

Renato Beluche (1780-1860)

Renato Beluche, born in New Orleans on December 15, 1780, was the fourth child born to the merchant René Beluche of Tours, France, and Rosa Laporte, a native of Orleans Parish. The names of their first three children were recorded in the St. Louis Cathedral Archives, New Orleans, as Rose Emilie Beluge, Jacques Beluche (he may have been named for his grandfather) and Maria Belouche.

Renato was seven years old when his father died, leaving a pregnant wife, five children (Francisco Basilio was born in 1786); and, as far as property was concerned, one heavily mortgaged plantation with several slaves. Selina, Renato's youngest sister, was born five months later.

Carefree childhood was over for Renato. He went to sea, and during 1801-1802 he learned the art of naval warfare on Governor Casa Calvo's flagship Catalina. New Orleans Customs Records for 1804 list Beluche as a citizen of the United States and, from 1805 to 1809, as master of sailing ships for Bartholomé Basque, then for Etienne DeBon, John Michael Fortier, and Archibald Gracie. All of these were merchants of New Orleans.

In 1809 Beluche bought the pilot-boat schooner Camillus and hired Joseph Duro and a crew of seven to sail it to Havana. The Camillus sailed on June 18, and on its return to New Orleans, Captain Duro sued Beluche for wages at \$80 per month--and a padded expense account. Benedict Fabregos testified that Beluche not only had no money, but "on several occasions borrowed money from the captain for his own private use." The court ordered Beluche to pay Captain Duro \$365.44; \$249 less than the bill presented by Captain Duro.

This episode taught Beluche a lesson. Three months later he sailed the Camillus to Pensacola and sold it there. This was easy to do since Beluche's sister Rose Emilie was married to the popular merchant Vicente Ordozgoity who, in 1812, was mayor of Pensacola. When Beluche returned to New Orleans he had eight seamen certify on the back of the Crew List "that he paid our passage home to New Orleans at his own expense, and that we have been satisfied by said Master, of all demands against the said Schooner Camillus and her Officers."

Beluche's career as ship captain continued without any unusual interruption until his second voyage to Bordeaux in the Jenny (Peter Lauve, owner). The Jenny was detained at Plymouth the month before the United States declared war on England. This experience must have galled the volatile mariner from Louisiana. When he returned to New Orleans he accepted command of the schooner Spy (Etienne De Bon, owner), the only successful United States privateer of the six commissioned at New Orleans during the War of 1812. On November 17, 1812, the Spy captured the English ship Jane, carrying a rich cargo of mahogany and logwood from Honduras. Beluche sent his prize to New Orleans and on January 11, 1813, his agent, John B. Laporte, filed libel. Less than a month later (February 1) the court ordered the Jane and her cargo sold and the proceeds turned over to Beluche.

Meanwhile, Beluche had sailed to Cartagena on the north coast of New Granada (Venezuela), and offered himself, his ship, and crew for service in Cartagena's navy (Cartagena had declared herself an independent republic in 1811). Beluche's service record (see "Notes and Documents") states that within nine months he became the owner of three privateers: La Popa, the Piñeras, and the General Bolívar. Not only did he sail under Cartagenan letters-of-marque, but many of Jean Laffite's privateers sailed under such commissions which Beluche brought in large bundles to Barataria Bay.

During the next two years Beluche scuttled more than a million dollars worth of Spanish shipping in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. He was back in New Orleans in time to become one of the star gunners in the Battle of New Orleans (December 23, 1814 to January 8, 1815). Then he returned to Cartagena, where the Spaniards were beseiging that port by land and sea. Beluche slipped into the harbor in spite of the blockade, then out again, and sailed to Jamaica in La Popa, said to be the fastest sailing vessel in the Gulf or the Caribbean.

On December 19, 1815, with Simón Bolívar on board, Beluche sailed from Kingston to the port of Les Cayes, in southern Haiti, and there helped to organize a squadron of seven vessels which was to spearhead the liberation of half a continent. Beluche defeated a royalist fleet in a naval battle off the eastern coast of the island of Margarita on May 2, 1816, and soon Bolívar was able to land in Venezuela. The war for independence continued for eight more years, and Beluche's role in those wars was fabulous.

His voyages on the sea of matrimony are also worthy of note. The Journal of the Louisiana Senate shows that his first wife, Marie Magdaleine Victoire Milleret, native of Port-au-Prince, petitioned the senate for a divorce; the Bill was put through the Senate on February 27, 1822, and again on March 5, 1822. That day the Bill was amended and read for a third time, and then it was sent to the Assembly. However, Marie Magdaleine died on March 14, 1822, aged 40. She may have been barren and petitioned for divorce because Beluche already had two children by "María Merced Boudri" of New Orleans. When Beluche married his "Mezelle" in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, (November 17, 1824) "all the necessary dispensations were proclaimed to make legitimate two children previously born to the couple: the first, María Reneta, born six years before on an island; and the second, Ana Colombia, four years of age." A son, Diego, was born in 1828.

Meanwhile, Beluche was active in the navy of Bolívar's Colombia. This state, in existence from 1819 to 1830, included Ecuador, New Granada (the present Colombia) and Venezuela. Beluche was promoted to Brigadier General on May 12, 1827. There were no more admirals in the Colombian Navy after Luis Brion and José Padilla; perhaps admirals were expected to fight on land as well as on the sea. In 1828 Beluche was appointed commanding officer of the First Marine Department, with headquarters at Puerto Cabello.

At this time the Peruvian Navy was threatening Ecuador, and Bolívar sent letters to José Antonio Páez, Governor of Venezuela, urging

him to send Beluche to the Pacific. Bolívar preferred General Beluche above all the other navel officers to head the Pacific Squadron of Colombia "because of his ability and enthusiasm."

Beluche left Puerto Cabello, August 25, 1829, in the 60-gun frigate Colombia; 161 days later, having made only one stop--for 14 days in Rio de Janeiro--he dropped anchor off Puná, the island at the mouth of the Rio Guayas on which Guayaquil is located. The date was February 1, 1830. Ecuador was already breaking loose from Colombia, as Venezuela had done the year before under Páez; and in April Bolívar resigned his power. In that month Beluche left Guayaquil for Panama. It was summer and he was forty-nine. On the island of Taboga in Panama harbor he established a home with Candelaria Esquivel. Subsequently he became involved in a revolution in Panama; his side lost, and after he was expelled from Panama a son, Blas Beluche, was born to Candelaria (February 3, 1832).

Beluche returned to his home in Puerto Cabello and started ship service between that port and La Guayra. In 1835 Beluche was on the losing side of another revolution--this time against the government of Páez. General Beluche lost his rank and privileges and was exiled, but after a few years he returned to Puerto Cabello, and Congress reinstated him in his titles.

Beluche's wife, Mezelle, died in 1840 while he was in exile. On February 7, 1846 the Caracas newspaper El Liberal listed commodities on the American brig Columbia, which had arrived at La Guaira from Baltimore after a passage of twelve days. Among the items destined for Puerto Cabello were "1 marble monument and 2 boxes of iron grill-work for Señor R. Beluche." The monument was in the form of a little tower. On it Beluche had inscribed "A la memoria de María Mezelle Beaudri de Beluche. Fallecio a la edad de 49 años el 13 de Sept. de 1840."

Beluche had the burial plot neatly paved before planting the monument, and then the whole was inclosed with the iron grill-work fence. When Beluche died he was buried beside Mezelle. A small slab in the paving was inscribed:

General Renato Beluche
Octubre 4, 1860
79 años

On Friday, July 19, 1963, the remains of Beluche--a few small bones and a little dust--were exhumed and placed in a sarcophagus. During the ceremony bugles played a prayer. Then a naval and military escort took the sarcophagus to the Naval Base Chapel where another ceremony ended with an oration by Isidro Beluche of Panamá, descendant to Blas Beluche. A round-the-clock honor guard of four sailors was maintained until Monday, July 22, when, at 8 A.M., the sarcophagus was put on board a destroyer and taken to La Guaira. A funeral cortege took the sarcophagus to the Panteón in Caracas where the remains of Renato Beluche were interred in company with those of Bolívar and the other immortals of Venezuela.