

This Day in History... August 17, 1807

“Fulton’s Folly” Makes First Commercially Successful Steamboat Voyage

At the behest of his critics, Robert Fulton launched his steamboat from New York harbor on August 17, 1807.

Born on November 14, 1765, in Little Britain, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Robert Fulton aspired to become a painter from an early age. After his father died, he moved to Philadelphia and painted portraits and landscapes and provided technical drawings for houses and machinery to provide for his mother and siblings. While in Philadelphia, he met Benjamin Franklin and several businessmen who encouraged him to travel to Europe to further his art training.



Issued for Fulton's 200th birthday.



Fulton studied art under West before becoming an inventor.

Fulton arrived in England in 1786 and lived with Benjamin West, who had been friends with his father. While Fulton received several commissions for portraits and landscapes, he liked to experiment with inventions in his free time. He also realized his artistic ambitions might not be fruitful. This led Fulton to further develop the idea for tub-boat canals that used inclined planes or vertical lifts instead of locks. Such designs had already been used in some parts of the world, and were helpful when the water supply was limited. In 1794, Fulton obtained a patent in England for a ramp lift design. He also began researching the use of steam for boats and patented a dredging machine.

Fulton moved to Paris in 1797, where he learned French, German, mathematics, and chemistry. He then started designing torpedoes and submarines. In 1800, he tested what is sometimes called the first practical submarine, the *Nautilus*, which went underwater for 17 minutes. Working with US Ambassador to France Robert Livingston, Fulton began designing steamboats, but put that work aside for a time to design the first modern naval torpedoes and other weapons for England during their war with France.

Fulton returned to America in 1806 and resumed work on a steamboat with Livingston. While others had invented steamboats before him, they were often considered dangerous and nothing more than a novelty. Fulton believed it could prove to be a successful business venture, and built a 150-foot-long ship that would make him famous. Critics dubbed the boat “Fulton’s Folly,” believing it wouldn’t make the trip.



From the Louisiana Purchase issue



Stamp issued for the Hudson-Fulton Celebration picturing Fulton's ship the Clermont.

On the afternoon of August 17, 1807, Fulton and a group of passengers boarded his ship *North River Steamboat* (later named the *Clermont*) in New York City, bound for Albany, 150 miles up the Hudson River. Shortly after leaving the dock, the boat stopped suddenly. Passengers and spectators willingly shared their doubts in the boat’s abilities. Fulton calmly went below the deck, found the problem, and easily fixed it. The boat then chugged along at a leisurely five miles per hour without any other incidents. They arrived in Albany (after a stopover at Livingston’s home) in a record 32 hours. While many had their doubts, Fulton proved the commercial viability of steamboats, which would rule American waterways for the next half-century.

After that success, Fulton was made part of the Erie Canal Commission. During this time, he also worked on another boat, *New Orleans*, which he took on a long trip down the Ohio River. The journey was through relatively uncharted territory and the fact that he was able to get the boat down the river and back home was a major milestone.

In early 1815, Fulton was walking home on the frozen Hudson River when one of his friends fell through the ice. Fulton rescued his friend, but was soaked in the cold water and caught pneumonia. He then contracted tuberculosis and died on February 24, 1815, in New York City.

Several towns and other locations have been named for Fulton throughout the country. There have also been five US Navy ships named for him and he was honored as part of the Hudson-Fulton Celebration in 1909.



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