



A Forgotten Hero, His Bust and an Exhibit

By Robert G. Freeland

Every January 8, we commemorate the Battle of New Orleans at Chalmette during the War of 1812.

This story is about a little known, almost forgotten, New Orleanian, and his bust in the Cabildo.

His name is Renato Beluche. He was a friend of Jean Laffite, he fought under Andrew Jackson during the Battle of New Orleans, and later under Simon Bolivar for South American Independence. Born in the French Quarter, he is buried with Bolivar in the Pantheon of Heroes of Venezuelan Independence in Caracas, Venezuela.

The Louisiana State Museum (LSM) and the Friends of the Cabildo (FOC) have strong connections to Beluche. The LSM's Madame John's Legacy on Dumaine Street is the site where Beluche was born. The only known bust of Beluche was donated to the LSM in 1953. The bust was restored with Friends of the Cabildo member donations in time for the Bicentennial of the Battle of New Orleans Exhibit in 2015. The bust is on permanent display in a place of honor in the Battle of New Orleans exhibit on the 2nd floor of the Cabildo.

A FORGOTTEN HERO

Rene Beluche, from Tours, France, arrived in New Orleans about 1763. In 1768 he married Rosa Laporte of New Orleans. Their son Renato was born on December 15, 1780 in a house that was destroyed by the Fire of 1788. That house is the LSM's Madame John's Legacy.

When Renato was 3, the house was sold, and the family moved to a plantation that was part of what became the Chalmette Battlefield in St Bernard Parish. Renato's father died in 1788.

Many of Renato's Laporte relations were involved in shipping, and they took him into their business. Renato rose from their cabin boy to pilots' mate on Spanish ships during the Haitian Revolution. After the Louisiana Purchase by the United States in 1803 Renato continued in New Orleans shipping, serving as Captain on ships sailing to various ports.

The period from 1803 to 1814 was one of much conflict in the Gulf and Caribbean. Besides the Haitian Revolution, France and England were at war and imposed embargos on the shipping of neutral countries, including the United States. Adding to these wars, Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1808 triggered the beginning of the Wars for Latin American Independence lasting until the late 1820's. In addition to their regular Navies, Letters of Marque were issued by each of the belligerents. It was not unusual for a privateer to sail with more than one commission. We know that Renato Beluche, using both his name and aliases, was active as a privateer serving under various Letters of Marque: Pierre Brugman from Saint Martin (France) and Renato Beluche for the United States against England and as

Beluche for Cartagena against Spain. In fact, Renato was the only one of the few New Orleans US authorized privateers who brought his cargo back to the city.

At some point in this period Renato's became involved with Jean and Pierre Laffite and their smuggling operations in Barataria. Possibly related through the Laporte family, the Laffites and Beluche knew each other from early in their lives.

As per William C. Davis in his *The Pirates Laffite*, the Baratarians were operating a court of admiralty on Grand Isle, legitimizing their captures, at least in their own minds. It was faster and more profitable to smuggle their goods into Louisiana instead.

In 1812 Louisiana had become the 18th State with William Claiborne as Governor. His wife Susana was Beluches' cousin. Claiborne could not ignore the diplomatic problems caused with Spain, with whom the United States was not at war. In 1814, the US Secretary of the Navy sent Commodore Daniel Tod Patterson to disperse the Baratarians.

The War of 1812 and Andrew Jackson resulted in the next phase of Renato's career. With the defeat of Napoleon, the British were able to focus on the United States, with New Orleans as their target. Offers by the British were made to Laffite to become their ally. Instead, Laffite and Jackson negotiated an amnesty for the privateers in exchange for men and munitions for the defense of New Orleans.

Jackson consolidated his forces in Chalmette. He called Beluche and Dominique You to command Battery #3 with two 24-pound field pieces, and added a 32 pounder. They were excellent artillerymen and highly effective during the various engagements with the British. After the Battle, Jackson issued a congratulatory message to his army in which he specifically commends Beluche and You.

We know that Beluche was not in New Orleans to hear Jackson's commendation – that day on his ship "La Popa", he was capturing a Spanish ship off the coast of Cuba! To learn more of Beluche's exploits as a hero in the Independence of South America one must read the out of print "Renato Beluche – Smuggler, Privateer and Patriot" by Jane Lucas de Grummond. The Davis book also covers much of the Beluche story.

Beluche became one of Simon Bolivar's favorite captains. He became the 4th and final Admiral of Gran Colombia, serving in Panama until 1832 after Bolivar's death in 1830 and the break-up of Gran Colombia into what are today Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama.

For the next 30 years of his life, Beluche remained active in the shipping business. At one point he was exiled from Venezuela after a dispute with President Jose Antonio Paez, a hero of Independence, but a political enemy of Bolivar. Apparently, Beluche insulted Paez at an event by yelling out "Viva Bolivar" when Paez was introduced to the audience! During his exile we know he visited New Orleans and Panama (where he had left a wife and a son Blas Beluche).

Renato Beluche ended his days, pardoned by the Venezuelan government, in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela. Here he had another wife and family and 3 children. He died on October 4, 1860, and was buried in Puerto Cabello.

But great men's stories do not always end with their death. Seventy five years later, in 1963, the Venezuelan Senate bestowed Renato Beluche with the honor of being buried in the Pantheon of Heroes.

THE BUST

In 1951 Isidro Beluche Mora, great-grandson of Renato Beluche, commissioned Panamanian artist Jose M. Ulloa to create the bust for \$900.00. A portrait of Beluche in the National Gallery of Heroes in Venezuela was used as a model for the bust. It was shipped to New Orleans from Panama in 1952 and presented to the Louisiana State Museum by the Society of the War of 1812 and member Isidore Beluche Mora in a ceremony at the Cabildo on January 8, 1953.

A presentation ceremony took place on Jan. 8, 1953. Isidro Beluche Mora, great-grandson of Renato Beluche, Henri Mortimer Favrot, president of the War of 1812 Society, and Ben B.

Mathews, briefly director of the LSM are visible in a single photograph in the collection, suggesting that this was not a grand event. The War of 1812 Society did have a dance, also on Jan. 8, 1953 - though not to honor the bust or Panama specifically.

The bust was displayed in Madame John's Legacy until 1967. After this it was carefully stored in LSM facilities for almost 45 years waiting to be resurrected.

The Louisiana State Museum planned on an exhibit for the Bicentennial of the Battle of New Orleans in 2015. Items such as the uniform that Andrew Jackson wore in New Orleans and his official portrait were to be brought in from Washington D.C. for one year. In addition, many other items from the LSM holdings, as well as loans by descendants of the men who fought under Jackson during the Battle of New Orleans, were to be part of a permanent exhibit.

Renato's bust was earmarked as a possible item to go on exhibit. The problem was that the bust had to be restored before going on display. Even though carefully maintained, 45 years in storage took a toll on the features of the bust and LSM staff estimated that proper restoration and other associated costs of about \$10,000 to \$12,000. The first step was to restore the bust at an estimated cost of about \$3,000. If these funds were available, the Beluche Bust would be prioritized as one of the items to go on display. Friends of the Cabildo were part of the planning process for the exhibit and committed funds to the overall costs of the exhibit. The inclusion of the Beluche Bust was a separate project, so a special request to members was made to raise funds. Initial member donations were enough to begin the project, and the restoration began.

As the overall plans for the exhibit were formalized, LSM staff determined the true final costs of exhibiting the bust. With this information, the FOC reached out once again to the membership and donors and members stepped up to put Renato Beluche is again in a place of honor in an LSM exhibit. A small ceremony unveiling the restored bust was held in the Cabildo on December 15, 2014 (Beluche's birthday). Present were FOC and LSM staff as well as the Venezuelan Consul and many FOC members.

Interested in learning more? Visit the Cabildo, open Tuesday – Friday from 10:00-4:00. As always Members get in for free!