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Looking Back

The Steamboat that Stayed

The difference between an invention that succeeds and one that fails can often be traced to the character of the inventor. In the case of the steamboat, the difference between the inventor who came first and the inventor who succeeded was like night and day—the darkness of John Fitch and the sunshine of Robert Fulton.

Born in Connecticut in 1743, Fitch was poor, erratic, and brilliant: a perennial misfit and twitchy self-taught silversmith who, during the American Revolution, procured guns and supplies for the patriot cause. Constantly struggling to make ends meet, he worked for a few years as a surveyor but in 1782 was kidnapped and nearly killed by Indians; he was released later that year.

In 1785, Fitch, an incorrigible dreamer, became obsessed with the notion of using steam engines to power boats. He bent all his copious nervous energy toward solving the idea's many technical problems—including some that other inventors in America and Europe had already solved, unbeknownst to Fitch—and toward procuring financial and political support for his scheme. In August 1787, his invention made its maiden voyage on the Delaware River as delegates from the Constitutional Convention then meeting in Philadelphia watched from the shore. That first working steamboat regularly plied the river all that summer on demonstration runs, and Fitch tinkered and tweaked and constantly improved the design in the next few years.

It was a great technical triumph: a reliable vessel that could defy wind and current without requiring the brute strength of men or beasts. But economically, Fitch's project was a dismal failure. For all his indefatigability and creativity, Fitch lacked the touch needed to make steamboats practical; competitors with better business smarts and political savvy tormented him. By 1798, Fitch was crushed. Penniless, friendless, and despondent, he killed himself with opium pills.

Unlike Fitch, Robert Fulton was no creative force of nature. Born in Pennsylvania in 1765, Fulton was a painter of miniature portraits; he turned to invention in his twenties and recognized that it need not be the pursuit of a lone inspired genius. More importantly, Fulton was charismatic, and a natural promoter. He had, as one historian put it, "a talent for capturing the attention of men of influence and resources." Fulton had not invented any individual part of the vessel that famously made its way around New York's rivers in the summer of 1807, but with the help of friends and patrons who opened many doors for him, he did all the work necessary to sustain that invention. After Fulton, the steamboat was here to stay—which is why, two centuries on, we credit Fulton for the invention and overlook the agony of the man who made it first.