

STORIES of New Jersey

COTCH PLAINS
No. _____
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For a while he wandered about Philadelphia, trying desperately to gain the backing he so badly needed. Frantic at the blindness of Congress, utterly powerless to obtain recognition that was justly his, hungry and poorly clad and half-demented from discouragement, he turned his back on the scene of his disappointment and proceeded to his land in Kentucky. He found it occupied by squatters whom he had to eject.

He tried to gain the support of his Congressman from Kentucky, but met with the usual rebuff. Heartbroken, penniless and tired of the long struggle, Fitch committed suicide during the spring of 1798. He was buried in a pauper's grave in the churchyard at Bardstown, Kentucky.

His death went unnoticed, and by the time Fulton launched his Clermont in 1807 Fitch was no longer even a memory. The success of Fulton's vessel struck the world like a bombshell and credit for the invention of the steam-engine went to Fulton on a sweeping tide of public admiration.

In 1887, exactly 100 years after Fitch's first steamboat was launched on the Delaware River, the Legislature of Connecticut, the State in which he was born, placed a bronze tablet to his memory on the east wall of the State Capitol. The memorial reads: "First in world's history to invent and apply steam propulsion of vessels through water." The tablet was dedicated with appropriate ceremonies.

The citizens of Kentucky, Fitch's adopted State, were spurred into action as a result of the Connecticut memorial. The inventor's body was removed from its obscure burial place to the Bardstown Public Square. A fund of \$15,000 was obtained from Congress to erect a suitable memorial to Fitch's memory, and the body of the illustrious pioneer in steam navigation was placed in a sarcophagus.

At Trenton, along the banks of the Delaware on John Fitch Way, a memorial boulder, placed in 1921, honors the man whose crude engine was the first to disturb the placid waters of the river.

Perhaps, 150 years after his first successful trial, John Fitch will be given belated recognition for his achievement.