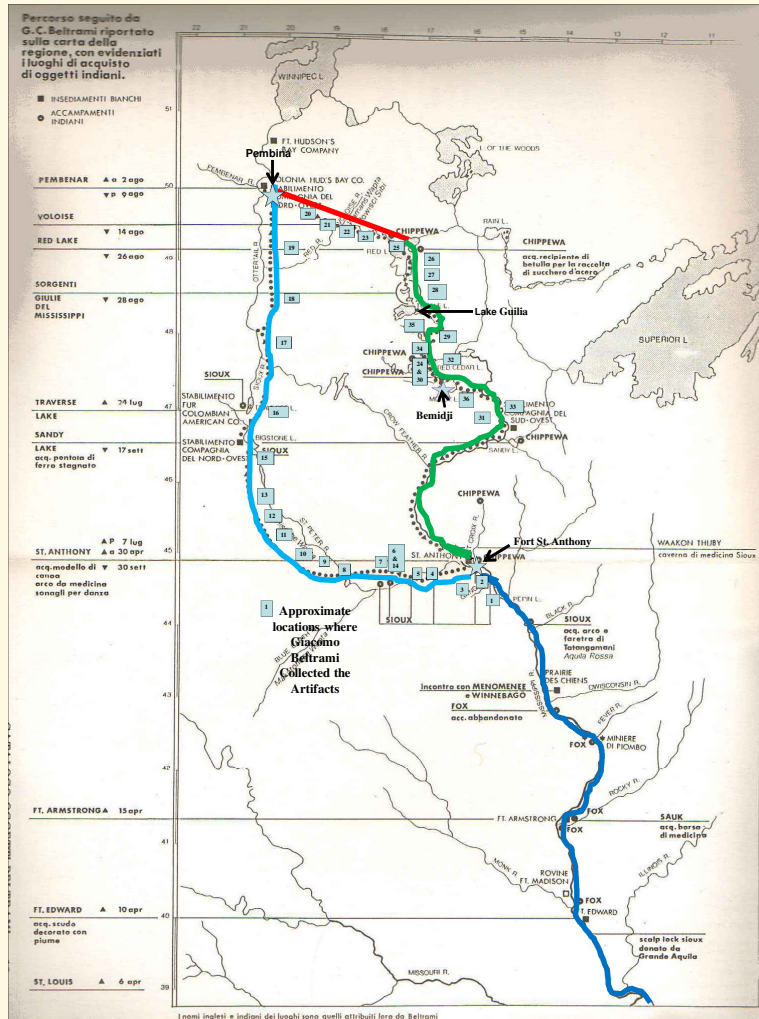


Giacomo Beltrami: The “Accidental Tourist” in Minnesota



Presented by Robert Bell. Faculty Mentors for the project: Dr. Debra Barker and Dr. Larry Martin both from American Indian Studies

Below is a map of the route that Giacomo Costantino Beltrami took to locate the source of the Mississippi River. The different phases of his journey are color-coded to explain what happened during each phase.



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The Different Phases of Beltrami's Journey

The first phase of Beltrami's journey began in St. Louis. He decided to go to Fort St. Anthony (later Fort Snelling) instead of New Orleans after meeting and befriending Lawrence Taliaferro, the Federal Indian Agent in Minnesota, who was heading to Fort St. Anthony.

During the second phase of Beltrami's journey, he accompanied Major Stephen Long's survey expedition to find the source of the St. Peters (Minnesota) River and establish the true border between the United States and Canada. This phase started at Fort St. Anthony and ended at the settlement of Pembina.

At Pembina, Beltrami decided to set out on his own for the third phase of his journey. He convinced two Bois Brule Ojibwe Indians to guide him to Red Lake and to show him the source of the Mississippi River. After three days the dogs that were being used to pull the wagon full of the artifacts Beltrami collected were exhausted and the two guides told him they were leaving because there were Sioux Indians in the area and they feared for their lives as they arrived at the Thief River.

Two other Bois Brule Ojibwe Indians arrived and Beltrami convinced them to guide him to Red Lake. They loaded all of the artifacts Beltrami had collected into a canoe and went down the Thief River. When the party reached the confluence of the Red Lake and Thief Rivers the two guides left Beltrami alone in the Minnesota Wilderness. He then wandered in the wilderness dragging the canoe full of artifacts, because he did not know how to use a canoe, for the next four days along the Red Lake River. On this phase of the journey he had a large red umbrella that he used to keep the rain and sunlight off of the artifacts he had collected.

At Red Lake Beltrami looked back at the wilderness and said "I have experienced total solitude and quiet. I now will reenter civilization and probably will never experience this again; I feel I have lost something." He went on to say "I, at this moment fully comprehended why the Indians consider themselves happier than cultivated nations, and far superior to them."

The last phase of Giacomo Beltrami's journey was spent in the Red Lake, Leech Lake, Lake Traverse (Lake Bemidji), Cedar Lake, and Cass Lake area. Here he collected more artifacts and believed he had discovered the source of the Mississippi at a lake he named Lake Guilia (Julia). He named this lake after his late beloved platonic friend back in Italy, Giulia Spada de Medici. However, Lake Julia was not the source of the Mississippi River. Henry Schoolcraft was the first Euro-American to identify the source, after being led to the headwaters by Ojibwe guide Ozawindib in 1832.

Beltrami named eight lakes in the area between Lake Guilia and Lake Traverse after members of his family, however, there is no record of which lakes were given names, or what the names were. Before Beltrami returned to Fort St. Anthony he claims to have averted a conflict between the Sioux and the Ojibwe. Cloudy Weather, the chief of the village on Lake Traverse, had lost his son-in-law during a raid of the Sioux. He asked Giacomo Beltrami his advice in the matter because he discovered that Beltrami was friends with Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian Agent for their tribe. Beltrami told him to consult with Taliaferro, so Cloudy Weather accompanied Beltrami back to Fort St. Anthony to meet with Taliaferro.

Upon arriving at Fort St. Anthony, Giacomo Beltrami had a big surprise. A Sioux scouting party that followed him back to Fort St. Anthony informed him that the red umbrella he carried with him, to keep the sun off of the artifacts he had collected, had saved his life and the lives of the Ojibwe living in the village on Red Lake. The Sioux Scouts said that they were not sure what the red umbrella stood for, and they were afraid that Beltrami was signaling reinforcements to hold off an attack by the Sioux. If the Sioux would have known that Beltrami was only using his umbrella to keep the sun off of the artifacts, they would have attacked him and the village. In a lucky twist of fate, the red umbrella saved Beltrami's life.

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