

# Mules and Museums Collaborate for STOMPING GROUNDS: Mules at Work in Southeast Louisiana

by Charlotte Jones

On February 2, 2021, the 1811 Kid Ory Historic House in LaPlace, LA, officially opened its doors to the public after a year of planning, pandemics, and perspiration. The former plantation home, about 30 miles west of New Orleans, currently features three exhibits. The two permanent exhibits, for which the museum bears its name, examine the 1811 German Coast Uprising - the largest rebellion of enslaved peoples in the country - and the life of jazz trombonist Edward "Kid" Ory, who was born in the tenants quar-

ters in 1896. The third, special exhibit, Stomping Grounds, examines the role of mules after the Civil War.

Rebellions, jazz, and mules? While it seems like an odd combination for a house museum, all three events (if one considers "mules" an event) impacted the United States on a macroscale and locally shaped The Woodland Plantation, where the museum resides today.

Stomping Grounds examines the ascent of mules as the predominant work animal in the South in sugar production. The hybrids became im-

mensely popular after the Civil War on both former plantations and in urban environments. Planters preferred them for their hybrid vigor and erroneously believed that only African American laborers and mules could successfully cultivate cotton or sugar in the South. As *Mules and More* readers understand, this is simply not true - people of all backgrounds (historically and presently) successfully worked with beasts of burden. This stereotype has roots in the saying "40 acres and a mule," a phrase coined by General Sherman's Field Order No. 15 which allowed confiscated lands to be redistributed to African American refugees along the Georgia coast. Though this order was rescinded within months, the animal became synonymous with

(right) The Woodland Plantation mule barn, built in the 1880s, still stands on the museum's neighboring property

(below) "Corn Barrel Talk" -- attendees chat about the exhibit at the museum's grand opening on February 2, 2021. Photo by John McCusker

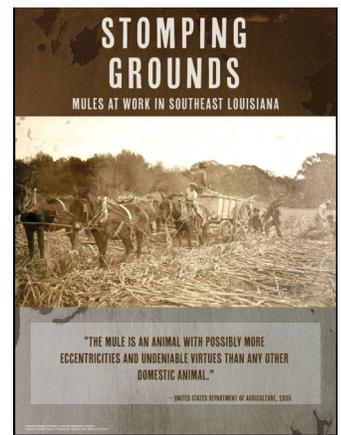
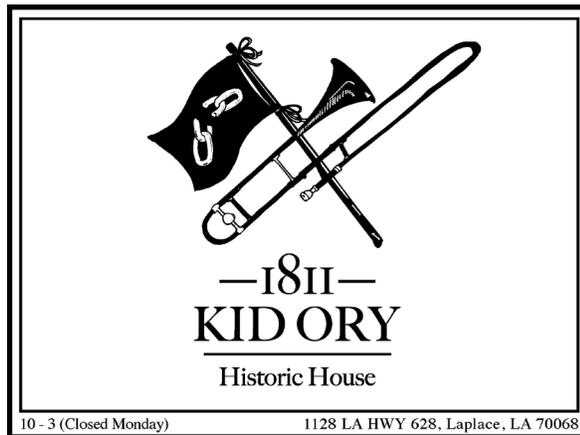


freedmen who worked with mules as sharecroppers or tenant farmers decades after the Civil War.

In the 1880s, the owners of The Woodland Plantation erected a massive mule barn on the property. The faded green barn still stands on the neighboring property. Councilmember Robbie Arcuri graciously donated the old company plow and some tack to the Stomping Grounds exhibit. The green corn barrel from the barn is also on loan in the display. Edward “Kid” Ory, who grew up on the site, made .60 cents a day bringing water and meals out to the fields with an old mule that he retrieved every morning from the barn. When he moved to New Orleans and established himself as a jazz musician, he often rented mule-drawn furniture wagons to advertise his band’s upcoming gigs. Since trombones require more elbow room than most instruments, he sat on the end of the wagon to avoid hitting his bandmates and thus created the “tailgate trombone” style.

By 1910, the Woodward Plantation continued to operate as one of 206 sugar plantations in St. John the Baptist Parish. Laborers and mules on the Woodland Plantation plowed the land twice in February, then tilled the soil into 6-foot rows. Women and men “grassers” dispersed the seeds, then mules pushed dirt over the rows and later flattened them with a roller. When the cane sprouted, “hoers” actively weeded and “hilled” soil around the stalks, then fertilized the crop. In the summer, mules cut drainage ditches (up to 15 inches deep) that flanked each row until harvest time in the fall.

Harvesting cane was also an elaborate process. Hand laborers often cut the cane in place. A team of sugar mules typically pulled a mechanized cane loader among the tall cane in the back of a flatbed wagon. A laborer positioned the loader’s boom and hoist over the cane to be harvested while another worker led the mules away from the machine. The cable attached to the mule’s work harness pulled the crane back into the air, ripping the



Stomping Grounds: Mules at Work Southeast Louisiana is a museum exhibit that explores mules and sugar production after the Civil War



A week after Chica arrived at the museum, she met a rotating group of 88 middle schoolers from Emily C. Watkins Elementary School. Chica, who is used to meeting thousands of people every year in New Orleans, enjoyed every minute of it.

*Photo by John McCusker*



Chica and Charlotte practice ground driving in front of the 1811 Kid Ory Historic House in LaPlace, LA. *Photo by John McCusker*

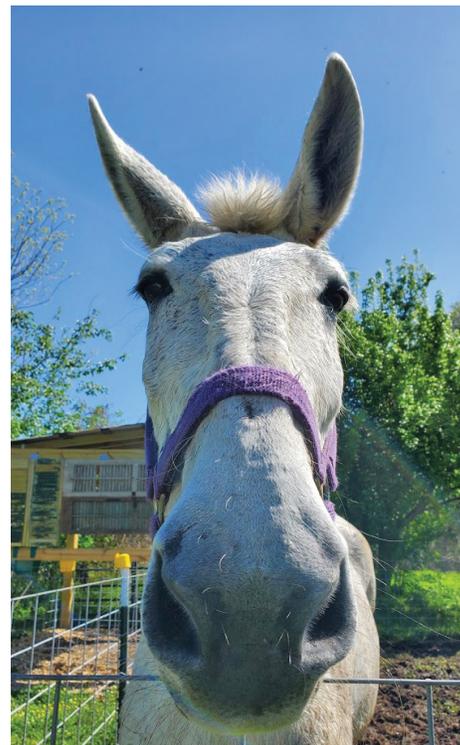
sugarcane out of the thick clay soil. The claw dropped the crop onto cane carts (a simple four-by-eight foot bed wagon consisting of two wheels) that towed the “white gold” out of the field. The cane would then be loaded onto train cars by loading derricks located throughout plantations and then transported the cane to the factory for processing.

While the Stomping Grounds: Mules at Work in Southeast Louisiana examines this and more, perhaps the most “immersive experience” of the exhibit is the museum’s newest team member Chica, a French Quarter carriage mule currently vacationing at the 1811 Kid Ory Historic House. The 13-year-old flea-bitten molly has been off from work for a year from Mid-City Carriages due to COVID-19. Though she enjoys her modest turnout and grazing privileges, Chica still looks for work, so she’s been assisting the museum founder and site man-

ager with chores around the grounds, such as moving antique cast iron tubs across the property. But her most burdensome task to date involved meeting, greeting, and nuzzling a total of 88 middle-schoolers who came to the 1811 Kid Ory Historic House for a field trip. New ash handles for the ca. 1900 plow arrived recently. Soon, Chica will be tasked with historical interpretation work for visitors.

For more information on the Stomping Grounds exhibit and 1811 Kid Ory Historic House, please go to [1811kidooryhistorichouse.com](http://1811kidooryhistorichouse.com). This exhibit is sponsored in part by the Charbonnet Funeral Home and Mid-City Carriages: [mid-citycarriages.com](http://mid-citycarriages.com).

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Chica, who is on hiatus from giving carriage tours in New Orleans, is currently interning at the 1811 Kid Ory Historic House



Chica, a 13-year-old molly mule originally from Texas, began working in New Orleans in 2018 for Mid-City Carriages. *Photo by author.*