



The New York Public Library  
Manuscripts and Archives Division

Guide to the

**Robert Fulton collection**

1767-1816

MssCol 18244

Compiled by Donald Mennerich, 2009

## Summary

**Creator:** Fulton, Robert, 1765-1815

**Title:** Robert Fulton collection

**Date:** 1767-1816

**Size:** .52 linear feet (1 box, 1 volume, 1 oversized folder)

**Source:** Donated by John Stewart Kennedy as part of the Emmet collection, 1896, and J. Pierpont Morgan, 1899, as part of the Ford collection; various donations and purchases

**Abstract:** Robert Fulton (1765-1815) was an American civil engineer and inventor. The Robert Fulton Collection consists of manuscript letters and documents by or relating to him, including photostat copies of items held in private collections, chiefly concerning steam navigation. Miscellaneous items include a drawing of a torpedo detonator and a lease signed by his father, 1767. The collection is an artificial amalgamation of Fulton materials acquired through donations and purchases.

**Access:** Advance notice required.

**Preferred citation:** Robert Fulton Collection, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

**Processing note:** Compiled by Donald Mennerich, 2009 Assembled from the Thomas Addis Emmet collection, Ford collection, Duyckinck family papers, Theodorus Bailey Myers collection, and various donations and purchases.

### Related Materials:

Stouinger-Alofsen-Fulton Drawings. The New Jersey Historical Society.

The Gilbert Montague Collection of Robert Fulton Manuscripts. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

The Robert Fulton Collection. Library of Congress.

The William Barclay Parsons Collection Of Robert Fulton Manuscripts. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

## Creator History

Robert Fulton was born in Little Britain, Pennsylvania in 1765. Fulton's father, a farmer and Presbyterian preacher, died in 1768 leaving little behind for his family. At an early age Fulton displayed precocious talents in the arts and an understanding of mechanics. As a teenager Fulton moved to Philadelphia to pursue a career as a portrait artist. Fulton was successful in this venture, able to support his family back in Little Britain. With a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin, Fulton left for London in 1786 to meet Benjamin West, whose father, incidentally, was an acquaintance of Fulton's father. Fulton spent the next seven years living with and studying painting under West.

Fulton abandoned his artistic career in 1793 having become determined to pursue a career as an engineer and designer of canals. Fulton became acquainted with the third earl of Stanhope, Charles Mahon, who shared a similar enthusiasm in the applied sciences and the improvement of the English canal network. Fulton helped in the design and building of several canals in England, publishing "Report on the Proposed Canal Between the Rivers Heyl and Helford" in 1796 and "Treatise on the Improvement of Canal Navigation" in 1797. In addition to his work on canals Fulton took out patents for improvements in marble cutting and flax spinning during his time in England.

In 1797, Fulton moved to Paris where he resided with the family of American diplomat Joel Barlow. Initially Fulton set out to continue his work as a designer of Canals, republishing his treatise in French. Using Barlow's connection to Napoleon, Fulton soon found himself designing his "Nautilus", a boat that was able to plunge beneath the water and fasten a torpedo to an enemy ship's hull for the French. Fulton would successfully demonstrate the destructive power of his Nautilus, twice, and gain the support of Napoleon's scientific commissioners. Bonaparte, against the advise of his scientific commission, ultimately came to the conclusion that Fulton was a charlatan and extortionist due to his lack of formal scientific education and unwillingness to disclose drawings of his boats mechanisms; ceasing communication with him. Beginning in 1802 Fulton was secretly induced to move back to England by the 2nd earl of Liverpool, Robert Banks Jenkinson, England's Secretary of Foreign Affairs. In 1804 Fulton secretly moved back to England and began negotiations with the British government on a contract to develop his system of submarine and torpedo warfare. Fulton successfully demonstrated his submarine by destroying a ship in test circumstance for the British, but failed in attacking a French ship at Boulogne with a torpedo. The Superiority of the British naval fleet was secured shortly thereafter with the destruction of both the French and Spanish fleets at the Battle of Trafalgar through traditional means. By early 2006 the British had determined they did not need Fulton's designs. Now spurned by both the French and British the engineer prepared for his return to America.

Fulton's militaristic inventions were not the work of a mercenary; rather, Fulton believed his inventions were to be used in freeing man from the constraints of oppressive and militaristic nations. In an unpublished manuscript on free trade, Fulton wrote "I turned my whole attention to find out means of destroying such engines of oppression, by some method which would put it out of the power of any nation to maintain such a system, and would compel every government to adopt the simple principles of education, industry, and free circulation of its produce."

Now residing in New York City Fulton revisited his ideas of using steam engines to propel boats in 1806. As early as 1793 Fulton began working on the basic principles of applying steam engines to marine vessels, which he would successfully demonstrate upon his return to America. In 1801 Fulton and American diplomat Robert R. Livingston, had undertaken experiments in using steam power propel a vessel on the river Seine in Paris, with modest results. In 1807, under the patronage of Livingston, Fulton launched his first steam-powered vessel, the Clermont, into the East River. The ship made a successful initial voyage from New York City to Albany. Livingston and Fulton quickly began commercial trips of the Clermont and several other steamboats built under their direction for both up-river navigation

and crossings along the Hudson.

Through their patents Fulton and Livingston soon had a monopoly on the commercial use of steam navigation. After Livingston's death in 1813, Fulton found himself embroiled in a series of disputes with both the operators of his steamships (Edward P. Livingston, Benjamin Henry Latrobe) and those trying to break his steamship monopoly (Nathaniel Cutting, Ferdinand Fairfax and William Thornton). In 1814 Fulton was contracted by the American government to build a steam-powered vessel of war, Fulton I. Fulton died in February 1815 after a brief illness brought on by exposure; he had become soaked while helping his attorney Thomas Addis Emmet from the icy waters of the Hudson River. Fulton had traveled to Jersey City with Emmet and Cadwallader Colden to view the progress of the construction of the Fulton I.

SourcesThe Life and Work of Robert Fulton / Cadwallader ColdenRobert Fulton and the "Clermont" / Alice Sutcliffe CraryRobert Fulton: A Biography / Cynthia Owen PhilipRobert Fulton and the Submarine / William Barclay Parsons

## **Scope and Content Note**

The Robert Fulton Collection consists of manuscripts and photostats of letters by or relating to Robert Fulton. The collection is an amalgamation of materials acquired by the Manuscripts and Archives Division through donations and purchases.

## **Key Terms**

### **Occupations**

Civil engineers  
Inventors

### **Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Contracts  
Drawings (visual works)  
Financial records

### **Subjects**

Steam-navigation  
Steamboats  
Torpedoes

### **Names**

Fulton, Robert, 1765-1815

## Container List

### I. Correspondence 1802-1814

Arranged chronologically.

- b. 1 f. 1 **Fulton, at Paris, to Fulwar Skipwith** 1802 Sep 20 (1 pages, facsimile. 2 copies)  
From the Ford Autograph Collection
- b. 1 f. 2 **Fulton, at Paris, to Fulwar Skipwith** 1802 Dec 12 (6 pages, negative photostat)  
Photostats made from original in possession of Randall J. LeBoeuf in 1934
- b. 1 f. 3 **Fulton, at New York, to David Morris** 1807 Jun 6 (4 pages, autograph, signed)  
Fulton giving the dimensions of the first steamboat, and his belief that a vessel could be propelled by steam power.  
Provenance unknown
- b. 1 f. 4 **Fulton, at Clermont Manor, to Charles Brownne** 1809 Aug 1 (3 pages, autograph, signed)  
From the Duyckinck Family Papers
- b. 1 f. 5 **Fulton, at New York, to Capt. Roorbach** 1812 Feb 15 (4 pages, negative photostat)  
Photostats made from original in possession of Mrs. Joseph H. Brewer in 1926
- b. 1 f. 6 **Fulton, at New York, to unknown correspondent** 1812 Oct 24 (1 page, negative photostat)  
Photostats made from original in possession of Randall J. LeBoeuf in 1934
- b. 1 f. 7 **Fulton, at New York, to William Eustis** 1812 Oct 28 (1 page, negative photostat)  
Eustis was the Secretary of War under James Madison  
Photostats made from original in possession of Randall J. LeBoeuf in 1934
- b. 1 f. 8 **Fulton to Commodore Oliver Perry** 1814 Jan 26 (1 page, negative photostat)  
Includes a published description of Fulton's steamship The Clermont.  
Photostats made from original in possession of Randall J. LeBoeuf in 1934
- b. 1 f. 9 **Fulton to Littleton W. Tazewell** 1814 Feb 26 (3 pages, negative photostat)  
Photostats made from original in possession of Randall J. LeBoeuf in 1934
- b. 1 f. 10 **Fulton to Commodore John Rodgers** 1814 Sep 19 (2 pages, negative photostat)  
Photostats made from original in possession of Frederick Rodgers in 1952
- b. 1 f. 11 **Fulton to John Brockenborough** 1934 Jun 27 (2 pages, negative photostat)  
Photostats made from original in possession of Randall J. LeBoeuf in 1934
- b. 1 f. 12 **Fulton to Commodore Isaac Chauncey** 1814 Nov 7 (2 pages, autograph, signed)  
Provenance unknown
- b. 1 f. 13 **Fulton to General Jonathan Williams** 1814 Nov 23 (4 pages, autograph, signed)  
From the Ford Collection
- b. 1 f. 14 **Fulton to William Jones** undated (2 pages, autograph, signed)  
Provenance unknown
- b. 1 f. 15 **Fulton to Capt. Roorbach** undated (1 page, negative photostat)  
Photostat made from original in possession of Mrs. Joseph H. Brewer in 1926
- b. 1 f. 16 **Robert R. Livingston, at Clermont, to Captain Roorbach** 1812 Feb 2, Feb 23 1812 (7 pages, negative photostat)  
Photostats made from original in possession of Mrs. Joseph H. Brewer in 1926

I. Correspondence (cont.)

- b. 1 f. 17 **Note from Mr. J. Henry to Col. Aaron Ogden** 1814 Jul 13 (1 page, autograph)  
Note questioning the originality of Fulton's steamship design. Ogden's legal proceedings can be found in the volume, "Steamboat Controversy," located in William Barclay Parsons' Fulton collection  
From the Emmet Collection

- b. 1 f. 18 **Thomas A. Emmet to Henry Baldwin** 1815 Mar 23 (3 pages, autograph, signed)  
Provenance unknown

- b. 1 f. 19 **Miscellaneous facsimiles and transcripts** (7 pages)  
From the Thomas Addis Emmet and Theodore Myers collections

II. Writings, Business and Legal Documents 1808-1815

Arranged chronologically

- b. 1 f. 20 **Check payable to Isaac Owen** 1808 Aug 14 (2 page, autograph, signed)  
From the Ford Collection

- b. 1 f. 21 **Contract between Robert R. Livingston, Robert Fulton and John R. Livingston** 1808 Aug 20 (2 pages, autograph)  
Contract giving John R. Livingston permission to construct and operate a steam boat. Copy made by John Livingston in 1814.  
From the Ford Collection

- b. 1 f. 22 **Estimate for the expense of a steam ferry boat for one year** 1810 Jan 22 (1 page. 2 copies, autograph)  
Includes facsimile copy by Thomas Addis Emmet.  
From the Emmet Collection

- b. 1 f. 23 **Contract between Fulton (on behalf of the U.S. Government), John Livingston and Henry Mead** 1814 Jun 3 (2 pages, positive photostat)  
Photostat made from original in possession of Lucius Wilmerding in 1938

- b. 1 f. 24 **Report on the construction of a steam vessel of war** 1815 December 28 (12 pages, positive photostat)  
Report of the commissioners superintending the construction Fulton's (who was since deceased) vessel of war. Signed by Henry Rutgers, Samuel L. Mitchell and James Morris. Includes a supplementary report signed by Oliver Walcott dated 1816 Jan 6  
Photostat made from original in possession of Lucius Wilmerding in 1938

- b. 1 f. 25 **Draft of the report of the select committee regarding the petition of Robert Fulton's widow** (5 pages, autograph, draft)  
Printed in N.Y. Assembly Journal, 48th Session (1825 Feb 2), pages 440-442  
Provenance unknown

- b. 1 f. 26 **Claim against the estate of Fulton** undated (1 page, fragment)  
Provenance unknown

- v. 1 **Letters Patent of Robert Fulton and John Stevens** 1808-1811 (Negative photostat, bound)  
Photostats made from originals in the possession of Mrs. Leta Forsyth Thomson in 1934

- o. 1 **Torpedo Detonator** undated (Ink and wash drawing)  
Purchased by the NYPL in 1985

III. Fulton Related Materials

- o. 1 **Lease signed by Robert Fulton Sr** 1767 (4 pages, autograph, signed)

III. Fulton Related Materials (cont.)

- b. 1 f. 27    Photograph of badge worn on first trip of the LaFayette undated (1 page, facsimile)  
              Badge worn by James Marshall on the inaugural voyage of Fulton's steam ship LaFayette. From the original in possession of Julius Schoonmaker of Kingston, NY. Date of photo unknown.
  
- b. 1 f. 28    Engraving of portrait of Fulton by Benjamin West
- b. 1 f. 29    Painting and engraving of Fulton's vessels