

The Men With The Red Umbrellas

New Orleans has had its share of incredible characters over the years, but you may be interested to know that two of them made a lasting impression on the world around them with their conspicuous red umbrellas.

The first was a Parisian-born dancing master named "Baby," an eccentric so inescapably apparent, wrote historian Lyle Saxon, that he was "a canary in a nest of jaybirds, a butterfly in an ant-hill." "Baby" was the city's first dancing master, who had followed the Marquis de Vaudreuil to New Orleans "in order to instruct the colonial children in the art of dancing."



We have him to thank for balls and dancing, Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil de Cavagnial, the Marquis de Vaudreuil (November 22, 1698 – August 4, 1778), Governor of French Louisiana (1743 – 1753) and the last Governor-General of New France

At the most recent televised *Meeting of the Courts of Rex and Comus* on WYES (2018), viewers watched as His Majesty Rex bestowed a

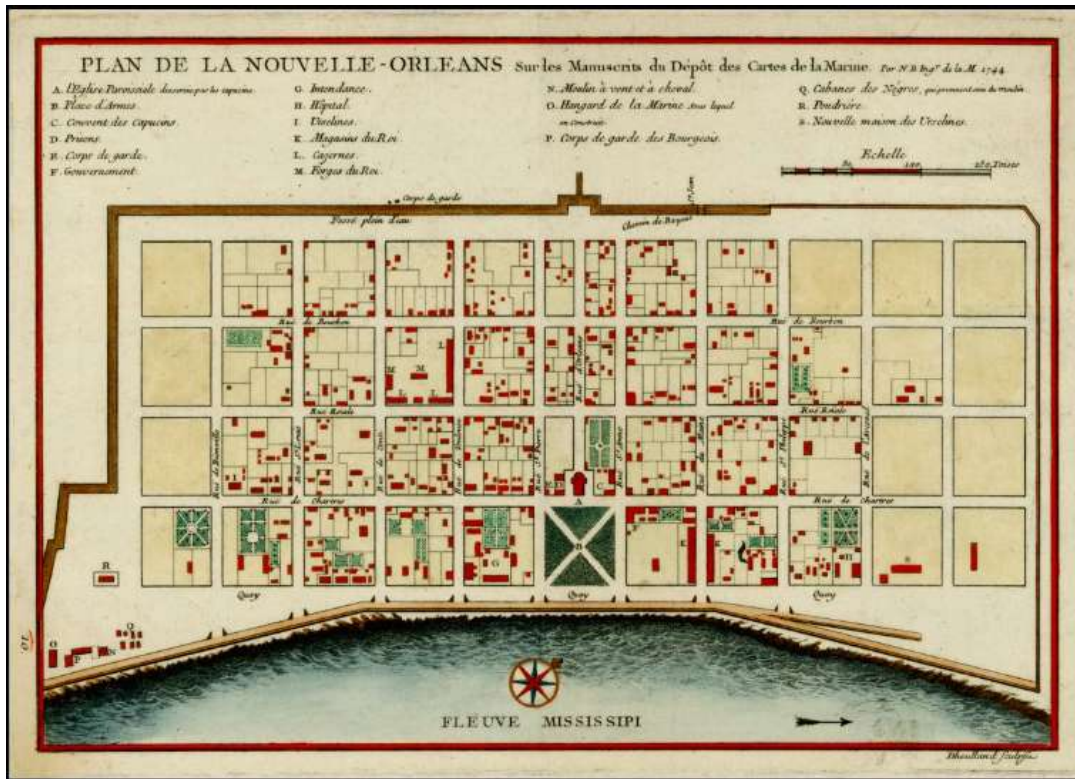
special "royal decoration" upon Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, the city's founder and former governor of French Louisiana, portrayed by a jovial and familiar past Rex, resplendant in blue and silver colonial attire. It was suggested on the program that the Marquis de Vaudreuil should have been similarly honored since he introduced balls and dancing to the colony.



A French Dancing Master

The Marquis, it must be remembered, replaced our city's founder, Bienville, as governor in 1743. Extremely wealthy, Vaudreuil was "a

gentleman typical of the French court of that time," wrote Saxon. "He brought his wife to Louisiana with him. A whole shipload of furniture and rich trappings accompanied them. He established a sort of court in New Orleans. There were balls, with court dresses *de rigueur*, where gaily uniformed officers danced with bejeweled women. This was the beginning of fashionable life in the colony."



Jacques-Nicolas Bellin's 1774 map of La Nouvelle-Orléans

Yet, at the same time, the Crescent City was "a rough village, surrounded by a wooden palisade. Within its walls was a motley crew of Frenchmen, Swiss, and Germans; a sprinkling of priests; a group of nuns; a sorry lot of abandoned aristocrats, trailing their bedraggled velvets through the muddy streets; men from jails and prisons of France; a few courtezans, now the industrious and respectable wives of colonists; and many plain bourgeois shopkeepers, wig-makers, laborers, and artisans, and their hard working wives."

But, apart from them, the French colony did have some rich planters, along with the city's officers and their wives, who together formed the official "Society," and it was their children the French Dancing Master, "Baby," had come to instruct.

"Baby" was an extraordinary sight to see. Louisiana historian Charles Gayarré wrote that the "eccentricities of Baby's mind," not to mention "his physical organization" and his "doleful mien" earned him "the appellation of the *Don Quixote of dancing*." But, unlike Don Quixote, his mode of transportation was more like that of Sancho Panza, riding through the muddy streets on a little mule, with the feet at the end of his long legs literally touching the ground until, as Gayarré described, "it was as though both man and beast were walking together."

Saxon said "Baby" was "tall and thin and sallow, with twinkling gray eyes" and, upon navigating those mud puddles with "an airy grace," it appeared as though "he were ready to dance the minuet."

Trouble was, "Society" children in need of dance lessons were few and far between in the colony, so "Baby" taught rich and poor children alike. Those whose parents did have means included a number who lived on the outlying plantations, which required a considerable amount of traveling on the dancing master's part. As his fame spread, "Baby" was welcomed with open arms, but journeying to and from these locales had its dangers.

Indian raids were not uncommon, and as "Baby" was riding astride his *petite* mule on his way to the *Côte des Allemands*, or German Coast, above New Orleans on the east side of the Mississippi River, a party of Indians encountered him singing a Parisian *chanson*. Splendidly arrayed in an outfit of fashionable "shiny green cloth," wrote Saxon, and "an immense beaver hat," he was wearing "sharp spurs" of Spanish silver and carried "an enormous red umbrella, open to protect himself and his mule from the sun." He looked more prepared to take a bow than to defend himself, but that was what he was going to have to do.

Having seized guns from the nearby Cheval plantation, killing two men and a slave, and burning the house to the ground, this party of fifty or more Indians was now intent on killing "Baby" and stealing his mule. Although it is doubtful that this colorful dancing master had ever before struck a blow against another human being, he took out his hunting knife and put up a valiant struggle. His leg muscles, strengthened by years of dancing, kicked back, and the spurs aided him in his defense. Wounded and bleeding, he ran as fast as he could to the dwelling that was expecting his arrival. A young man named Guillaume let him in and they then barred the door of the sturdy cottage. Gathered within were the ten or twelve boys and girls, both white and black, that were assembled to await "Baby's" dance lesson.

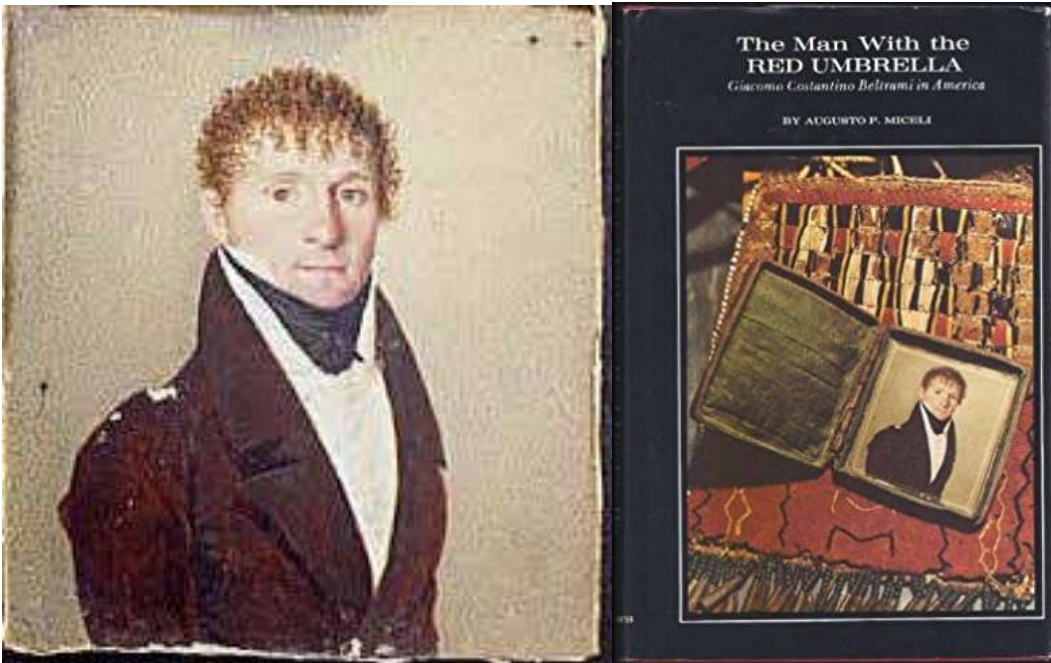


French Maistre à Dancer Early 18th Century French Umbrella

That would have to wait. Guillaume and the seriously injured "Baby" were the only adults there to fend off the attack of the Indians who were in hot pursuit of the knife-wielding dancing instructor with the "enormous red umbrella", and there was but one gun between them and little ammunition. They killed off enough of their attackers that the Indians retreated into the dense wilderness, but "Baby" did not survive. All through the night, Guillaume and the children tried to nurse his wounds, and early the next day he was taken by wagon to New Orleans. Delirious by then, "Baby" died before sunset. At his funeral, it is said that every child in New Orleans came to pay their respects to the eccentric gentleman who taught them the joy of dancing.

But he was not the only gentleman with a red umbrella that graced New Orleans with his eccentricities. Giacomo Costantino Beltrami (1779 – January 6, 1855) was the subject of an interesting historical narrative entitled *The Man With The RED UMBRELLA* (June, 1974), by Augusto P. Miceli, a New Orleans attorney born in Cefalù, Sicily. A member of the Judge Advocate Corps and a colonel on the staff of General Omar Bradley during World War II, Miceli also penned *The Pickwick Club of New Orleans*.

Giacomo Beltrami, the 16th of 17 children, born in the city of Bergamo in the northern Italian region of Lombardy, was an Italian-born classical scholar, linguist, jurist, author and explorer. His fame comes mostly from his having discovered what he erroneously thought were the headwaters of the Mississippi River in 1823 while on a trip across much of the United States. An extensive network of notable figures could be counted among his friends and acquaintances, including members of the powerful Medici family.



Giacomo Costantino Beltrami

Book by Augusto P. Miceli

In 1797, at the young age of eighteen, Beltrami enlisted in the army of the Cisalpine Republic. The northern Italian republic was at that time governed by France, and Beltrami was able to use his position to become a Mason and work his way into the government of Napoleon Bonaparte, spending his early career working as a magistrate within the Napoleonic judicial system. Upon Napoleon's defeat in 1815 and

considering his Masonic membership and French connections, he was soon at odds with the papal government, which had suspicions he had conspired against the Italian state, which had regained control of the Cisalpine Republic. This political pressure and personal tragedy (the loss of his close friend, the Contessa Giulia Spada dei Medici) spurred him upon a self-imposed exile from his native land. He toured Europe before sailing from Liverpool to Philadelphia in October, 1822. He set off to visit several North American cities, including Washington, D.C., where he met President James Monroe, who inspired in him "an impression of the deepest respect and veneration." After meeting Major Lawrence Taliaferro, an Indian agent, Beltrami embarked on a personal mission to find the source of the Mississippi River.



Giacomo Costantino Beltrami, with hair a bit longer, detail from a painting by Enrico Scuri, 1861

In December 1823, soon after his arrival in New Orleans, Beltrami presented a manuscript of his adventures to New Orleans printer and publisher, Benjamin Levy, whose offices were located at 86 Royal Street. Appearing in print on April 12, 1824, Beltrami's book (written in French) was entitled *La Decouverte des Sources du Mississippi ...* , or *The Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi ...*

THIS PRICE CURRENT will be published every Saturday, at 9 o'clock A. M. at Benj. Levy's Printing Office, 86 Royal-street, by JOHN WILIE, at \$12 per annum, payable half yearly—Distant subscribers will pay in advance.

New Orleans Price-Current and Commercial Intelligencer, Jan. 24, 1824, mentioning "Benj. Levy's Printing Office, 86 Royal street"

Beltrami's published account proved controversial. It told the story of how, on August 28, 1823, he had discovered the source of the Mississippi and the Red River of the North. It was a lake "about 3 miles large," he wrote confidently, which "has the shape of a heart and talks to the soul". He named it Giulia (Lake Julia) in honor of his departed friend, Giulia Spada dei Medici, and named eight other nearby lakes after her children. The rest of the world, however, either disregarded or ridiculed Beltrami's claim. The Mississippi's true source at Lake Itasca remained unknown to European-Americans until verified by an 1832 expedition led by American geographer and geologist Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (March 28, 1793 – December 10, 1864).

The title of the Beltrami's biography by Augusto Miceli, *The Man With The RED UMBRELLA*, derives from the fact that as Beltrami thrust himself deep into the wilds of the Minnesota wilderness, his "red umbrella" served a two-fold purpose. First, it was extremely useful in protecting his canoe and his supplies from both the rain and hot sun. Secondly, unlike the red umbrella of the unfortunate "Baby", this one served Beltrami, Miceli wrote, as "a passport to safety," a strange device that truly mystified the Chippewa and Sioux Indians. Upon setting eyes upon the unusual implement, it left these Native Americans in a state of bewildered awe.

The umbrella, or parasol, as the names imply, was originally used for protection from the sun's rays, but sometime in the late 1600s or early

1700s the idea of waterproof umbrellas emerged. Oiled silk fabric made the umbrellas difficult to open when wet, and the wood components were heavy and inconvenient. Improvements came along, and by the early 1700s it was a fairly common sight to see women in England and France carrying umbrellas as protection from the rain. It took a while, however, for men to protect themselves in this fashion. Until the middle to late 1700s, men still viewed the umbrella as "effeminate." Customs eventually changed by the time Giacomo Beltrami visited the United States.

Commenting on Beltrami in his "Pie's a la Mode" column in the *Times-Picayune*, dated May 12, 1974, "Pie" Dufour wrote that the interesting Italian explorer had "an alert mind, boundless energy, and a gnawing curiosity about many things. He was short-tempered, sensitive to insult, real or imaginary, and somewhat boastful. Rash, brave, determined, Beltrami's quixotic qualities made him one of the most colorful figures on the American frontier."

So it appears there have been two "quixotic" characters, both having experienced confrontations with Native Americans, and both toting "red umbrellas," who made their mark on the history of New Orleans.

Additional journeys by Beltrami included a visit to Mexico where he collected local flora, art, and manuscripts, including a text that translated the Aztec language into Latin. After a repeat visit to New Orleans in 1825, he was in New York that November, hob-nobbing with elites at celebrations surrounding the opening of the Erie Canal. Following trips to Haiti, Beltrami traveled to London in late 1826. Moving to Paris two years later, he joined several scientific societies through the early 1830s. In 1834, he was in Heidelberg, Germany; and finally he returned to Italy for his later years tending to his house and garden, calling himself "*Fra Giacomo*". He died there in 1855.

The state of Minnesota has remembered Giacomo Costantino Beltrami, the intrepid yet mistaken explorer, by naming a county in his honor, as well as a lake, a town and the Beltrami State Forest.

This determined Italian, in connection with his explorations in North America, collected a number of Native-American artifacts, including two indigenous (probably Dakota) flutes, one of which is the oldest extant American Indian flute. These items are now in the collection of the *Museo Civico di Scienze Naturali* in Bergamo, Italy, as is Beltrami's historic *ombrello rosso* (that's "red umbrella" in Italian). It is symbolic, wrote Roberto Bonzio in his book *Italiani di Frontiera*, "di un

italiano inquieto (of a restless Italian) dall'insaziabile voglia di scoprire (with the insatiable desire to discover). As for the umbrella: *Un tempo rosso, oggi è ingiallito dal tempo. Ma è ancora intatto.* (At one time red, it is now yellowed by time. But it's still intact.)”



The Museo Civico di Scienze Naturali in Bergamo, Italy

In his travels, Beltrami found the United States to be “most civilized, precisely because (it is) not over-civilized.” It is doubtful that “Baby,” the tragic dancing master, would agree; but he and Beltrami, two truly quixotic characters, would probably concur that a bold new country required a bold statement, and a “red umbrella” certainly did that.

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New Orleans Nostalgia
“The Men With The Red Umbrellas”
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