

STORIES of New Jersey

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JOHN FITCH AND THE STEAMBOAT

Whistles from tugboats, ferries and factories salute the arrival of every new transatlantic liner on her maiden voyage to New York Harbor. Streams of water are sprayed from a municipal fireboat, planes wheel overhead with newsreel cameramen, excursion boats and small craft of every kind cluster about the giant vessel, while trim gray patrol boats of the Coast Guard regulate the harbor traffic. From the skyscrapers of Manhattan and from the shores of Brooklyn and Staten Island thousands of people watch the new liner as she noses her way up the channel, past the Statue of Liberty and into a berth on the Hudson River.

There were no whistles, planes, or skyscrapers on an August day in 1807 when an awkward little boat with a tall smokestack churned steadily up the river toward Albany at the then amazing speed of 4 miles an hour. No photographers recorded the scene, but there were thousands of watchers on both shores of the river to shout and cheer with a fervor that is unknown to the placid throngs who turn out these days to see a new ship come in.

The little steamboat, the Clermont, built by Robert Fulton, was hailed as one of the seven wonders of the world. Back of the demonstration that brought permanent fame to Fulton was the story of another man's struggle, discouragement and tragic death; a story that has been almost lost in the crowded record of America's progress.

Nine years before the triumphal voyage of the Clermont, Colonel John Stevens, at his home in Hoboken (now the site of Stevens Institute of Technology) had perfected a steamboat which he tried out on a run from Belleville to New York. This boat he called the Little Juliana. In 1808 he applied for a lease to operate his second boat, the Phoenix, as a steam ferry between Hoboken and New York. This was the first steam ferry in the world but it had a short career, for Robert Fulton had obtained from New York a monopoly to