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Robert Fulton and the North River Steamship

1807

When Robert Fulton's steamboat made its way up the Hudson from New York City to Albany, a new era was ushered in. Though Fulton was not the first to use the steam engine on a boat, he developed the most practical design and succeeded in putting it into practice.¹ Other attempts at a steam-powered boat include John Fitch in 1788 and Samuel Morey in 1794; but neither of these had the practicality or effect of Fulton's success on the Hudson.² As the *North River Steamboat*, later known as the *Clermont*, made its way up the Hudson on August 17, 1807, the Industrial Revolution picked up speed in the Hudson River Valley. This region, as well as the United States, was forever changed.

Robert Fulton was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in 1765. As a young man he had an interest in mechanics and created a hand-operated paddlewheel; however, his passions varied and he studied portraiture for a while as well.³ In the 1790s Fulton became interested in canal systems and published *Treatise on the Improvement of Canal Navigation* in 1796.⁴ He travelled to Europe in the late 18th century and it was there that his interests in mechanics and engineering grew. While there, Fulton experimented with steam power in innovative ways that would help him later when he worked on the *Steamboat*. He worked with both the French and the British on the idea of harnessing the power of steam in submarines and torpedoes; however, great success was not found in these endeavors.⁵

In 1806 Fulton returned to the United States and shortly began work on putting the idea of a steamship into practice. He had an English engine ordered from Watt & Boulton, and also improved the side paddle wheel of previous models. These enhancements proved to be effective, despite public doubt.

¹ AC American Biography, "Robert Fulton," Accessed February 16, 2010, <http://www.robertfulton.org>.

² Ibid.

³ Anne Pedtke, "Full Steam Ahead," *New York State Conservationist* 64 (Aug 2009): 34.

⁴ AC American Biography.

⁵ Pedtke, 34.

Many were unsure of how successful Fulton's experiment with the steam engine would be, referring to it as "Fulton's Folly".⁶ Regardless of public opinion though, the *North River Steamboat* was launched on August 17th and made its way up to Albany. The ship reached speeds of 5 mph against the current, which was considered a great achievement.⁷

Robert Fulton is often compared to Henry Hudson, as someone who opened a new era of navigating the waters.⁸ The Hudson River Valley was inevitably transformed, as steamboats provided a more efficient way of transporting goods and people up and down the river. Unlike sailboats that had to depend on wind and tides, steam-powered boats were independent of these variables.⁹ The introduction of steamboats to the Hudson River spread to other American rivers, and adaptations of the *Steamboat* were soon found in the west. Industrialization took over the region and the Hudson became one of America's most important waterways.

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⁶ Cynthia Owen Philip, *Robert Fulton: A Biography* (NY: Franklin Watts, 1985), 200.

⁷ Philip, 201.

⁸ Pedtke, 34.

⁹ Pedtke, 34.

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