

THE PIONEER STEAMSHIP *ROBERT FULTON*

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In 1820 the steamship *Robert Fulton* became the first steam-powered vessel to make the voyage between New York City and New Orleans. According to John Morrison¹ she was the first steam vessel built specifically for ocean service.² She operated primarily as a regular packet ship between those two ports, with additional stops at Charleston and Havana, from April 1820 until being converted to sail on December 5, 1825.

Illustrated in Figure 1, the *Robert Fulton* was constructed by Henry Eckford in 1819 as a 702 ton sidewheel steamer with auxiliary sail. She was first registered at New York on 22 April 1820 upon embarkation on her maiden voyage to New Orleans.

Prior to this, in April 1819, Henry Eckford, Cadwallader Colden, David Dunham and others had incorporated in New York State as the Ocean Steam Ship Company with the stated intent to construct and employ steamships in navigating the ocean. Eckford, a noted ship architect and builder of Navy vessels during the War of 1812, returned to government service as a naval contractor in 1820 following the launch of the *Robert Fulton*. The operational aspects of the company then devolved to David Dunham who may have bought out one or more of his partners at this time. Advertisements list him, sometimes styled as David Dunham & Co., as owner and operator. Dunham drowned near West Point on March 30, 1822 in a boating accident during a storm, but the ship continued to operate.

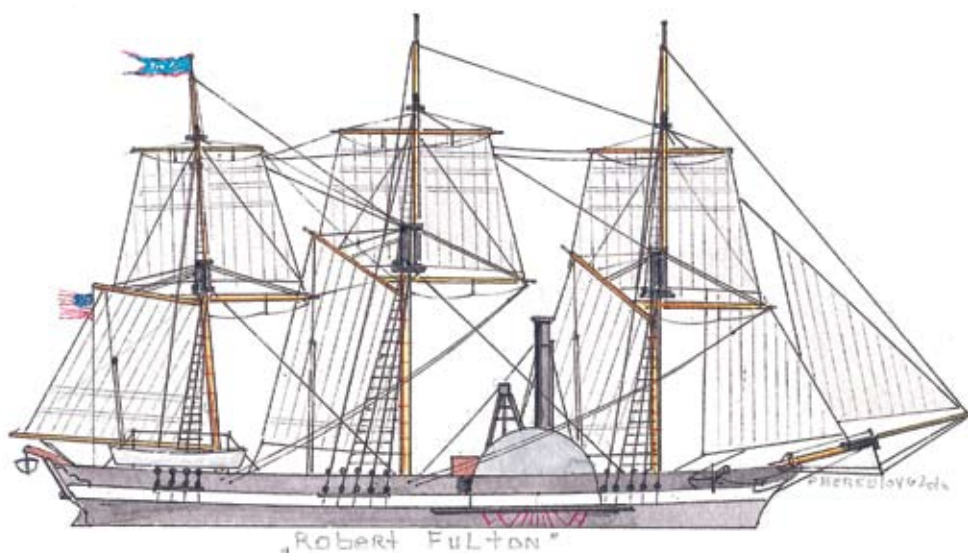


Figure 1. A modern watercolor illustration of the steamship *Robert Fulton* by nautical artist Petr Merkulov.

The *Robert Fulton* made approximately 18 trips during her five-year period of activity as a steamship. In addition to her home port of New York, her regular schedule included primary stops at Charleston, Havana and New Orleans, as well as exceptional trips to other coastal ports and to Vera Cruz, Mexico.

Early “Steam Boat” Letter Carried by the Steamship *Robert Fulton*

Figure 2 shows a folded letter addressed to Plymouth, Massachusetts. It was carried on the steamship *Robert Fulton* on her return trip from Vera Cruz, via New Orleans and Havana, to New York City in the Spring of 1823. The enclosed letter is dated at New Orleans April 28, 1823 and the author closes the letter with: “the Steam Ship will sail tomorrow as well as the Fanny but as I think the former will make a quicker passage she shall be the bearer of this.”

This change of mind is evidenced by correction of the original “Sloop Fanny” manuscript directive at the lower left of the address. This was crossed out and “Steam Ship, via New York” substituted.

The terms steam boat, steamboat, steam ship and steamship were all used rather indiscriminately in this era, as evidenced in period advertisements and notices that mention the *Robert Fulton*. Postal historians today generally differentiate the terms, with “steamship” being applied to ocean-going steam-powered vessels and “steamboat” applied to inland waterway vessels powered by steam.

Figure 3 shows two ship images that were used as advertising illustrations for the *Robert Fulton*. The image on the left, from a February 1822 ad, shows a sailing ship. The image on the right, from October 1823, shows a ship with sails, sidewheel and smoke.

Ship sailing information for this voyage of the *Robert Fulton*, shown in Figure 4, was compiled from various newspaper notices. The steamer departed New Orleans with the Figure 2 cover on May 1, 1823, making stops at Havana and Charleston on her way to New



Figure 2. An 1823 letter from New Orleans carried by the steamship *Robert Fulton* to New York where it entered the mails and was rated as a steamboat use (carried over a postal route) shortly after this new rating procedure had been announced.

The 1823 Instructions for Steamboat Mail

Most published sources refer to the Post Office Act of March 3, 1825 as the first codification of steamboat letter mail handling. For example, *The American Stampless Cover Catalog* (Vol II, page 130) states:

In 1825 Steamboat and Steam letters were recognized formally and officially in the P.L. & R. for the first time with a fee of two cents to be paid to the master of the steamer by the postmaster receiving the letter. The rate properly charged for a Steamboat letter was the regular postage from the point where the letter was picked up (as reported by the master of the vessel) and its final destination.

However, it has long been known by students of the subject that ocean waterway covers with steamboat markings and ratings exist from the two years prior to the 1825 Act. It has been assumed that an instruction from the Postmaster General outlining the handling of such mails was issued. However, no record of such notice has been previously reported.

NILES' REGISTER—APRIL 12, 1823—POLITICAL ECONOMY.

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GENERAL POST OFFICE, March 4, 1823. [Circular to the deputy post masters.]

Sir—The public having made arrangements for transmitting correspondence along the sea coast, as well as through the country, at great expense, found itself a loser on that account, in consequence of the numerous establishments of steam boats.—

To prevent these losses, and to subject all letters and packets of letters conveyed by steam boats, to the regular postage, congress, by an act passed on the 3d inst. have established all routes on which those boats pass, as post roads. You will therefore charge all letters which you receive or send by steam boats, with postage according to the distance

they are conveyed, at the same rates as if sent through the mail by land. The account of steam boat letters should be kept by itself, and may be kept on the common blanks for ship letters received, merely substituting the words "steam boat," for ship. It is important, particularly on account of the state of receipts and expenditures of the department, that the act of February 27, 1815, be duly enforced and carried into effect, (see page 20 and 21 of the post office laws), and I hope you will not fail to prosecute, should the law be violated.

Yours, respectfully,

RETURN J. MEIGS,
Post master general.

Figure 5. Circular of Postmaster General Return J. Meigs, dated March 4, 1823, that spells out new instructions for the handling of mail received from steamboats.

The missing instruction has now appeared. It was published in *Niles Weekly Register* of April 12, 1823. The actual notice is shown in Figure 5, with the columns rearranged to fit the *Chronicle* page format. This circular from the General Post Office, dated March 4, 1823, states in part:

....[Congress has] established all routes on which those boats [steamboats including those on the sea coast] pass as post routes. You will therefore charge all letters which you receive or send by steam boats, with postage according to the distance they are conveyed, at the same rates as if sent through the mail by land. The account of steam boat letters should be kept by itself.

The circular refers to an act passed on March 3, 1823. This innocuously short act had consequences for steam boat mail as outlined in the circular. It states:

Sec. 3. And be it further enacted, That all waters on which steamboats regularly pass from port to port, shall be considered and established as post-roads, subject to the provisions contained in the several acts regulating the Post-office establishment.

With this dated circular now available, it can be firmly stated that the change of rating on letters received from ocean-going steamships should have commenced upon receipt of this March 4, 1823 notice by the individual port postmasters. Where a letter from New Orleans to New York by steamship previously received a "Ship" handstamp on arrival in New York and was rated as a ship letter, it was thereafter to be rated as if carried by land from New Orleans to its final destination. The addition of a separate "account" for steam-

boat letters to be kept would also serve as reason for a change in the way the covers were marked—now using “Steam Boat” instead of “Ship.”

The letter illustrated in Figure 2 is the earliest example of this change in handling seen by the authors. We would welcome reports of earlier examples. We wish to thank John Olenkiewicz for discovery of the pertinent ship notices for the *Robert Fulton*, extracted from newspapers of the era, as well as Van Koppersmith, Bernard Biales and Yamil Kouri for providing additional insights on the subject.

Endnotes

1. John H. Morrison, *History of American Steam Navigation*, Argosy-Antiquarian Ltd., 1967, pg. 436.
2. The *Savannah* gets the credit for the first ocean crossing although originally she had been laid down as a sailing vessel and later outfitted with a steam engine. Her engine was used sparingly on her transatlantic crossing, however, for out of 648 on the seas, 560 saw her sail in use. ■