

## Who invented a steamboat in 1787 that traveled between Philadelphia and Burlington, New Jersey?

**Answer:** John Fitch

Robert Fulton, a native of Lancaster County, is widely recognized as the inventor of the first commercially successful steamboat in the early 1800s. However, decades earlier, another Pennsylvania inventor named John Fitch worked on his own steamboat designs. Fitch fought for credibility and recognition, only to end up overshadowed and in obscurity.

Fitch, who was born in Connecticut, worked as clockmaker, silversmith, and surveyor. While exploring the Ohio River Valley, Fitch was captured by a group of Indians and remained their prisoner for about a year. Upon being freed, Fitch settled in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. By 1786, he had begun building his steamboat, which was reportedly inspired by Indian canoes.

Fitch entered into partnership with Philadelphia clockmaker Henry Voight and completed his boat in 1787. The steam-driven vessel was a success as it made its way from Philadelphia to Burlington, New Jersey, and it received praise from delegates at Philadelphia's Constitutional Convention. Fitch released another version of his steamboat in the 1790, offering service between New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. However, Fitch's slow steamboat had yet to find an audience among reliable horse-and-carriage riders, and his company went out of business. To make matters worse, Fitch discovered that Virginia inventor James Rumsey laid claim to creating America's first steamboat. Fitch felt that title was his and his only. He tried to promote other steamboat ideas, but found no support. Fitch moved to Kentucky and fell into a severe depression. He committed suicide in July 1798.

HSP has a small collection of [John Fitch's papers](#) <sup>[1]</sup>(#208), which includes a few documents on his steamboat. Our library also holds several works on Fitch, Rumsey, and the history of the steamboat. Other related collections include the [George Bryan papers](#) <sup>[2]</sup> (#90), which contain his opinion on the case of *Fitch v. Rumsey*; and the account book of Boyer, Brooke & Wilson (Am .930), whose customers included, among other notables folks, John Fitch.

*Image:* [John Fitch's Steamboat](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, April 16 1790, watercolor (1871)

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### Links

[1] <http://discover.hsp.org/Record/hsp.ead.at01-0208/Description#tabnav>

[2] <http://discover.hsp.org/Record/hsp.ead.at01-0090/Description#tabnav>

[3] [http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/3673](http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/3673)