

Steamboats

BY DAVID WALBERT

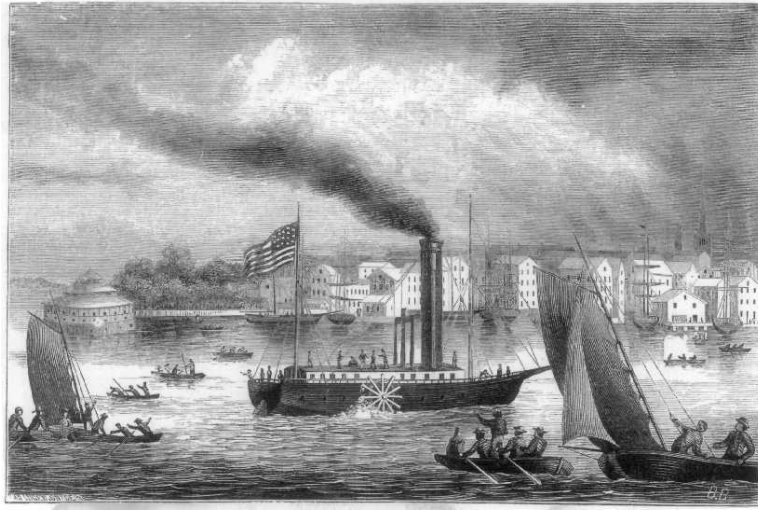


Figure 1. Robert Fulton's *North River Steamboat*, first launched in 1807.

A steamboat is propelled — not surprisingly — by steam, but that may seem impossible if your only experience with steam is watching it rise off a cup of cocoa. In a steamboat's engine, wood or other fuel is burned to boil water, and the steam from the boiling water is forced through a small space to increase the speed at which it escapes (like releasing the valve on a pressure-cooker). The steam is then channeled into a closed cylinder, where it pushes a piston that turns a paddlewheel. The wheel's paddles push against the water to propel the ship forward.

Inventors in Europe and America had been experimenting with steam-powered boats since the 1690s, but it was not until 1807 that the first commercially viable steamboat was introduced into the United States: the *North River Steamboat*,¹ built by Robert Fulton, which successfully made the trip up New York's Hudson River from New York City to Albany in thirty-two hours.

Not long after, the first steamboats appeared on North Carolina's rivers. The *Sea Horse* of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, was apparently first, steaming up the Roanoke River in 1818. That same year, the first steamboats were built in North Carolina. James Seawell built the

Henrietta in 1817–1818 on his plantation near Fayetteville, and it began regular service on the Cape Fear River in October 1818. The *Prometheus* launched the same year, and when President James Monroe visited Wilmington in 1819, the *Prometheus* carried him to Smithville. As many as 100 different steamboats traveled North Carolina’s rivers between 1818 and 1861.² Steamboats also worked the sounds and, by the 1830s, the Dismal Swamp Canal³.

Because North Carolina’s rivers are not very deep, steamboats had to be built that could travel in shallow water. Fayetteville, Wilmington, and Washington all developed important shipbuilding industries that flourished until the Civil War.

On the web

The Cape Fear Steamers: Wilder Days upon the Cape Fear

<http://bgibson135.wordpress.com/the-stories/>

Stories of steamboats that traveled the Cape Fear River in North Carolina, from newspaper accounts of the time.

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Notes

1. After he died, a biography of Fulton referred to the steamboat as the *Clermont*, and that is the name by which it is usually known today. Clermont was actually the estate of Robert Livingston, the wealthy politician and investor who funded Fulton’s work. The *North River Steamboat* was rebuilt at Clermont in the winter of 1807–08, and was later registered as the *North River Steamboat of Clermont*.
2. A complete list of steamboats working North Carolina rivers in the nineteenth century is available from North Carolina Business History (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.historync.org/steamboats.htm>).
3. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4462>.

About the author

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David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC’s educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC’s website and content management systems, and is the organization’s primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

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Figure 1 (page 1)

From James Dabney McCabe, *Great Fortunes, and How They Were Made* (Philadelphia: George Maclean, 1871). This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.