 1935, the National Cotton Show represented the original goals of Carnival’s founders—“All of the “fun and frivolity,” all of the “hip, hip, hooray,” which has brought thousands of joy-makers of the Mid-South to Memphis, has merely provided the background for a far more fundamental work, a work that has already brought surprising

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<sup>24</sup> S. Toof Brown, “Works and Plans of the Cotton Carnival Association.” *Official Cotton Carnival Program: Memphis Cotton Carnival Association*, 1935. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, A. Arthur Halle Collection.

results in certain fields of Southern industry,”<sup>25</sup> and this show became a staple of Carnival in subsequent years. Education would continue to be an integral part of Cotton Carnival, through the National Cotton Show as well as essay contests and scholarship opportunities for young Memphians.

Most Carnival events were scheduled outside of the workday so that Memphians who worked could attend alongside their families as well as visitors to the city. The barge landing was the most popular event, but parades were also popular. And although public, these events echoed the elitist social hierarchy evident in the private spheres of Carnival. The barge landing showcased the Cotton Carnival royalty of the year. The royal party would board a barge that paraded from about five miles south of the city. It would amble up the river, visible from the bluffs of the Mississippi, and dock to great celebration. The King and Queen would be crowned, signaling the beginning of Cotton Carnival. To participate in parades one would have to be either the representative of a business or industry, a member of a secret society, or for the children’s parade the representative for their particular school. Despite exclusion of participation to many, the parades and other public events provided free mass entertainment for Memphians as well as visitors. Parades normally consisted of these floats, with local and visiting bands marching alongside them. Carnival parades have snaked through downtown and Overton Square, down Main Street, Beale Street, and Riverside Drive.

A midway fair was set up annually and usually was a collection of various games, rides, side shows, and performers. The Maid of Cotton Contest always ended in a public unveiling, and visitors to Carnival also attended air shows, athletic contests, boat races,

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<sup>25</sup> Brown, “Works and Plans”, 77.

outdoor concerts, and art exhibits.<sup>26</sup> While Memphians and visitors alike enjoyed these public events, these were the only Carnival events they were privy to—another other side of Carnival was taking place in which only the region's financially and socially elite could participate.

Private events were the real draw for upper-class Memphians. For individuals to participate in private Carnival events they had to fit a certain mold—they were generally white, Protestant, upper-class businessmen, mostly in the cotton business. Women gained social access to these events through their husbands and fathers. For young women, Carnival was their entry into society, much like the debutantes among whom their photos would be featured in the society pages of *The Commercial Appeal* and the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. The most attended private event was a Grand Ball, but individual Carnival krewes held their own events and meetings throughout the year and Carnival season. The king, queen and royal court of Carnival, although associated with public Carnival events, actually represent the most secretive side of the celebration.

A king and queen were chosen to preside over the festivities, and would serve as the focal point of all public events. The process for choosing the king and queen remains a secret to this day; it is believed that the nominating committee was made up of current and former Cotton Carnival officers.<sup>27</sup> Although the king and queen are traditionally from Memphis, individuals from Mississippi and Arkansas have also worn the crown. The process, while secret, generally follows a pattern. Both king and queen are from wealthy families. The queen usually is of college or marrying age, and from a prominent family in Memphis or regional society. Although beauty was common in Cotton

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<sup>26</sup> Halle, Arthur. *Authentic*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Mclean, "Cotton Carnival," 98.



Carnival queens it was not paramount. Family history, political connections, and social connections held more importance in the nomination of Carnival queen. A 1950 article in the *Commercial Appeal* exclaims, “Three top honors of the Royal Court of the 1950s Memphis Cotton Carnival are today bestowed on three lovely young Memphians, Miss Mary Budd Bodine, Mess Lawrence Barton, and Miss Gloria McPhillips.<sup>28</sup>” Queens and women of the court were announced in the newspaper in great detail, especially regarding their family and social connections. In contrast the king would be a respected member of the cotton industry, although as cotton became less and less important economically to Memphis this became less obligatory a requirement for the position. For both there were societal benefits—the queen instantly became one of the most eligible young women in the region while the king reaped the reward of a reputation of success in business as well as in public leadership. As Carnival continued, some prominent families established a lineage of involvement in Cotton Carnival. In his history of Carnival, Pierre Magness illustrates this, “by Cotton Carnival’s fourth decade, the carnival connections of the King and Queen were as complicated as the genealogy of European royalty. Frank Norfleet II was the 1960 King. He was the nephew of the first Carnival President and 1932 King, first cousin of the 1937 and 1951 Kings and 1946 Queen, and second cousin of the 1951 Queen. Queen Louise Crump’s sister Betty was Queen in 1947 and her cousin, Frank M

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<sup>28</sup> “Selection of Carnival, Royal and Cotton Princesses for 1950 is Announced.” *The Commercial Appeal*, April 9, 1950. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, A. Arthur Halle Collection, scrapbooks.

Crump III, was President of Carnival during her reign.”<sup>29</sup> As Carnival continued through the decades lineage would continue to lengthen for many prominent society families.

In addition to the king and queen, a royal court was chosen; young women as princesses and young men as their escorts. They were nominated by social clubs, the Cotton Exchange, and sometimes even by former Carnival Association presidents. While these women might someday become Carnival queen even a spot on the royal court was valuable socially. McIlwaine describes the kind of social maneuvering necessary to earn a spot in the royal court, “For the social set, the choice of King, Queen, and Court makes for delightful politics, a little game of ‘suggesting’ so-and-so for this-or-that. Ambitious parents, especially those with a lovely daughter but without the money for a debut might maneuver mightily to get her into the Carnival Court.”<sup>30</sup> While the women generally were chosen exclusively from “society” families the escorts were not held to such strict standards, and many young men became escorts simply through friendships with the women on the royal court.

Secret societies were the root of private events for Cotton Carnival. Although some private events existed before 1934, it wasn’t until the Memphi formed in 1934 that the private components of the festival were organized and funded. The Mystic Society of The Memphi had been a secret society during Memphis Mardi Gras and the men who revived it had no connection to previous members. The reorganization was suggested by Arthur Halle, and The Memphi was the first of many private organizations that would be connected with Cotton Carnival, and some still exist today in conjunction with Carnival

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<sup>29</sup> Perre Magness, *The Party with a Purpose: 75 Years of Carnival in Memphis*, (Jonesboro: Pinpoint Printing, 2006), 80.

<sup>30</sup> McIlwaine, *Memphis Down*, 284-285.

Memphis. Today these secret societies are called krewes named after the organizations of New Orleans Mardi Gras, but this change would not occur until 1981. Membership in such organizations were supposedly secret, but among the Memphis elite it was well-known which prominent community leaders belonged to each exclusive organization. A king, queen, and royal court was chosen for each society, and the royalty of Cotton Carnival itself was hand-picked from secret society members.

Secret societies also toed the line between public and private. Groups would often stage their own parades and would have at least one float in the Grand Parade. Groups held masked balls and while non-members were allowed, the general public was excluded. Despite the original purpose of Carnival as an inclusive celebration, secret societies were the outlet for Memphis elite to act in exclusivity. In the 1937 Carnival program the Carnival Association responded to these events, "It should be noted that none of the social affairs [of secret societies] are directly sponsored by the association except the annual Ball. Private parties were to be expected, and the officials feel that they are pleasant adjuncts which any group may organize for its private pleasure. It should not be inferred from this that the true purpose of the association is not the pleasure and benefit of the public at large, and it is quite beyond our authority to prevent private affairs even if we had any such desire."<sup>31</sup> Non-members could attend as guests of members, and were allowed to watch the members in their costumed festivities but could not participate. These societies were expensive, but not necessarily exclusive. Former Carnival President Clark Porteous recommended in the *Memphis Press Scimitar* that,

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<sup>31</sup> Scriptor, "Secret Societies of the Cotton Carnival." *Official Cotton Carnival Program: Memphis Cotton Carnival Association, 1937*. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, A. Arthur Halle Collection.

“newcomers, if you are interested in joining, call the Cotton Carnival general manager and he will put you in touch with the grand high something or other in some secret society.”<sup>32</sup> But the societies did serve an important and more serious purpose. Should Carnival go into debt, the secret society treasuries were tapped to make up the deficit.

Carnival gained popularity quickly, and as it became more popular naturally it drew more attention. As early as 1932 Fox and Paramount newsreels attended, and in 1934 NBC radio broadcast the arrival of the royal barge.<sup>33</sup> While the festival received universal acclaim on a national level, dissenters seemed to think the celebration callous in light of universal poverty in the region. John Handcox, an activist for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union set expressed the discord of the lower class through poem in 1936:

The planters celebrated King Cotton in Memphis,  
May fifteen.

It was the largest gathering you most ever seen.  
People came from far and near—to celebrate King

Cotton  
Whom the planters love so dear.

Thousands of flags was hung in the street,  
But they left thousands of sharecroppers on their  
farms with nothing to eat.

Why do they celebrate Cotton? Here, I'll make it  
clear,

Because they cheat, beat and take it away from  
labor every year.

Cotton is king, and will always be,  
Until labor in the South is set free.

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<sup>32</sup> Magness, *Party*, 93.

<sup>33</sup> Porteous, Clark. “History of the Memphis Cotton Carnival.” *Official Cotton Carnival Program: Memphis Cotton Carnival Association*, 1948. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, A. Arthur Halle Collection.

The money spent for decorations and flags,  
Would sure have helped poor sharecroppers who are  
hungry and in rags.

Oh! King Cotton, today you have millions of slaves  
And have caused many poor workers to be in  
lonesome graves.

When Cotton is King of any nation,  
It means wealth to the planter—to the laborer  
Starvation.<sup>34</sup>

Handcox represented a silent faction of individuals in this region who suffered under the reign of the same King Cotton that city leaders hoped would save the region. Though this festival was supposed to celebrate “King Cotton,” a crop that affected the lives of all who lived in this region, the festival, “left thousands of sharecroppers on their/farms with nothing to eat.” Handcox is highlighting a fundamental problem with Cotton Carnival—that all of the money spent on this celebration might be better served to “help poor sharecroppers who are/hungry and in rags.” Though Cotton Carnival was largely regarded as a way to revive the dying cotton economy, perhaps the founders did not stop to consider that for many poor southerners, black and white, to celebrate Carnival would mean celebrating the very system that kept them in destitution.

The New Deal not only revolutionized life in the countryside, at least for a while, but also was likely the first time that the federal government entered urban areas and spaces in a significant way. The New Deal had a modernizing impact on Memphis, and the city seemed to be moving away from its Old South image. To businesses owners and inhabitants, the New Deal, “signaled the advent of new American values that were much more appropriate to the collective, urban realities of the modern era than to the

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<sup>34</sup> McLean, “Cotton Carnival,” 60.

individualistic and largely rural ethic of the past”<sup>35</sup>—and for a city of virtually unchanging social hierarchy since the Civil war, the New Deal era was a time of change for Memphis. Sharecropping had been the major source of labor for cotton producing plantations labor shortages during and after WWII greatly weakened the system, and it was all but defunct by the 1960s. Carnival did halt for WWII. Many of the volunteers who made Carnival possible joined the armed forces or went to work for the war effort. Iron and steel from the floats was contributed to the war effort. It was back after the war, however, and was grander and more popular than ever. In 1949, the Maid of Cotton modeled a cotton wardrobe designed by prominent French designers Christian Dior, Jacques Hein, and Pierre Balmain, and she travelled over 40,000 miles in her promotion of cotton through fashion. That same year *Life* magazine ran Cotton Carnival on the cover with the title “King Cotton Plays Make Believe.”<sup>36</sup> Carnival was gaining popularity not only regionally, but nationally and even internationally. Technological innovation and the rise of radio gave the Memphis music scene a push, and it was becoming a center for popular culture, which could only help Cotton Carnival festivities.

While Cotton Carnival founders succeeded in attracting media attention and spectators, promoting civic participation, and heightening a sense of community identity in the city, the celebration was largely in the hands of white men. Despite the noble goals laid out by the four founders, Cotton Carnival perpetuated biases present in regional society at the time, particularly regarding race and gender.

Although Carnival certainly did not invent the social hierarchy of Memphis, symbols and rituals of Carnival incorporated the accepted hierarchy while defining

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<sup>35</sup> Biles, *Great Depression*, 184.

<sup>36</sup> Magness, *Party*, 46.

unequivocally local and regional boundaries. Traditionally, participation by blacks in Carnival was limited not only because of local customs, but because of strictly enforced segregation laws. The Great Depression had only made race relations in Memphis worse because there was even more competitions for what few jobs were available. Memphis already was crowded and urban, and after the market crash as many as 40,000 unemployed blacks<sup>37</sup> streamed into Memphis looking for work. The two races coexisted delicately—in a city already crime-ridden, mutual suspicion and mistrust could quickly escalate, and strict separation between the races was customary.

The participation of black Memphians in Carnival events was extremely limited. Because of segregation laws and a legacy of segregation for many events, “black Memphians were not among those who could attend. Blacks comprised 49 percent of the city’s population in 1900, but they were not welcome in the city’s public parks.”<sup>38</sup> In the 1930s when Carnival began, citizens of Memphis maintained the same practice of segregation. Black men traditionally pulled the floats; they were placed on downtown corners to sing spirituals or play the banjo, or were employed on plantation tours of homes in the surrounding areas open to the public during Carnival. While they could attend public events, standing and seating areas were separated, and blacks and whites visited the midway on different days. Black leaders felt the need to start their own institution to respond to this segregation. They saw that a parallel organization was necessary to offer an outlet for black Memphians to participate in the city’s economic revival as well as opportunities for civic engagement. Though there was a need, the establishment of such an organization would not be easy. Cotton Makers’ Jubilee

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<sup>37</sup> McLean, “Cotton Carnival,” 46.

<sup>38</sup> Harkins, *Metropolis*, 108.

reinterpreted Cotton Carnival while at the same time attempting to change the perception of the African American community in the Jim Crow era. Much like the founding of Cotton Carnival, the story of the founding of Cotton Maker's Jubilee has been told and retold almost into myth. In 1935 Dr. R.Q. Venson, his soon-to-be-wife Ethyl, and Venson's nephew attended the Grand Carnival Parade. As they watched it pass down Union Avenue, Dr. Venson asked the nephew (Quincy) if he liked the parade. Quincy replied that he did not because "all the Negroes were horses."<sup>39</sup> The next day, Venson went to the Cotton Carnival offices to petition for black participation in Cotton Carnival.

Dr. Ransom Q. Venson was one of the most prominent black citizens in Memphis during the early 1930s. He was one of the city's earliest dentists, even serving as the president of the National Dental Association. He was a lieutenant in World War I, a delegate to the first American Legion Convention, and the first black delegate to the National Legion Convention representing Tennessee in 1931.<sup>40</sup> After Venson was turned down by Cotton Carnival officers, Arthur Halle urged Venson to start his own Carnival, a parallel celebration. After garnering monetary and individual support, the first charter for Cotton Maker's Fiesta, renamed Cotton Maker's Jubilee the next year, was obtained. Venson was commander of Post 27 of the American Legion, and it was the bonus money of his men that ultimately made Carnival possible. It is probable that the men had grown used to equal opportunity and integration abroad during the war, and hoped that Jubilee could change public perception of African Americans and help Memphis grow to be more accepting. Blacks had long been relegated to demeaning roles, "pulling floats in the

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<sup>39</sup> McLean, *Cotton Carnival*, 49.

<sup>40</sup> Miriam Decosta-Willis, *Notable Black Memphians*, (New York: Cambria Press, 2008), 380.



main Cotton Carnival parades, serving as plantation sing-ers on the banks of the Mississippi River when the Royal Carnival barge landed, and seeing his chil-dren perched on cotton bales serving as pickaninnies on Main Street,”<sup>41</sup> and the men wanted to change negative perceptions perpetuated by these roles.

Patterned after Carnival events, Jubilee was held during the same week as Carnival, but with some considerations. Events were scheduled so that they did not conflict with the major events of Carnival, like the Barge Landing and the Grand Parade. Jubilee was held on a much smaller scale due to cost considerations. But despite these differences the goal of Cotton Maker’s Jubilee were remarkably similar to those laid out by Cotton Carnival’s founders—they encouraged consumption of cotton, encouraged civic engagement and participation, and hoped to incur favorable publicity for local businesses, “The Memphis Cotton Maker’s Jubilee was organized for the following purposes: To give opportunities for expressions, to advertise Memphis, the mid-south and cotton and to sell good-will...it is not financed by any business, political or financial organization or individual, neither is it supported from the public trough...yet it is the only organization by the Negro which attempted to advertise Memphis, the mid-south, cotton and the Negro also to sell good-will to friend and foe for free.”<sup>42</sup>

Cotton Maker’s Jubilee held public events similar to traditional Carnival events. There was a grand parade, a grand ball, and a children’s parade. The Spirit of Cotton pageant was the black counterpart to Cotton Carnival’s Maid of Cotton contest, and

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<sup>41</sup> Nat D. Williams, “Tradition or Not.” Memphis Cotton Maker’s Jubilee Program, 1961. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, Venson Collection, 1.

<sup>42</sup> “After Twenty Years, What? Memphis Cotton Maker’s Jubilee Program, 1956. Memphis Room, Shelby Country Public Library, Venson Collection, 1.

and national prominence. The 1935 program stated that many concessions were granted, “Not by protest” as it was “not that kind of organization; but through education, honest, earnest methods and active participation. The total value of the contributions of the Memphis Cotton Maker’s Jubilee has made on the local, sectional and national levels cannot be estimated in dollars and cents only, they must be evaluated with the inclusion of inspiration given, the opportunities afforded, and the information imparted.”<sup>45</sup>

Because Jubilee was not organized or endorsed by Cotton Carnival, the fact that Venson and his colleagues chose to include cotton in the title of their festival as well demonstrates that these dissenters did not recognize the necessity of cotton to the region’s economy, despite its negative history for the black population. Numerous programs from the festival address this question, all with similar sentiment, “In this age of Freedom and our quest for its fulfillments to all men, we must not look back to yesterday’s dead past; we must not overlook today’s opportunity, nor fail to contribute to tomorrow’s improvement. Cotton, as a product for Human needs, should not be penalized for past experiences out-lived, and enslaved circumstances outlawed. Cotton is the chief product and economic security of the South from which all of us benefit.”<sup>46</sup> Cotton Maker’s Jubilee would continue for decades despite the misgivings of many at its founding, even members of the black community.

Not only were tangible gains in the hands of black Memphis businessmen, from Cotton Maker’s Jubilee rose a new image of what it meant to be a black southerner. The

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<sup>45</sup> Dr. R. Q. Venson, “King Cotton Dreams.” Memphis Cotton Maker’s Jubilee Program, 1954. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, Venson Collection, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Clifton Satterfield, “A Charted Course in Pursuit of Destiny.” Memphis Cotton Maker’s Jubilee Program, 1961. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, Venson Collection, 13.

Jubilee made, “kings and queens out of little Negro boys and girls. Opportunity for high school children to parade through the city’s streets as drum majorettes and band members were provided. Negro women were glorified as “queens,” Negro men were designated as kings,” to give a tinge of pride in self.”<sup>47</sup> Students were encouraged to participate not only in parades and public displays, but also in essay contests and other opportunities to earn college scholarships. In fact, Cotton Maker’s Jubilee marked, “the first favorable reporting designed to enhance the dignity of the Negro” in white Memphis press, “Miss Dora E. Todd, a teacher at Washington High School serving as the Jubilee Spirit of Cotton, was photographed for the Commercial Appeal in 1936. Since then virtually every worth-while Negro civic project has received better treatment and coverage in the local white press.”<sup>48</sup> Cotton Maker’s Jubilee accelerated the slow-moving process of acceptance for black Memphians in the press, and eventually in general public opinion. Jubilee was intended to be a mode of agency for African Americans in Memphis. Clearly the celebration grew out of a desire for recognition of the black community as well as a change in how they were portrayed—an improvement on what Dr. Venson’s nephew saw as a Carnival float went passed, pulled by all black men. It was a subtle and unthreatening protest in a time that outright protest would have been meet with violence. Through a semblance of celebration Jubilee quietly changed perceptions and protested the racial divide. Jubilee would bring positive national and international attention to Memphis as a center of African American culture, especially in the South.

The first Cotton Makers’ Jubilee in 1935 honored the blues. Themed “Rebirth of the Blues” the celebration was led by Grand Marshal W.C. Handy, the so-called Father of

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<sup>47</sup> Williams, “Tradition,” 2.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, “Tradition,” 3.

the Blues. Cotton Maker's Jubilee is inherently tied to Beale Street. In his biography *Father of the Blues*, Handy remembers Beale Street: "Beale Street has always known a good fellow when it sees one, and Beale Street has always been hospitable and big-hearted."<sup>49</sup> As the center of the Memphis black community, Beale Street has a reputation as a cultural mecca, the place where Handy, Muddy Waters, and B.B. King played. But Beale Street served another purpose. African Americans were excluded from the main business district of Memphis and as a result Beale Street became the "business, cultural, and political" center for the African-American community.<sup>50</sup> Although not many blacks lived on Beale, this was the place where they could come, a place that was welcoming in a city that in many places were not. Handy was the Grand Marshal of the first Cotton Maker's Jubilee in honor of this Beale Street culture. As 1958 Cotton Maker's Jubilee President reminisced, "emotions are stimulated and influenced by certain experiences brought to bear. The Negro has learned to set his joys, troubles and sorrows to music as an escape valve... The Late W.C. Handy, the matchless composer, gave the world a new kind of music as he sets his sorrows to music and calls it The Blues."<sup>51</sup> Blues poet Sterling Brown wrote about the grievance of the cotton tradition in this blues style:

Old King Cotton  
Old Man Cotton,  
Keeps us slavin'  
Till we'se dead an' rotten

Starves us wid bumper crops,  
Starves us wid po'  
Chains de lean wolf  
At our do'.

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<sup>49</sup> *Father of the Blues* 90

<sup>50</sup> Cunningham, Laura. *Lost Memphis* (Charleston: The History Press, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> 1958 CMJ program

Ef flood don't git us  
It's de damn bo' weevil  
Crap grass in de drought,  
Or somp'm else evil;

Some planters go broke  
An' some gits well  
But dey sits on deir bottoms  
Feelin' swell;  
An' us in de crap grass  
Catchin' hell.

Cotton, cotton,  
All we know  
Plant cotton, hoe it  
Baig it to grow;  
Whag good it do to us  
Gawd only know!<sup>52</sup>

Published in 1932, his poem demonstrates the impact that cotton had on the black community in the South, especially to those living in and around Memphis as cotton made up the city's economy. While Cotton Carnival celebrated the plantation culture that kept elite whites rich, for African Americans cotton had much more negative connotations, and was often the subject of blues lyrics and literature.

Despite a history of racial tension and all of its perceived faults, due to Beale Street Memphis was probably a better home for black Americans than most other urban southern areas. Perhaps by setting the first Jubilee on Beale, Venson hoped that the festival could symbolize to the black community what Beale already did—that there is a place for every man in Memphis.

The Jubilee theme often reflected what challenged the black community of Memphis at the time. Early years focused on music and cultural contributions. After

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<sup>52</sup> Sterling Brown. *Southern Road*. (Harcourt: Brace and Company, 1932).

World War II, themes were patriotic in nature, and in the 1960s they were all about social change. Both Cotton Maker's Jubilee and Cotton Carnival were cancelled in 1968 after Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination in downtown Memphis. Both returned in 1969, but neither ever fully returned to what they were before. The 1970 theme of Jubilee's Grand Parade was "Where Do We Go From Here?"<sup>53</sup> Through the 1960s, especially considering the causes and effects of the Civil Rights movement, Cotton Maker's Jubilee served a crucial role for Memphians as well as all southern African Americans. The press was beginning to draw positive attention for the celebration. The *Commercial Appeal* published an article about Jubilee and a new "Jubilee Dip" dance, "The Negro version of the Memphis Cotton Carnival introduced this week with an epidemic of dancing and singing in the streets with the Beale Street Blues as the theme song."<sup>54</sup> Although the article mistakenly references Jubilee as a part of Cotton Carnival, a common misconception, the mention of Jubilee in the paper at all was a feat in this time. Jubilee had finally reached the stage, "where it is becoming something of a young tradition in Memphis, Mid-South, and the nation. It is a true expression of the Negro's desire for favorable recognition and understanding as the Spirituals...the songs of the slaves...the blues...the plaints of the disinherited...the con-gested jazz of the jet age...the music of the revolutionary and the restless."<sup>55</sup> Cotton Maker's Jubilee reflected the agitated feeling of a community ready for social change while still maintaining a connection to the blues past shared by the black community in Memphis.

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<sup>53</sup> Joe Lee Nelson, "From Where I View King Cotton's Future in Memphis." Memphis Cotton Maker's Jubilee Program, 1975. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, Venson Collection, 39.

<sup>54</sup> Magness, *Party*, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Williams, "Tradition," 3.

Though downtown Memphis began to decline slowly after World War II, it was in the 1960s and 1970s that this degeneration accelerated. Department stores and businesses began to relocate farther east, causing the growth and development of neighborhood convenience stores, restaurants, and even shopping centers.<sup>56</sup> Although white flight out of the city began during World War II, this also quickened as racial tensions escalated and the downtown business district was vacated. Not only did the riverfront lose residents, it lost retail and commercial residents. Front Street, which in its cotton-dealing offices held, “the real thing: the traditional ways and spirit that have made cotton men and Memphis different”<sup>57</sup> was left almost empty. Despite reaching almost iconic status as the home of the blues, by 1968 Memphis was ripe with racial tension due to the Sanitation Worker’s strike as well as the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that same year. Cotton Carnival and Cotton Maker’s Jubilee were both suspended. While they were suspended in honor of Dr. King it is likely that city leaders feared outbreak of violence or ill-will with such large gatherings in public spaces. Though both celebrations resumed the following year, neither returned to their former fame, and the year off cut an already declining audience for both festivals.

The economy also had a lot to do with decline in attendance and popularity at Carnival events in Memphis. Where Memphis residents and visitors to the area had once looked to these celebrations as a free and inexpensive form of entertainment, in the 1970s and 1980s as the economy continued to pick up this was no longer a prerogative for consumers. As incomes increased nationally, people could afford to pay for entertainment and recreation activities. Televisions became commonplace in residences,

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<sup>56</sup> Cunningham, *Lost*, 81.

<sup>57</sup> McIlwaine, *Memphis Down*, 290.

air conditioning was on the rise, and to many a living room couch probably began to seem more appealing than an outdoor event in muggy Memphis in the heat of May. Some Carnival events were televised locally, the most popular being the barge landing, and with this option, many who would normally have attended Carnival simply watched it on TV. Another economic change was that Memphis was no longer simply a cotton city. With the rise of other businesses and industry in the era and with agriculture expanding west, Memphis was no longer king and the cotton business no longer held absolute authority over the Memphis economy. Whereas in the past the plantation model dictated that black and white Memphians basically fell into either the category of rich or poor, the prosperity of the latter half of the twentieth century gave rise to new economic prospects.

In the 1960s, Cotton Maker's Jubilee lost the support of the black community, with some protests at Jubilee events. During the Civil Rights era some African Americans thought that the Jubilee was anachronistic, a reminder of the negative image of blacks perpetuated by early Cotton Carnivals, and a remnant of a time when blacks were expected to conform to white practices. Jubilee lost the support of the black political elite, although they were never meaningfully involved in Jubilee in the first place.<sup>58</sup> Cotton Carnival also continued to lose participants, especially as white Memphians gained the economic freedom to pursue other forms of entertainment.

The 1970s were a rocky time for Cotton Carnival, but some positive changes were made. The Blues festival was added in 1970, and expanded throughout the decade. Carnival began to rely a lot on music-based events for participants. In 1973 it moved

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<sup>58</sup> McLean, "Cotton Carnival," 142.



from downtown to the Fairgrounds, and attendance continued to rise. Memphis police estimate that in 1976, attendance at the River Pageant was 150,000, 40,000 at the Cotton Maker's Jubilee Parade, 75,000 at the Children's Parade, and 100,000 at the Grand Carnival parade.<sup>59</sup> In 1970 the festival expanded from its normal seven day celebration to a ten day event, and the events were relocated with the hope that attendance would increase. But Carnival would soon have competition as the preeminent festival in Memphis. In 1977, Memphis and May began. Also in May, this festival aimed to revitalize the downtown area of Memphis after its decline in the 1960s and 1970s. The month long celebration features its Beale Street Music Festival most prominently. The concerts, usually concurrent for one weekend on multiple stages, attract thousands of Memphians and visitors to Tom Lee Park on the riverfront. Like Cotton Carnival, Memphis in May was founded to stimulate the economy of the city: a country was chosen each year for commendation as a trading partner of the Mid-South. Japan was the country chosen that first year, and the two main events were the Beale Street Music Festival and the Sunset Symphony. On paper, the goals of the Cotton Carnival and Memphis in May for their first years seem very similar. But Memphis in May is different in that from its outset it sought a diverse audience.

Because the two festivals were for similar purposes and promoted some similar events, it was natural that Cotton Carnival and Carnival Memphis would butt heads. There was competition from the beginning. A local article in May of 1977 described the Grand Parade, "Bubbles dripped from the giant champagne glasses of France and a Chinese dragon spit paper fire at the crowd as the Cotton Carnival parade moved down

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<sup>59</sup> Magness, *Party*, 116.

Madison yesterday afternoon.” The President of the Carnival Association that year explained that men and women were dressed in costumes of different nations and the parade design, “was designed to pick up the international flavor of Memphis in May with many of the floats representing different countries.”<sup>60</sup> For Carnival Memphis, Memphis in May was new and untested. To Memphis in May, Carnival events probably seemed antiquated, a pageantry of the past. So in 1979 when Carnival’s Great River Pageant and Memphis and May were set for the same date in the same location on the Mississippi, it is no surprise that there was debate over who would get to use the space and bad feelings due to conflict. Carnival won the space, but the disagreement left both sides feeling bitter as well as causing a media storm of bad publicity, especially in local and regional press.

In 1980, it was clear that Carnival needed to change to stay relevant and well-liked. Clearly Memphis in May was gaining popularity, and it would do Carnival no good to continue fighting for attention if it meant negative feelings and press. 1980 Cotton Carnival Association president W. Wise Swebston Jones recognized this need to change and adapt. He established a series of meetings held every Friday to bring together representatives from Carnival and Memphis in May as a gesture of good will as well as for practical purposes. He also implemented the first major changes to Carnival in 49 years in three steps:

1. Carnival would become year long event promoting civil, social, and business developments for Memphis
2. Neighborhood and trade krewes would be established similar to the six secret societies

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<sup>60</sup> Katherine Barrett. ““New Flavor Fills Parade of Carnival.”” *The Commercial Appeal*, morning edition. May 8, 1977.

3. Slate prominent performers for each of the 10 days of Carnival to increase national interest<sup>61</sup>

In addition, Jones implemented smaller changes. He established councils of past Kings and Queens as well as past presidents. He reorganized the Executive Committee, decreasing the governing board from eighty-eight to twenty-six members. To this council, the Mayor of Memphis, the President of the Chamber of Commerce, a representative from the Memphis Convention Bureau, and a representative from Memphis in May would all have automatic memberships. The King and Queen of Carnival would reign for a year rather than the week that was customary, with promotional tours and activities scheduled nationally and internationally to garner interest in Carnival.

Despite these changes Carnival continued to decline in popularity. 1981 MusicFest had a longer, 10 day schedule to coincide with an 18 day Carnival celebration—its fiftieth anniversary. But the festival continued to decline in the early 1980s. There were conflicts with the Memphis in May schedule and MusicFest attendance declined as Cotton Carnival attendance rose. Because no one associated MusicFest with Cotton Carnival the results each year could go one of two ways. If the MusicFest was popular, it probably paid for itself but did not garner much positive publicity for Cotton Carnival. When the festival went badly and attendance was down or weather was down, the Carnival Association was left with all of the financial ramifications and no benefits. In 1985 the National Cotton Council moved the Maid of Cotton contest to Dallas to coincide with the Cotton Bowl, effectively ending one of the last ties between Memphis and the cotton industry. That same year, there were again

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<sup>61</sup> Magness, *Party*, 122.

scheduling conflicts between Carnival MusicFest and Memphis in May. Cotton Carnival unsuccessfully negotiated the use of Mud Island for the series, but ultimately the cancelled MusicFest. In a 1988 article in the *Commercial Appeal*, a paper which had been supportive of Cotton Carnival throughout its history, journalist Deborah Clubb compared the two organizations and their competitive relationship. She noted that while Memphis in May was ten years old, Carnival was fifty-seven. Carnival's MusicFest and Memphis in May's Beale Street Music Festival were in direct competition with each other, competing for acts as well as attendees. The \$1 million Memphis in May budget had far surpassed Cotton Carnival's \$300,000. Carnival had only had two women (both white) on the board in its history while Memphis in May had already experienced the leadership of three female presidents, two black, in its brief history. In short, Memphis in May was going world-class and worldwide while Carnival continued to focus on Shelby County, as well as remaining behind the times in diversification.

The 1980s were also the first time that Cotton Carnival integrated. Ethyl Venson was quoted in the 1980 Jubilee program saying that, "the Jubilee membership abhors segregation in any form; we believe that the day will come when all persons will be recognized for their capabilities and contributions and that there will eventually be one celebration representing all of the people in Memphis and Shelby County."<sup>62</sup> This turned out to be prophetic. While Cotton Carnival and Cotton Maker's Jubilee had run congruently and by all accounts amicably, Jubilee had always been a completely autonomous organization. In 1981 Carnival Memphis invited Cotton Maker's Jubilee to

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<sup>62</sup> Mrs. R. Q. Venson, "Letter." Memphis Cotton Maker's Jubilee Program, 1980. Memphis Room, Shelby County Public Library, Venson Collection, 37.

become a grand krewe. Jubilee would participate in Carnival while maintaining its status as an autonomous organization until 2007.

In 1987, the Great River Carnival became simply “Carnival Memphis.” Instead of honoring Cotton, the festival would honor a business important to Memphis each year, much like Memphis in May’s tradition of choosing a different country to honor each year. In 1987, the first year, the chosen industry was agribusiness—not so far from the tradition of honoring the cotton industry. This in addition to diversification of offerings from Carnival would become the model for Cotton Carnival in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the 1990s Carnival events for participants would be year-round rather than the traditional model of the week-long celebration. Golf tournaments and other events were added, like a Health and Fitness day, and an air show by the National Guard. The new statement for Carnival Memphis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century became, “Honoring Mid-South Business and People Through Celebration and Education.”<sup>63</sup> Although today Memphis in May attracts such large crowds and so much media attention that many people have never heard of Cotton Carnival, or believe that it no longer exists, it is still very much alive and well, with great effect on local culture. The name change moved the festival away from the cotton-centric festival of earlier decades, and it has diversified greatly in events as well as participants. No longer the prominently public festival that it once was, Carnival Memphis now focuses mostly on philanthropy work in addition to the numerous events and parties associated with the celebration each year. Individual krewes in addition to private balls and events raise money for charity and give of their time.

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<sup>63</sup>Cotton Carnival Association, “History of Carnival Memphis.” [http://www.carnivalmemphis.org/Carnival\\_History.html](http://www.carnivalmemphis.org/Carnival_History.html), accessed November 15, 2012.

While most choose to sponsor children's organizations krewes may visit hospitals and senior centers, nursing homes, or schools.

Jubilee would participate in Carnival in this way until 2007 while still existing as an autonomous organization. In 2007, Cotton Maker's Jubilee withdrew from Carnival. They changed the name to Kemet Jubilee. The name Kemet comes from the name of the land that later became Egypt, as well as being an alternate meaning for the word "black."<sup>64</sup> The organization no longer identified with cotton, and in a sense this name change separated the organization from its slavery and sharecropping past and instead identify with African culture. By renaming the celebration using "Kemet" Jubilee at once cut the ties to a negative cotton past and returned to an identity as an organization with ties to both versions of Memphis: Egyptian metropolis and the American trade hub. The celebration markets itself as a "party with a mission." Kemet Jubilee continues to serve in the same purpose as Cotton Maker's Jubilee—to celebrate racial pride while promoting African American achievement, even if it means challenging fundamental social order. Kemet Jubilee now has branches in Nashville and Detroit. In addition to the traditional parades and events Kemet Jubilee has other components. The scholarship program includes all royalty candidates between the ages of six and seventeen, and all proceeds of Kemet Jubilee events are deposited into scholarship savings accounts for these candidates as long as they attend college or a trade school.

Despite the fact that Memphis is a majority African American town, the community is extremely divided in terms of wealth. While a festival celebrating racial pride may seem archaic in today's Memphis, there is still too large a disconnect between

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<sup>64</sup> Magness, *Party*, 125.

the city and the poor African American population. Kemet Jubilee, which appeals to a primarily black audience, seeks to remedy this situation. In addition to scholarship programs Kemet Jubilee sponsors adult mentors for local children, especially children from lower-income families. While Carnival has transitioned into a sort of elite do-gooder organization, Jubilee has redefined itself through emphasis on racial identity. In addition, Kemet Jubilee is struggling to find generational relevance.

The split from Cotton Carnival was amicable, and Clyde Venson explained that Kemet Jubilee withdrew from Carnival Memphis because, “the more we tried to get in step with Carnival Memphis, the more we got out of step with the black community.”<sup>65</sup> While this is vague, there were probably many reasons that Jubilee felt this was the case. Carnival is a year-round event that can be all-encompassing. Perhaps participation in Carnival Memphis at great expense was not valuable considering that the time and money invested could be used to further Kemet Jubilee’s mission as an organization.

Carnival in Memphis is an enigma. It is at its root a system that has been continued because the community sees value in it. Both Cotton Carnival and Cotton Maker’s Jubilee were proposed as festivals that would benefit the Memphis community and the Mid-South as a whole, and its benefits are laudable. But through decades of ever-changing parades, balls, and events, the Carnival system has in some ways prevented the city of Memphis from successfully integrating. It also perpetuates stratification of classes, as well as affirming and even supporting gender stereotypes. A strongly patriarchal organization from the beginning, Carnival has at times enforced the exclusions of the Jim Crow South. It has been a forum for degradation according to race

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<sup>65</sup> Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox*, 184.

as well as gender, and mostly ignored if not excluded lower-income Memphis residents. As the festival transitioned from public to private in the latter twentieth and early twenty first century, perhaps participants began to see Carnival as a symbol of the economic, social, and racial divisions that divide Memphis and the Mid-South.

The history of Cotton Maker's Jubilee is marked by dissent, even from the African America community. The NAACP did not always support the celebration, and the black community did not ever fully embrace the idea of Jubilee. Many could not see the point of celebrating a crop that kept their ancestors in poverty for the benefit of a city that was not always accepting despite its large African American population. Ethyl Venson explained the opinion of she and her husband, "We had as much a right—more so—to celebrate as anyone. That's why we named it Cotton Makers. We are the makers, we said. We break our backs making cotton, while you [whites] are the financiers, the money makers."<sup>66</sup> One of the main founders of Cotton Maker's Jubilee, Ethyl Venson's name does not appear on the Jubilee charter because she was a woman, and a woman could never have received such recognition. While living under the expectations of a male and race dominated social system, Ethyl Venson acknowledged a need—to reach higher in hopes that things could change for the African-American community of Memphis and the Mid-South. However decades later, Kemet Jubilee would continue to face the same type of challenges that Cotton Maker's Jubilee faced at its inception. Historically black spaces like Beale Street and Church Park were no longer reliable as venues for the celebration, and have been largely reappropriated as tourist spaces and do

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<sup>66</sup> Magness, *Party*, 126.



not represent the black community in Memphis today. Issues with scheduling and Memphis and May arose and became a problem just like with Carnival.

In addition, Kemet Jubilee faces problems with relevancy in today's Memphis black community. No longer the beacon of hope for African Americans who desired social change, Jubilee has lost the luster of hope that it represented in the 1940s and 1950s—the pre Civil Rights South. While the programs for disadvantaged youth and scholarship opportunities are a valiant effort by Kemet Jubilee to stay relevant as well as necessary, the growing disparity between rich and poor as well as increasing poverty and violence in the city are not particularly relatable to those who remember the hopeful feeling of Carnivals past. This is represented in the level of integration in Carnival Memphis and Kemet Jubilee. Participation by whites in Jubilee and blacks in Carnival have never been reciprocal—for much of Jubilee's history whites served on its board, while no African Americans have ever been asked or allowed to serve on the board of Cotton Carnival or Carnival Memphis. Some more wealthy black Memphians have joined Carnival Memphis krewes, but few whites participate in or even attend public Kemet Jubilee events, which are free. The culture of exclusion continues between Carnival Memphis and Kemet Jubilee.

In addition to issues with perpetuation of racial tropes, Cotton Carnival has throughout its history tolerated if not encouraged divisions according to gender, usually following the expectation of the southern woman as a lady. Very much following the precedents of antebellum society, women were expected to submit to the male gender, and had very limited social and political opportunities. While this patriarchy is neither uniquely southern or exclusively white, especially in the early twentieth century, under

the visage of Carnival college-aged girls were expected to embody the marriageable southern woman. The fact that the court models the royal courts of Europe also brings to mind traditional gender expectations. Newspaper articles in the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* and the *Commercial Appeal* detailed the pedigree of queens and princesses. Their wardrobe was described in detail, as well as their appearance. In addition their family history was detailed as well as their father's occupation, and mother's connections in society and to Cotton Carnival—essentially their pedigree was printed in the newspaper. The women were not expected to be beautiful, but lineage and connections to Cotton Carnival were and are today highly prized. In a region full of queens—every high school, harvest festival, and social club has one—these women were expected to be the embodiment of white southern womanhood. They were expected to be young, feminine, sociable, and single. In today's South where women have the opportunity to pursue equal opportunity education, can pursue careers, and are not subject to the absolute authority of their fathers and husbands, the fact that women agree to go through this process and serve as Cotton Carnival Queen or on the Royal Court is surprising. Carnival, though anachronistic, holds a kind of aura of secrecy and importance to residents of Memphis that keeps women coming back. The opportunity to be queen, however misguided, still has a kind of mystic appeal.

Lastly, Carnival had a large role in continuing and strengthening the stratification of the class hierarchy in Memphis. This stratification is the main reason that Cotton Carnival continued to decline and eventually transition in to the much smaller series of private events of which it consists today. Though this transition did not affect Carnival's strong connection to Memphis, not all Memphians today can participate in what once was

the preeminent form of public entertainment by the city of Memphis for its citizens. The level of participation is now more than ever related to one's family status, race, gender, and especially class. Newcomers to Memphis cannot hope to achieve the level of participation of more prominent Memphis families who have been involved in Cotton Carnival for decades, through generations of family members. The structure and traditions of Carnival have changed little over the years, and the organization continues to socialize coming generations to prolong the same divisions of wealth and power that it has and does currently produce. Though fourteen percent of residents live below the poverty line in the city<sup>67</sup>, more residents have money to burn, and the appeal of public events is not as great as it was when Carnival began. Though the events were segregated, Cotton Carnival provided entertainment for free in a time when people needed distraction at a low cost. Today Memphians with more money to burn can attend sporting competitions, Memphis in May, or any number of festivals and events in Memphis. For those who would however, attend Carnival as it was in its original form, they cannot. Although anyone who pays \$75 is technically a "Member" of Carnival Memphis, individual krewes maintain separate criteria and are usually much more expensive. The costs as well as necessary social connections necessary to gain entrance into such an organization are out of reach for lower-class Memphians, white or black. While Carnival has adapted to globalization and changing social conditions, class remains a barrier for many who might wish to participate.

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<sup>67</sup> Memphis Business Journal, "More than 14% of Memphis Families Live in Poverty." <http://www.bizjournals.com/memphis/news/2012/02/17/more-than-14-of-memphis-families-live.html>. Accessed March 12, 2013.

The tradition of Carnival in Memphis is at once heartening and perplexing. It is heartening in a sense that it continues to be more than “the South’s Greatest Party”—it is an example of how an organization can successfully adapt to changing times and changing circumstances. But if that adaptation continues to perpetuate antiquated mindsets regarding race, class, and gender, one must wonder if the organization really has adapted at all. In 1935, Arthur Halle wrote that, “The Memphis Cotton Carnival is something more than a great frolic. As such it would have small value. It is a meeting time and a meeting place for a people of common interests and common ideals.”<sup>68</sup> And despite negative effects of its continuation, Carnival does have value to the community and the outside world. It is an example of a place that still sees the value of regional identity and promotes civic participation and unity in the face of globalization and a changing world. Carnival Memphis stands as a way to participate in a living culture, in the face of shifting economic and political truth. It still serves as a boon for local business. While this may be true only for the elite class, Carnival is a valuable social network for the Mid-South businessman or businesswoman. Halle wrote, “Someone once said that ‘Memphis is more Arkansas than Tennessee, and more Mississippi than Arkansas.’ The gathering of people of this region year after year in celebration of a festival, centered around an industry upon which they all depend for a livelihood, cannot fail to bring about an increased feeling of good will and cooperation.”<sup>69</sup> Carnival Memphis today represents the struggle that many cities and organizations face in a changing world—how to maintain regional and local identity, but at the same time recognize the flaws in a society that may perpetuate outdated views of race, class, and

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<sup>68</sup> Brown, “Works and Plans”, 77.

<sup>69</sup> Brown, “Works and Plans”, 78.

gender. While Carnival has not figured out this balance yet, it is a vital part of what makes Memphis distinct, and will continue to adapt and change.

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