



# MOBILE – *A Southern Charmer*

Story and Photos by Melissa Wolcott and Al Martino

Contrary to popular belief, New Orleans was NOT the first city to hold a Mardi Gras, nor was it the first to employ the use of the familiar fancy wrought iron work—Mobile, Alabama was. We learned this and a whole lot more on our recent trip to this historic southern city, which just celebrated its tricentennial last year.

We flew into Mobile via U.S. Airways and checked into the Radisson Admiral Semmes, a downtown hotel named after the Civil War hero who commanded the Confederate ship, Alabama. The rooms, which are actually suites, are quite spacious, comfortable, and decorated in Chippendale style. The hotel also has its own fine dining restaurant, Oliver’s, and is well located for getting around town. Right outside the door is Mobile’s free electric trolley service, called “the loDa moda!”—and no, we don’t know what that means—which stops at restaurants, parks, shopping and more, so no need to haul out the car.



Radisson Admiral Semmes Hotel lobby

courtesy Admiral Semmes Hotel

The iron lace facade of the Richards-DAR House Museum.



There is a lot of renovation going on in downtown Mobile, and we saw the promise of wonderful homes and shops emerging from construction sites. European architecture with some Caribbean influences are found throughout the city. A lot of intricate wrought iron work on Mobile’s architecture gives a “New Orleans style” to homes—which as we now know, should be called “Mobile style”!

In the 1980’s, HUD offered people rundown

homes for \$1 if they promised to renovate. Now beautiful homes dot the area. You can see insignias on some homes indicating their historical value. When we asked the significance of some stars lined up on some older buildings, we were told they indicate hurricane protection - steel rods go completely through the house so it won’t sway in a hurricane strength wind.

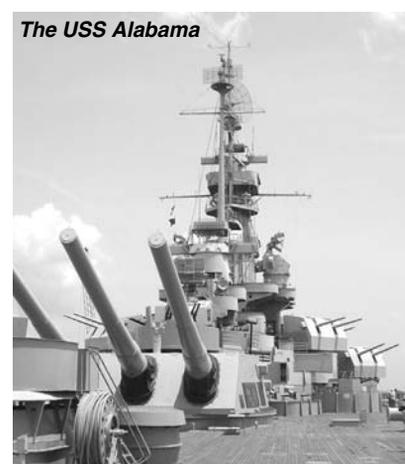
Downtown Dauphin Street is a great way to start a walking tour of the area, and the Mobile CVB provides maps in the hotels and restaurants for this purpose. It is also the entertainment area, with theaters, nightclubs, bars and an opera house. Some of the interesting historic buildings we found were: The Italianate style 1860 Richards-DAR House Museum; The 1865 Henry Chamberlain Building with cast iron columns and segmental arches; The 1834 Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (oldest congregation in the Central Gulf Coast region) which features art glass windows by Adolph Meier; and the 1891 Wintzell’s Building, the only wooden structure designed for commercial use remaining on downtown Dauphin Street. Wintzell’s building houses the “Wintzell’s Oyster House” Restaurant, and it has been doing business since 1938. We decided to treat ourselves to lunch there, and weren’t disappointed. Wintzell’s slogan is “Oysters — Fried, Stewed or Nude”, and they are a Mobile tradition. Willard Scott even included the restaurant in his All-American Cookbook for the Best Oysters and Crabs. The down-home decor is almost as interesting as the food, with walls filled with hundreds of homemade signs of humorous homespun sayings that have been accumulated over the many years.



The walls in Wintzell's Oyster House Restaurant are full of homespun humor.

After lunch, a short walk took us to The Three Georges, a little shop that has homemade candy, and the best pralines we’ve had in a long time—maybe ever.

We then drove out to USS Alabama Battleship Memorial Park. The Alabama is a 1942 Iowa class WWII ship that has the distinction of never having any loss of life, and never being hit, even though she managed to shoot down 22 enemy planes, and received 9 battle stars. Called the “Lucky A”, 2,500 men on the ship served 37 months of active duty. In 1947 the ship was “mothballed.” She was the fifth newest battleship ever



The USS Alabama

built, and reportedly, no more battleships will be built. Donations brought the ship to Mobile in 1965, and it cost \$1 million for towing 5,600 miles—the longest mileage tow in history. When she came through the Panama Canal on the way to Mobile, she scraped through with only 11 inches on each side of the canal to spare!

An aircraft museum is part of the tour before you

visit the ship, which contains 12 historic aircraft from the last six decades, including an A-12 Blackbird super-secret spyplane (able to fly more than 5 times the speed of sound—3,000 MPH), and a P-51D Mustang dedicated to the Tuskegee Airmen. It



*Al Martino waxes nostalgic at Battleship Memorial Park.*

**WWII sub, The USS Drum**



was a nostalgic trip for Al to see the planes (A-4 Skyhawk, and RF-8G Crusader) he worked with when he was serving aboard the aircraft carrier USS Franklin D. Roosevelt, as well as being an age reality check to realize they are in a museum!

Also at the park is the 1942 USS Drum, a WWII sub which received 12 battle stars for sinking 15 enemy ships. She was decommissioned in 1946, but reactivated in 1947 to serve as a training ship. She became part of Battleship Memorial Park in 1969. Walking through the sub (the length of 2 football fields), we both realized we could never have lived aboard — way too claustrophobic. The men who live and work in that environment are truly amazing.

Outside the museum are military equipment and more aircraft, including the B-52 bomber, “Calamity Jane.” The park attracts about 300,00 visitors a year.

The afternoon was still young, so we drove to Bellingrath Gardens, one of Mobile’s foremost attractions. Founded in 1932 by Walter Bellingrath, the 1st Coca Cola

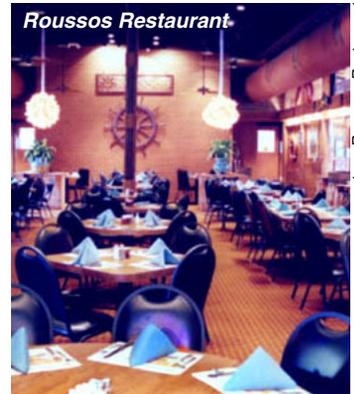
**Bellingrath Gardens Home and dining room.**



bottler in the South, the gardens were originally a swampy area on Fowl River. In 1935, the Bellingrath home was built by architect, George B. Rogers, who also created the gardens at Mrs. Bellingrath’s request. It was an ongoing job for the next ten years to transform 65 acres into gardens, a picturesque lake, rock gardens, foot bridges and grottoes.

The gardens have been open to the public since the ‘30s, and are geared to have beautiful plants blooming all year long, with a special feature of 135 different varieties of roses. The home is in the English Renaissance style. Mrs. Bellingrath was very interested in antiques, and Mr. Bellingrath insisted on the most modern fixtures, so you have the juxtaposition of the old and new. Many of the Bellingrath’s kitchen and bath features were being used in their home a full ten years before they were commonly available. Walking through the home, we noticed beautiful examples of Royal Doulton and Meissen porcelain, and Rococo Revival style furniture. A fabulous Boehm porcelain collection is in a separate building on the grounds.

After strolling through the gardens, thoughts turned to dinner, and those thoughts were of Roussos, a Mobile mainstay for the last 45 years, known for their fresh seafood. The building in which the restaurant is housed is on the historic register, and was built in 1832 as a horse and buggy works. The old brick and cedar walls create a warm dining atmosphere, and the Roussos have sprinkled bits of their Greek family heritage about. A member of the family is always on property to greet customers and make them feel welcome. We enjoyed our Baked Oysters and Scamp Almondine (a sweet and flaky white fish broiled with toasted almonds) along with good conversation with a Roussos family member.



**Roussos Restaurant**

courtesy Roussos Restaurant

**Cannon from the Confederate ship Alabama at the Museum of Mobile.**



The next morning we decided to see what Mobile is all about, so we checked out the Museum of Mobile, whose own historic building is from 1859, and was originally a market place. The museum uses wonderful 3 dimensional displays for their collections, and a time-line from 1559 to 1985, including disasters, fires, yellow fever, and hurricanes that have struck the area.

Although Mobile was spared Civil War destruction, an 1865 accidental ammunitions explosion leveled 8 blocks of downtown with 200 tons of explosive material. Also on display is a room full of wonderful miniature houses from the Aaron Friedman collection. They are lovingly rendered, meticulously scaled, and well furnished. A fun section for children in the museum has hands-on Mardi Gras costumes that they can try on and play in.

**A dollhouse from the Aaron Friedman collection.**



Continued on next page

That whole New Orleans/Mardi Gras thing really ticks off the Mobilians. After all, their party (1703) precedes New Orleans by about 100 years. Apparently, New Orleans had much better PR way back when. Mardi Gras is pretty serious stuff in Mobile. They consider the New Orleans Mardi Gras to be a pretty tacky event—too much wild reveling and nudity.

Back in 1703, the celebration was one of feasting and merriment on Fat Tuesday (the day preceding Ash Wednesday). In 1783 the Spaniards arrived, bringing their version of Mardi Gras which included parades held on Twelfth Night (January 6). The costumed Mardi Gras parades started in 1866 to lift people's spirits after the civil war. Today, ten thousand people come to Mobile for the first three weeks of the year to participate in the various parties and balls. The pageants, parties and parades are organized by secret societies, and are very family oriented events. At the main ball, ladies have to have their ankles covered or they don't get in, and men wear white tails.

We got to see quite a few parade costumes that had been worn by former kings and queens, in various places in Mobile. Some of the trains we saw weighed 86 - 140 lbs., and had to be pulled on wheels. One of the costumes we saw cost \$1 million, and took more than a year to create, which these days is apparently not all that unusual. These costumes are truly amazing works of art. The kings and queens have to be related to a previous king or queen to be eligible, and sixteen debutantes and escorts are part of the court. Four hundred to five hundred couples attend the balls.



*Some Mardi Gras costumes at Oakleigh.*

One Mardi-Gras museum is located at the Oakleigh Historic Complex—a group of three house museums. One of the cottages contains 19th and 20th century Mardi Gras regalia, photographs, and souvenirs.

In the 1830s, taxes were based on how many rooms, doors, and staircases a home

*The only piece of furniture original to the Oakleigh House.*



*Portrait of Octavia LeVert by Thomas Sully.*



had, so that is why folks used armoires instead of building closets, and homes have the staircases outside. Oakleigh had five different family owners since it was built, and was given to the city in 1955. The mansion was spared during the civil war by the foresight of then owner, Mrs. Irwin, who flew a union jack outside the home, since she was a British citizen.

The Oakleigh House itself is a treasure trove of the Civil War era's furnishings, including a wonderful portrait by Thomas Sully of

Octavia LeVert, who was the grand dame in Mobile society in the 1850s. She was the toast of the town, world-traveled (presented to the Pope and Queen Victoria no less), and was a friend to many famous Americans of the time. After the Civil War was over a few years, she made a BIG faux pas for which she was never forgiven, and was never again accepted in society. She made the mistake of inviting some Yankees into her home for dinner. Bad move.

For lunch we checked out another Mobile favorite restaurant known for down-home cookin'—Saucy Q BarBQ. We were told to prepare to feast on award-winning sauce and meat that falls off the bone, and we weren't disappointed. It may look like a fast-food restaurant, but everything is cooked to order, so we hunkered down and enjoyed a saucy lunch with the jovial owners visiting our table.

Going through historic old homes is always interesting, and made even more so when you acquire some insight into the history of the owners themselves. Such is the case with the 1855 Bragg-Mitchell Mansion, considered to be Mobile's grandest antebellum mansion. We toured the 1855 Greek revival home, which sits on 27 acres.

*The 1855 Bragg-Mitchell Mansion.*



Congressman Judge John Bragg moved his valuables from his Mobile home to the north before the Civil War for safe keeping. Mobile didn't suffer any damage from the war, however, the union burned all his belongings up north. The home is now filled with Chippendale chairs, Hepplewhite and French Empire furniture of the time. The huge oak trees on the property were all grown from acorns from the original trees which were removed. The huge current trees are about 150 years old.

An intriguing dining experience was planned for us that evening, aboard a beautiful 72' wooden schooner, the Joshua. We arrived with our party, but unfortunately the skies opened up and scuttled our plans. The Joshua was built by a determined woman with a dream of being captain of her own schooner. Carol Bramblett earned her 100-ton master's license in 1991, and started working full time as a skipper. The vessel was built lovingly by Carol and some friends, and completed in 2000. She now charts the boat out for day trips. She is a very interesting lady, and we look forward to someday experiencing her wonderful ship—weather permitting.

*The Schooner Joshua.*



*courtesy The Joshua*

The next morning we visited Dauphin Island, a quiet village on the Gulf of Mexico with an estuary, birding trails and historic Fort Gaines (est. 1821). Of particular interest to us was the fort, site of the Battle of Mobile Bay, and the famous quote by Admiral David Farragut, "Damn the torpedoes—Full speed ahead!"

Dauphin Island and Mobile Bay were actually mapped as early as 1519 by Alonso Pineda. In 1699, the French explorer, Pierre Le Moyné de l'Iberville named it "Massacre" because of a large pile of human skeletons he discovered. Despite the burial ground, Iberville decided to locate a colony here because of the abundant timber, reliable supply of fresh water, and a great harbor. "Massacre Island" became "Dauphin Island" in 1707, and during this period, the island was capitol of the Louisiana Territory, which equaled almost two-thirds of the United States. After changing hands several times, the land was seized by the U.S. in 1913. Construction of Fort Gaines began in 1821, but serious renovations and design changes happened around 1853. The fort was named after Brigadier General Edmund Gaines, a hero in the war of 1812. The fort was used one way or another all the way up through WWII.



A Fort Gaines re-enactor cooking cake the "old-fashioned" way.

Now period costumed folks stroll the property and are hand to answer any questions you may have about the history of the area. Our excellent guide, Joseph Everett, made the history of the fort come alive for us — right down to explaining the latrine duties of lowly ranked soldiers...(you don't want to know!) We witnessed some cannon fire, and later sampled moist, delicious upside-down cake made from scratch and cooked in a cast iron skillet over the fort's blacksmith's fire.

At the Island Sea Lab, visual displays and interactive exhibits focus on the four ecosystems in the estuary environment. We learned that an unbelievable 70% of all fish in the gulf come into Mobile Bay to spawn—sounds like some pretty good fishing goes on there.

Speaking of fish, we decided on Picklefish for dinner. Not to eat — to eat at. Picklefish is a laid-back, retro restaurant that serves a wonderful variety of pizzas, steamer po-boys, and huge fresh salads. This is another fave of local Mobilians.



Joseph Everett, guide at Fort Gaines.

Along with all the renovation going on in the city is the news that Mobile now has one of the most aggressive ports in the world. The cruise industry is actively pursuing the port with seasonal cruising, November through April (avoiding the hurricane season.)

We will enjoy watching the growth and rebuilding of Mobile, knowing that the townsfolk will definitely keep the charm and hospitality that has been attracting people there for over three centuries.

### If You Go:

- Battleship Memorial Park** - Battleship Pkwy, Mobile AL 36601; 251-433-2703; [www.ussalabama.com](http://www.ussalabama.com)
- Bellingrath Gardens** - 12401 Bellingrath Gardens Rd., Theodore, AL 36582; [www.bellingrath.org](http://www.bellingrath.org)
- Bragg-Mitchell Mansion** - 1906 Springhill Ave., Mobile, AL 36607; 251-471-6364; [www.braggmitchellmansion.com](http://www.braggmitchellmansion.com)
- Dauphin Island** - P.O. Box 5, Dauphin Island, AL 36528; [www.dauphinisland.cc](http://www.dauphinisland.cc)
- Fort Gaines** - 109 Bienville Blvd., Dauphin Island, AL 36528; 251/861-3607; [www.dauphinisland.org/fort.htm](http://www.dauphinisland.org/fort.htm)
- The Joshua** - Making Waves Charters, Grand mariner Marina, Mobile, AL; (215-443-9463; [www.dwabrams.com/joshua](http://www.dwabrams.com/joshua)
- Museum of Mobile** - 111 South Royal St., Mobile, AL; 251-208-7569; [www.museumofmobile.com](http://www.museumofmobile.com)
- Oakleigh Historic Complex** - 350 Oakleigh Place, Mobile, AL; 251-432-1281; [www.historicmobile.org](http://www.historicmobile.org)
- Picklefish** - 251 Dauphin Street, Mobile, AL 36602; 334 434-0000; [www.picklefish.net](http://www.picklefish.net)
- Radisson Admiral Semmes** - 251 Government St., Mobile, AL 36602; 1-251-432-8000; [www.radisson.com/mobileal](http://www.radisson.com/mobileal)
- Roussos** - 166 S. Royal St., Mobile, AL 36601; 334-433-3322; [www.roussosrestaurant.com](http://www.roussosrestaurant.com)
- Saucy Q BarBQ** - 1252 Government St., Mobile, AL; 251-433-7428; [www.saucyqbarbque.com](http://www.saucyqbarbque.com)
- U.S. Airways** - 1-800-428-4322; [www.usairways.com](http://www.usairways.com)
- Wintzell's Oyster House** - 605 Dauphin St., Mobile, AL 36602; 251-432-4605

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