

History Museum of Mobile



The History Museum of Mobile houses and interprets 300 years of Mobile history through numerous exhibits containing thousands of artifacts. The museum is housed in the Old City Hall building, a national historic landmark, and has roots that date back nearly 180 years. The museum also operates the Phoenix Fire Museum and oversees the historic Fort Condé.

The origins of the museum lie with Augustice Girard, a Swiss watchmaker who emigrated to Mobile in 1831. His interest in scientific and historical artifacts led to his organizing a Mobile chapter of the Franklin Society, named after Benjamin Franklin and having the motto "knowledge is power." The Franklin Society appears to have originated with a student secret society that existed at Brown University until 1834. In Mobile, it functioned as a literary society and at its headquarters housed a library and reading room filled with books and artifacts collected by members.

The society persisted in several incarnations for 50 years and included members such as Confederate naval hero Raphael Semmes and T. A. Hamilton, father of Mobile

historian Peter J. Hamilton. During that period, repeated fires damaged the society's collections and led to the group disbanding in 1882. Some of the books rescued from the fire were given to Addie C. Moses, founder of the first Mobile Public Library. This collection expanded over the years as historically minded Mobilians continued to donate family heirlooms, artifacts, and art acquired during travels to various parts of the world.

In 1905, Reverend A. C. Harte, secretary of the Mobile YMCA, local author and historian Peter J. Hamilton, and Erwin Craighead, editor of the *Mobile Register*, began campaigning for a museum. They displayed Mobile's historical collection in part of the YMCA. In 1930, much of the museum collection was moved to the new Mobile Public Library and opened to the public.

In 1935, a group of women began meeting at the Women's Club to discuss the preservation of Mobile's heritage, including the artifacts housed at the public library. The group formed the Historic Mobile Preservation Society, elected officers, and began planning a permanent museum. Over the years, the society tried to establish a museum at various locations in the city, including the old Custom House, the Kirkbride House, and the Oakleigh Mansion. None of these sites worked out as a permanent location for the museum, however.

By 1954, the space occupied by the collection at the library was needed for library activities. The items were packed up and stored in several locations around town. On November 9, 1954, the city's Board of Commissioners adopted a resolution creating a committee, overseen by the Historic Mobile Preservation Society, that

was charged with cataloging the collection and assembling additional artifacts in anticipation of the establishment of a city museum. In 1962, the committee became the autonomous Museum Board and continued its efforts to unite artifacts relating to Mobile's history under one roof.

By 1964, the Museum Board had exhausted all possibilities of finding a single structure capable of holding the entire collection. Thus, boardmembers decided to divide the artifacts into three collections and instead worked to establish three separate museums. The board's efforts resulted in the creation of the Phoenix Fire Museum and the Museum of Mobile and a planned Mardi Gras Museum that never came to fruition. The fire department museum is located in the station house of the Phoenix Volunteer Fire Company. It was dedicated on October 9, 1964, by First Lady Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson. Between 1964 and 1967, the museum's collections were housed in the south wing of the City Hall building and the Phoenix Fire Museum.

In July 1972, the collections relating to general Mobile history found their first real home when the city of Mobile bought the historic Bernstein-Bush House and turned it over to the Museum Board. The facility opened as the official Museum of Mobile in 1976 and operated for 23 years.

In 1999, the Bush-Bernstein House (now home to the Mobile Carnival Museum) closed to the public so that the museum could relocate to a larger facility. The Old City Hall complex was chosen as the permanent home for the museum. This historic landmark building underwent \$10 million in restoration, renovations, and retrofitting, and the museum opened to the public in September 2001. The Phoenix Fire

Museum continues to be operated as a satellite facility.

The History Museum of Mobile at Old City Hall has approximately 20,000 square feet of exhibit space, a collection of more than 80,000 artifacts, a research library with a collection of some 5,000 books, a classroom, an auditorium, a fabrication shop, a collection storage area, a loading dock, design studios, meeting rooms, a museum store, and offices for the staff.

The museum has made a special effort to preserve and present the stories of historically underserved segments of Mobile's population. To that end, the museum has incorporated the history and contributions of African American Mobilians into its permanent exhibits. Current activities of the museum include: guided tours, summer day camps, special educational events and programs, outreach activities for local schools, teacher workshops and open houses, a changing exhibit schedule that presents both traveling and in house exhibits, conservation and preservation workshops, book signings, lectures, and presentations by the staff to schools and local civic groups.

Jennifer Fondren
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