

# Full Steam Ahead!



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## Robert Fulton ushers in a new era of transportation

By Ann Pedtke



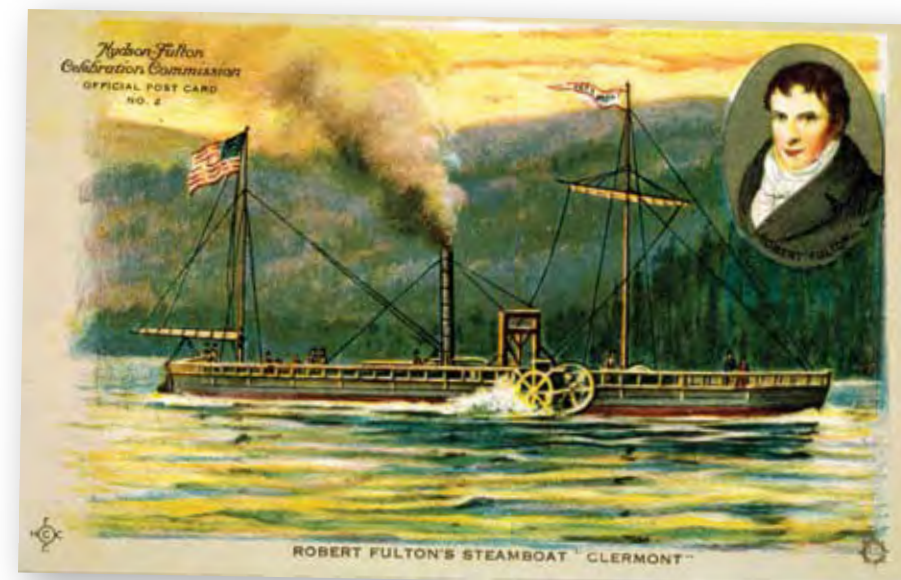
Painting by John Trumbull

**The Hudson River has long been a site of exploration and discovery.** In 1807, almost two hundred years after Henry Hudson sailed up the river in the *Half Moon*, another ship made a historic journey on the Hudson. Unlike the *Half Moon*, the *Clermont* was an ungainly steamboat that spewed smoke and threatened to explode on the water before the eyes of fearful spectators. Popularly known as “Fulton’s Folly,” the ship was an unlikely candidate for making history. And its designer Robert Fulton, an inventor whose earlier steamboat had sunk immediately upon being launched, was an unlikely figure to change the course of river travel.

The *Clermont* itself became a profitable packet boat, making regular trips up and down the river carrying mail, passengers, and goods.

Robert Fulton was born in 1765 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the son of Irish immigrants. He demonstrated his mechanical aptitude at an early age by designing hand-operated paddlewheels, which he attached to small fishing boats. His artistic talents, however, proved as fine as his mechanical skills. After briefly apprenticing with a jeweler in Philadelphia, Fulton left his engineering pursuits behind and traveled to London to begin a career in painting under the tutelage of American-born artist Benjamin West.

Though he practiced portraiture with some success in England and France, Fulton was soon drawn back into engineering and navigation. He became involved in the construction of a canal, and subsequently obtained patents for mills, dredging machines, and various types of watercraft. Fulton then moved on to experiment with steam power and submarine and torpedo technology. Although his first steamboat sank to the bottom of the Seine—and his early submarine torpedoes could not sink anything at all—Fulton remained undaunted. In 1806 he decided to return to the United States to build a commercial steamboat for use on the Hudson River between Albany and New York City.



At the time, many other American inventors were experimenting with steam transportation. In 1784, James Rumsey traveled up the Potomac River in a steamboat powered by water jets. In 1788, John Fitch built a steamboat propelled by vertical paddles, which successfully chugged twenty miles from Philadelphia to Burlington. But these attempts had not proved steam a practical means of transportation. Noisy, dirty, and operating at speeds that could be matched by wagon travel, steamboats were seen by the public as little more than an interesting oddity.

When Fulton’s new steamship—officially dubbed the *North River Steam Ship*, though later known as the *Clermont*—slowly made its way up the Hudson on the afternoon of August 17, 1807, everyone expected another disastrous spectacle. The steamboat was an unsettling sight for anyone accustomed to regular sailing vessels: a witness recorded that “the whole country talked of nothing but the sea-monster, belching forth fire and smoke.” But to the amazement of the crowds gathered on the shore, the *Clermont*, equipped with large paddlewheels and a modified Watt engine, ultimately stayed afloat, and went on to complete the 150-mile

journey to Albany in just 32 hours. The era of steam transportation had begun.

Though squabbles ensued over patents and navigation rights, Fulton’s steamboat was an unmatched success. The *Clermont*’s achievement sparked an increase in Hudson River steamboats, including many built under Fulton’s supervision. The *Clermont* itself became a profitable packet boat, making regular trips up and down the river carrying mail, passengers, and goods. A ticket from New York City to Albany cost \$7.00; no small sum at the time. Fulton soon expanded his steam fleet to include additional ferryboats on the North and East Rivers.

Fulton’s steamboat ushered in a new era—one in which travel on the Hudson became a scheduled affair. Unlike Hudson River sloops, steam-powered vessels like the *Clermont* were not bound by the vagaries of wind and tide.

By expanding the realm of steam-powered travel—just as Henry Hudson had pushed the boundaries of traditional seamanship two centuries before—Robert Fulton helped make the Hudson Valley accessible to new generations of pioneering spirits.

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