

STORIES of New Jersey

SCOTCH PLAINS
No. _____
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loads over the difficult roads and through the unchartered wilderness.

He had read of the Englishman, James Watt, who had discovered the power of steam. To Fitch and others the idea had occurred that steam might be used to propel wagons. Although he had never seen a drawing of a steam-engine, he began to design an engine for wagons. After working with the idea enthusiastically for a week, he decided it would be impractical to operate a heavy vehicle over the rough roads.

But he did think that a steam-engine might move a boat against tide and wind and at greater speed than was possible with sail or oars. Afire with his new idea, he set to work on drawings for a boat with an engine. Three weeks later he took his drawings to a friend, the Reverend Nathaniel Irwin, who was much interested in the young inventor's idea. The minister took from his shelves a book with a description and drawing of a stationary steam-engine. This was the first that Fitch knew of an engine in operation, although one had been used for pumping at the copper mine in Arlington, N.J. since 1753. News traveled slowly in those days, but ideas for inventions were developing in all parts of the civilized world among people who had no communication with one another - ideas born of the necessity for improving man's life in the eighteenth century.

When Fitch saw that a practical use had been found for steam, he set to work with renewed enthusiasm to carry out his plan. Like all inventors and men of genius who can see into the future beyond the actual accomplishment of their own hands and brain, Fitch visioned steamboats traveling up and down the rivers of the new country, carrying food and clothing to the new settlers in the wilderness, bringing back wood, furs and other products to the cities on the coast. He gathered all available literature on the steam-engine and saturated his mind with it. His first model, built of brass, had wooden side paddle wheels; but he later abandoned these in favor of a row of oars or paddles suspended from a frame.

He traveled to Mount Vernon to see General Washington to enlist his interest in presenting his idea to Congress - not only to protect his patent rights but to secure financial aid. He interviewed the members of the legislatures of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York and New Jersey. The last named state was the first to grant him exclusive rights to construct and operate steamboats on the rivers and streams under its jurisdiction. This was in March 1786. The other states followed New Jersey's example shortly, but Congress still withheld its support.