



Robert Fulton

Robert Fulton was born on a farm. He was an innovative young boy and looked out for the comfort of others. One year he saved the day by making homemade fireworks for the Fourth of July celebration during a candle shortage. He was a pretty good artist, so he was apprenticed to a silversmith where he learned about business. He carefully saved his money and bought his way out of the apprenticeship when he was only 17. He continued to save his money so that he could purchase a small farm for his mother where she could spend time in her garden. He went to Europe and was befriended by the American artist Benjamin West. Fulton found moderate success as an artist but he was continually thinking of new inventions. He began working on plans for a submarine but had trouble finding a country to back the project.

Eventually he teamed up with Robert Livingstone (see unit on Louisiana Purchase) to go into the steamboat business. Fulton designed and built the boats and Livingstone provided the financial backing. The business was a success. The two partners worked well together and they provided steamboat service to the East Coast. Then they expanded to the Mississippi River. Fulton continued to work very hard. He oversaw all the preparations and looked into his passenger's comfort. He made sure all the details were taken care of. Throughout his life he was careful to be fiscally (financially) responsible.

Dates:

- 1756–born
- 1786– Went to England
- 1797–Designed a Submarine
- 1802– Started work on a steamboat
- 1807–Successful steamboat launch in America
- 1808 Married Harriet Livingstone (second cousin to partner)
- 1815– Died, age 49

Areas to Study:

Steam engines
Steamboats
Ferry boats
Submarines
Torpedoes

Projects:

Find out what inventions Robert Fulton made in his childhood. Find a problem in your house and design a solution such as a machine for sorting laundry or a contraption for picking up dropped pencils.

Figure out how a steam engine works.

If you have a whistling tea kettle, make a pinwheel and use steam to turn it.

Make a boat with a paddle wheel that winds up with a rubber band and floats in the bathtub.

Discussion Questions:

Robert Fulton was faced with many obstacles in his life. What characteristics made him a success?

Robert Fulton was very creative. He looked for difficulties in people's lives and thought up ways to help them. Discuss the meaning of the old saying "Necessity is the mother of invention"

Not only was Fulton creative and hardworking, he was also willing to be a servant. He instructed the crew of his steamboats to make sure the passengers were comfortable and he oversaw the food preparations to make sure the food was hot, tasty, and served promptly. Was this really necessary? How could you apply a servant's attitude to your life today to prepare yourself for future business ventures?