

**COLLECTIONS OF THE NEW
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SOCIETY NO. 1: WHO INVENTED
THE AMERICAN STEAMBOAT? A
STATEMENT**

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Collections of the New Hampshire Antiquarian Society No. 1: Who invented the American steamboat? A statement by Wm. A. Mowry

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WM. A. MOWRY

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COLLECTIONS OF THE
New Hampshire Antiquarian Society.

NO. I.

WHO INVENTED
**THE AMERICAN
STEAMBOAT?**

A STATEMENT OF THE EVIDENCE THAT THE FIRST AMERICAN
STEAMBOAT, PROPELLED BY MEANS OF PADDLE WHEELS,
WAS INVENTED, CONSTRUCTED, AND SUCCESSFULLY
OPERATED ON CONNECTICUT RIVER, ABOUT 1792,
BY CAPTAIN SAMUEL MOREY, OF ORFORD, N. H.,
AND THAT ROBERT FULTON SAW THE
BOAT IN OPERATION.


BY WM. A. MOWRY, A. M.
OF PROVIDENCE, R. I.


READ BEFORE THE NEW HAMPSHIRE ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY AT AN ADJOURNED
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WHO INVENTED THE AMERICAN STEAMBOAT?

DR. RENWICK commences his biography of Robert Fulton with this sentence:—

“THE gratitude of mankind has not failed to record with honor the names of those who have been inventors of useful improvements in the arts.” It would, perhaps, be nearer the truth to say, “those who have *obtained the reputation* of being the inventors of useful improvements in the arts.” But it is to be feared that, in too many cases, the real inventor is not known.

It has been said that language was invented to conceal one's thoughts. Many times it would seem to be true that “history was invented to conceal facts.” However this may be, it may confidently be affirmed, that frequently the truth of history is so covered up and buried beneath the debris of passing events, that it requires a long time to dig it out and bring it to the light, so that it may be seen in its true character, and its proper relations to other events be fully appreciated.

It is especially the province of an Historical Society — such as I have the honor of addressing — to rescue from oblivion facts of importance, and record them for the benefit of the future historian. As a general truth it may be said, that one or two generations must pass by, before an impartial history can be written.

THE first steamboat upon American waters is generally understood to have been made by Fulton, and its first voyage was in 1807, from New York to Albany.

It is not my purpose to discuss the relative merits of European inventors in this paper, but to endeavor to answer the questions: "Who invented the first American Steamboat? and When and where was its first trip made?"

THE claim has sometimes been set up that to John Fitch belongs the honor of this invention. It is certain that Fitch was a superior mechanic, and that he made many experiments in the application of steam as a propelling power for boats. His plan was to put in motion by means of steam a series of paddles, which should operate like the human arm. But this — 1783 — was before Watt had invented his double engine, and the single engine was "too feeble and cumbrous to yield an adequate force." — *Life of Fulton, p. 41.* This method of paddles was a failure, and has not been followed up by any improvements in that direction.

IN 1787 James Rumsey made experiments in propelling boats by pumping in water, to be afterwards forced out at the stern, the resistance of the water pushing the boat along. For this invention Rumsey applied for a patent, but his application was rejected, and experiments failed to bring success, either for himself, or others following in the same line of thought.

JOHN STEVENS experimented on the application of steam to boats between 1790 and 1800. He invented a boat which was tried on the Hudson, but without success.

WE must conclude, therefore, that unless some new competitor appears, Fulton will bear off the prize. Unless it can be shown that a boat was constructed, launched upon American waters, and pro-

pelled successfully by steam power, prior to 1807, then Fulton's Boat, the CLERMONT, plying between New York and Albany, was the pioneer boat. But if it can be shown that a steamboat had been constructed, and successfully propelled by steam power, prior to the above date, then the laurels do not belong to Fulton.

It will be my purpose to show, in this paper, that such was the case; that such a boat was invented, made and put to a successful test, fourteen or fifteen years before the date of Fulton's boat, and there is strong evidence that Fulton saw the models of this boat, that he made a visit to the place where the boat was built, saw the boat itself, and it has been ever claimed that, by this boat, and by the experiments of its inventor and builder, his attention was directed to the subject of steam navigation, and that the invention which he claimed as his own, fairly belonged to another.

If I am not mistaken, the credit of inventing, building and successfully working the first Steamboat in America, is due to a self educated New Englander, a native of Connecticut, whose ancestors were from the old Bay State, but whose family, while he was yet a child, emigrated to northern New Hampshire, where he built the first steamboat in our country, if not in the world, propelled by paddle wheels, moved by a steam engine; and put it to a successful test upon the waters of the upper Connecticut river, as early as 1792, or 1793.

It is only justice to Mr. Fulton to say, that he was the first man — that is, in connection with Chancellor Livingston and by the aid of Livingston's mon-

ey — to make a *practical business success* of a steamboat. He did build a boat, which was successfully propelled by steam by means of paddle wheels, and he is, perhaps, properly called the father of American steamboat navigation.

But the question returns, was he the originator of the plan? Was he the inventor? Did he make the first paddle wheel steamboat that worked successfully? To these questions we must answer, "No." The invention and the first boat were by another man. The story of this invention I am to tell.

BETWEEN the years 1760 and 1770 occurred a very important emigration from the vicinity of Lebanon, Connecticut, to Orford and Hanover, New Hampshire. Rev. Dr. Eleazer Wheelock, the minister of Lebanon, had established a school for the education of the Indians. As the number increased and his resources increased also, he determined to move the school nearer to the frontiers, both to diminish the expense of living and to be nearer the Indians. The school was therefore moved to Hanover in 1770, and called Dartmouth College. (*Life of Ledyard.*) It is probable that this removal of Dr. Wheelock and his school from Lebanon to Hanover was in a large measure due to the spirit of emigration which had already sprung up among his parishioners and their neighbors.

THE first settlers in the town of Orford were John Mann and his wife, who started from Hebron, October 16, 1765. They made the journey in eight days, the young bride on horseback, and her husband much of the way on foot. About three months later, these pioneers of a new settlement were followed by

another family from Hebron, consisting of Colonel Israel Morey, his wife and several children.

THIS journey of about two hundred miles was made in the dead of winter — January, 1766 — with an ox team, the wife carrying in her arms an infant six months old. What a journey was that, to be made at such a season, much of it through a pathless forest, an unbroken wilderness. From Charlestown to Orford, sixty miles, it is said there was no road, only a foot path with marked trees for guide boards.

AMONG the children of this hardy and courageous pioneer was a boy of four years named SAMUEL. The family settled in Orford, and during the Revolutionary war the father was made General, and commanded a body of brave men upon the frontier. As the boy SAMUEL grew up to manhood he turned his attention to some subjects connected with mechanics and chemistry, and from about 1780 to about 1820 or 1830, he devoted much of his time to practical experiments upon steam, heat and light. One writer says of him:

“SAMUEL MOREY was not a mere visionary experimenter or superficial sciolist in hydrostatics and pneumatology. His correspondence with the late Professor Silliman of Yale College shows that he was an ingenious inventor and practical philosopher.” — *Orford Celebration, Mann's Address.* p. 27.

In the first three volumes of *Silliman's Journal of Science and Art*, may be found several articles from his pen, upon light, heat and steam. An article in the first volume of the same Journal, by John L. Sullivan, Esquire, of Boston, describes and *commends* Morey's apparatus, for producing heat and light from tar