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Giacomo Constantine Beltrami

The student of Iowa history owes much to the private explorers, both foreign and American, for the contributions they have made to our knowledge of Iowaland prior to the beginning of permanent white settlement in 1833. Too often the contributions of these adventurous souls have been overshadowed, and hence overlooked, because of the magnitude of such expeditions as those of Lewis and Clarke and Zebulon M. Pike. And yet, several of these adventurous foreign travelers have left an invaluable record of their wanderings when Iowa was very young.

Outstanding among these early travelers was Giacomo Constantine Beltrami, an Italian exile and judge, who journeyed through Europe in 1822 and then crossed the tempestuous Atlantic and wrote his first letter from Philadelphia on February 28, 1823. This letter (as were all his European and American letters) was addressed to his friend Countess Compagnoni, born Passeri, who appears to be a confidante of the voluble Italian.

At Pittsburgh he met Major Lawrence Taliaferro, who was Indian Agent at Fort Snelling from 1819 to 1840. According to Taliaferro:

I was in Washington in 1823 relative to my official connection with the northwestern tribes of Minnesota; whilst on my return, in March, to my post, I found a note, or card, at a hotel in Pittsburgh, from Beltrami, asking permission to bear me company to the Falls of St. Anthony. When I saw him, his presence and manner at once obtained my confidence, and leave was granted to do so.

What of the background of this exuberant Italian? According to Taliaferro: "Beltrami was six feet high, of commanding appearance and some forty-five years of age; proud of bearing, and quick of temper, high spirited, but always the gentleman."

In Vol. II of *Minnesota Historical Society Collections*, A. J. Hill wrote of Beltrami in 1867:

. . . Constantine was bred to the law; and although he possessed a restless spirit, desirous of adventure, and that when he was just ten years old the great public commotions, that afterward shook all Europe were beginning, yet his natural talent prompted him to the acquisition of the Latin and Greek literature, to which afterward, from his experience in public affairs, was added a rich store of geographical knowledge, and, finally, a familiarity with the modern languages. The courage and adventurous will that shone in him at forty-four impelled him, in his youthful vigor, to abandon the paternal house for military affairs; and being brought to the notice of men in high office, friends of the family, and shortly opening the way by his own abilities, he became vice inspector of the armies; but,

disgusted with occupations so far below his higher aspirations, he returned to civil pursuits. At the age of twenty-eight, in 1807, he became chancellor of the French departments of the Stura and the Tanaro, and soon after Judge of the court at Udine. There, by his fine intellect and untiring zeal, he gained the praises of his superiors, who testified to him their high satisfactions, as appears by many of their letters . . .

After holding various judicial posts for which he showed unusual ability, Beltrami became enmeshed in the dark political intrigues that were shaking France, Italy, and Austria. He retired to his estates at Filotrano, whence he made occasional excursions to Naples, Rome, and Florence, between the years 1816 and 1819. He appears to have become involved in the Carbonari, a revolutionary group organized about 1811 to establish a united Italian Republic, and was exiled in 1821.

It was while awaiting transportation up the Mississippi from St. Louis that Beltrami became entranced with the idea of visiting the Indian tribes of the northwest and perhaps discovering the source of the Mississippi. At that very time, the steamboat *Virginia* was taking on passengers and supplies for the military posts on the Upper Mississippi at the St. Louis levee. Should she succeed in her voyage, the *Virginia* would be the first steamboat to navigate the waters of the Upper Mississippi! The prospect of going on this adventure was anticipated with keen relish by Beltrami.

On April 21, 1823, the *Virginia* backed out

from the St. Louis levee and churned upstream.

In addition to Beltrami and Taliaferro, a woman missionary and a Kentucky family, bound for the lead mines at Galena, were the only white passengers aboard the 109-ton sternwheeler. The *Virginia* had been chartered primarily to carry government supplies to the posts on the Upper Mississippi—Fort Edwards, Fort Armstrong, Fort Crawford, and Fort St. Anthony, renamed Fort Snelling in 1825.

There were only 121,797 inhabitants in Illinois and Missouri in 1820. There were a few huts at Clarksville and Louisiana, the northernmost towns in Missouri. The region north of the new state of Missouri was referred to by Beltrami as "Savage Lands."

Perhaps the most colorful passenger for Beltrami was Great Eagle, a Sauk chief, who had been prevailed upon to board the *Virginia* while his fellow tribesmen walked along the banks. Great Eagle left the boat after a dispute with the pilot of the *Virginia*. When the *Virginia* reached Fort Edwards, Great Eagle was there exchanging furs with the traders of the Southwest Company. Since Fort Edwards was located opposite the mouth of the Des Moines River in Illinois, Beltrami's journal of the Iowa country begins with his visit to the Sauk village at this point.

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