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African American Dance

Professor Popalisky □

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Congo Square- New Orleans □

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The city of New Orleans has a rich history behind. □ Much of that history deals with music and dance. □ New Orleans has been called America's most interesting city, due to its long and diverse past. □ Mardi Gras and Bourbon Street are two things that come to mind of most Americans when they think of New Orleans. □ Founded by a French Canadian in 1718, the city was settled by both French Canadians and immigrants from France. □ The Spanish took control of the city in 1762, and their rule lasted until 1800. □ Having both French and Spanish in New Orleans created a cultural mix that influenced African-American dance there. □ The Roman Catholic Church was the major religion in New Orleans, and it had more tolerance for African-Americans as human beings as opposed to Protestant sects. □ Louisiana was the only state in the south to have Catholicism as their primary religion. □ African slaves were there since its settlement, and as West Indian planters and their slaves immigrated to New Orleans it added a lot to the population of African-Americans. □

In the early days of New Orleans, there was an open field known as Congo Plains (later called Congo Square), northwest of the city limits. □ Indians and Creoles would play a type of ball game there called racquette. □ Also during the summer, the circus and menagerie would perform there. □ Bullfights, cockfights, and dogfights were also held there. □ The most famous event there was the Sunday dance of African slaves. □

The exact time when black dances in Congo Square is not known. □ However, it is known that it lasted until the 1880's. □ Some historians think that the dances began around 1805, which is when New Orleans was taken over by the Americans. □ From 1800 to 1810 many West Indians immigrated to New Orleans, and with them they brought Voodoo. □ Voodoo involved secret ceremonies and dances. □ The whites of New Orleans feared secret slave meetings, and did not like the secret meetings of Voodoo believers. □

Belief in Voodoo spread among the African slaves, and the amount of secret meetings were greater than before.□Because of their fear of these meetings, the whites felt that something needed to be done.□In 1817 the New Orleans City Council passed legislation that allowed meetings of slaves for dancing purposes to take place on Sundays.□These meetings would take place in open or public places chosen by the Mayor.□The Mayor chose Congo Square as the site, where they could keep the slaves under a watchful eye for any signs of rebellion.□Sunday dances were held in Congo Square before 1817 however, and they grew in popularity after the legislation.□The dances in Congo Square became a large tourist attraction, only the quadroom balls drew more tourists.□

The primary instrument of the dances in Congo Square was a long, narrow drum of various sizes, ranging from two to eight feet in length.□The African drum, which was prohibited in the United States, reemerged in Congo Square.□Nearly everyone who witnessed the dances of Congo Square harped upon the incredible sound made by the drums.□Other instruments used were the triangle, an animal jawbone scraped by a stick or piece of metal, and a banjo.□

The dances in Congo Square were described as not very pleasing to watch.□They displayed a savage quality, as they were performed mostly in circular groups.□Many people were disturbed by these types of savage dances, but the tourists they attracted kept on increasing.□□

As time passed, attitudes began to change toward the dancing in Congo Square.□People began to appreciate the energy and skill it took to perform African dances.□Dancers would have several “get down” moments and would at times laugh and scream with enjoyment.□Those African-Americans who surrounded the circle found it hard to watch, because the energy was so high that they wanted to dance with them.□

There were many types of dances performed in Congo Square.□For example, the “flat-footed Shuffle” was noted as being dance performed by the slaves.□This dance involved both a male and female, with either glaring or closed eyes while in each other’s arms.□There were screams and shouts, with their hands hitting their thighs to the music.□Their feet turn in and out, and they touch the ground with first the heel and then the toe, and continue to this more quickly.□

Among the more famous dances performed in Congo Square was called the Bamboula.□The smaller of the two drums used for the dance was called the bamboula or baboula, maybe giving the dance its name.□Along with the drums, there was clapping from those on the outer edge of the circle, and some call and response type singing.□The musicians play with a sort of frantic energy, as they progressively pick up the pace of their play.□The

Bamboula involves jumps and leaps that seem out of control, and as the energy continues to increase a state of madness happens.□ On rare occasions, dancers would fall with foam on their lips and have to be dragged out by their arms and legs, amidst the new dancers coming into the circle.□ It seems as though the musicians do not get tired, as the dance continues on.□ The Bamboula was a dance of savagery and wildness, and added to the stereotype of slaves as being savages.□ The Bamboula involved more group movement than other dances.□

Another dance performed in Congo Square was called the Calenda.□ The Calenda was a favorite dance of the West Indies, and was brought to New Orleans during their emigration.□ However, because of its sexual nature, it was banned from Congo Square around 1843.□ The Calenda was a dance with a large number of participants performed with a lot of passion.

There were other dances that were connected to Congo Square.□ Some were the Babouille, the Cata, the Counjaille, the Voudou, and the Congo.□

Congo Square was regarded as one of the most exciting places in New Orleans.□ The dances of Congo Square ended in the 1880's.□ The dances held there probably came to an end because there was no need for it anymore.□ In the 1880's African-Americans began to migrate to the North.□ Black dance halls came into existence, and Congo Square became something of the past.□ Congo Square was a place for black slaves to express themselves, and they did so in front of many whites who stopped to watch them dance.□□