**Full Steam Ahead: How “Fulton’s Folly” Transformed America**

**By Jamie Malanowski – Smithsonian February 2015**

Sent to Paris in 1801 to obtain permission for American vessels to navigate past French-owned New Orleans, Robert Livingston reached a grander deal: He simply bought New Orleans, as well as the Mississippi and the entire Louisiana Territory. While there, Livingston, the former chancellor of New York, met Robert Fulton, who died two centuries ago this month. Fulton, the son of a Pennsylvania farmer, had traveled to Europe as a painter, where he made contacts that were useful when his attention turned to nautical engineering.

Fulton was developing a submarine for the French Navy, but was also one of the numerous inventors interested in building a ship driven by steam power. With monetary backing from Livingston, Fulton built a ship and launched it on the Seine River in France. It was a huge success, at least in the ten minutes before the hull cracked and it sank.

Back in America, Livingston had persuaded New York State to give him an exclusive grant to operate steamships on the Hudson River, an audacious move given that he had no ships. But when Livingston brought Fulton home to New York, the returning expatriate harnessed the best shipbuilding talents along New York’s East River docks to fulfill his specifications. The result: a vessel 146 feet long and 12 feet wide, with a shallow draft and a heavy, fire-spewing boiler that powered a pair of flanking paddle wheels. Anyone who knew ships thought it was a catastrophe in the making, but in August 1807, Fulton announced that his North River Boat was ready to travel up the Hudson River to Albany.

The crowd gathered at the Christopher Street dock expected an explosion. Instead, just minutes into the water, the boat came to a complete stop. “I heard a number of sarcastic remarks,” Fulton later wrote. “This is the way ignorant men compliment what they call philosophers and projectors.” Fulton rolled up his sleeves and – missing out on the opportunity to invent the word “glitch” – soon rectified “a slight maladjustment of some of the work” and off the needle-like vessel went, clanking and hissing, every bit a monster.

Twenty-four hours and 110 miles later, it stopped at Livingston’s estate, from which the boat takes its popular name, the *Clermont.* The next day it ventured on to Albany, having finished in about a day and a half a trip that took the better part of a week by sloop. “We saw the inhabitants collect; they waved their handkerchiefs and hurrahed for Fulton,” wrote one passenger, the French botanist Francois Andre Michaux.

At that moment, the Age of Sail was doomed. America became a smaller continent, and the oceans shrank. In the years to come, steamships cruised the Mississippi, carrying forty-niners to California, opened the Orient and helped Cornelius Vanderbilt, Mark Twain and Mickey Mouse become national icons in their own right.

Fulton didn’t invent the steamship, but in the *Clermont,* he built a sturdy boat with a durable engine, one strong enough to become a commercial success. By changing the boat’s design, hiding the boiler and the engine, adding awnings and cabins, Fulton made steamship travel acceptable to the upper class. In a similar way, he upscaled himself, and married Livingston’s second cousin Harriet.

During the War of 1812, while canvas-sailed frigates battled in Lake Erie, Fulton was developing a steam-driven warship for the defense of New York Harbor. He never saw it realized; he caught a chill and died on February 24, 1815. When completed, the ship was presented to the United States Navy. The USS *Fulton* was the first steam-powered vessel in the American fleet.