

Steamboat John



In school I was taught certain historical facts: Thomas Edison invented the light bulb; Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin; and Robert Fulton invented the steamboat. What I wasn't taught was that there might be another story... one that involved an ancestor.

John Fitch was born in 1743 and raised in what some have called an unhappy home life. He followed that some twenty years later with an unhappy marriage before becoming what might be best described as "a wanderer." He abandoned his wife and child and with limited formal education, became a self-taught watchmaker, turned gunsmith when the American revolution required that skill. His alignment with the revolutionary forces led to his property being destroyed by the British. He wandered a bit more and after being captured by Indians and enduring a year-long imprisonment, he found himself penniless in Warminster Pennsylvania. It was here he first began developing the idea of a steam powered engine. The year was 1782.

He built prototypes, found and lost investors, and even though his designs and resulting vessels proved mechanically successful, he never managed to generate enough financial "steam" to propel his ideas forward. Having hit a brick wall

in the US, he traveled to France and Britain to try to raise capital there but returned dejected and distraught.

He died in 1798, thinking himself a failure. As he wrote in his journal, "The day will come when some more powerful man will get fame and riches from my invention; but nobody will believe that poor John Fitch can do anything worthy of attention." That "some more powerful man" he prophesied about was Robert Fulton who, in 1807, would revolutionize river traffic by introducing a steamboat (the Clermont) that took passengers some 300 miles along the Hudson.

A legislative committee ruled in 1817 that Fulton's ship was identical to the designs that were patented by Fitch back in 1791. It was learned that, in 1793 while in France, Fulton was given access to Fitch's designs as well as the time to study them. John Fitch, the true "inventor" of the steamboat, is the third cousin to my sons (seven times removed).

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