Robert Fulton.

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Birth Date: November 14, 1765

Death Date: February 24, 1815

Robert Fulton was an American inventor and engineer. He was also an artist. He made the steamboat a commercial success. He also designed a system of inland waterways, a submarine, and a steam warship.

Portrait engraving of Robert Fulton, steamboat innovator. By Benjamin West, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Bust of Robert Fulton. By Jean-Antoine Houdon, Public

Early Life

Fulton was born on a small farm in Little Britain, Pennsylvania. His parents lost the farm when he was six. As a result, they moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. When he was a boy, Robert loved to build things and experiment. He made his own lead pencils. He built mechanical paddles for his boat. He even made fireworks for a Fourth of July celebration. Fulton began working for a silversmith when he was fifteen. He also liked to draw. He was a very good artist. At seventeen, Fulton went to Philadelphia. There, he spent four years making portraits and doing miniatures.

Becoming an Inventor

In 1786, Robert Fulton went to Europe. He wanted to study art. He also began to study science and mathematics. His interests shifted from art to invention. Robert Fulton was especially interested in canals and ships. He came up with new ways to dredge canals and to raise and lower boats. He also created new designs for bridges. During this period, he invented a tool for spinning flax into linen. He made a machine that could saw marble.

Robert Fulton moved to Paris in 1797. In 1800, he designed a submarine called *Nautilus* . Many consider *Nautilus* to be the first practical submarine. It had a screw propeller that helped it

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move under water. *Nautilus* dove twenty-five feet below the surface. It remained there for an hour. Robert Fulton now needed money to build and test more submarines. He met Napoleon, who was the emperor of France. However, Napoleon thought that Robert Fulton was a crook. Napoleon said he would pay Fulton money for sinking a British ship with a submarine. Fulton rejected Napoleon's offer. The British government then asked the American to change sides. As a result, he started working for the British.

The Steamboat

Robert Fulton now wanted to build a boat that was powered by a steam engine. New York businessman Robert Livingston agreed to fund the project. However, the first steamboat quickly broke apart and sank. However, Fulton didn't give up. He learned from his mistakes. He eventually completed a successful test of his first steamboat in England. He now wanted to build a steamboat in the United States. However, England would not let him take a steam engine out of the country. After almost two years, he was allowed to bring a single steam engine to the United States.

In 1807, his new steamboat was ready for trials. It was called *North River Steamboat* . It was 150 feet long. It was used to transport passengers from New York to Albany. The 150-mile journey took thirty-two hours. Robert Fulton didn't invent the first steamboat. Steam power had been used previously by other inventors to power boats. However, Fulton did produce the first commercially successful steamboat.

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