

# STORIES of New Jersey

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## THE FIRST RAILROAD IN NEW JERSEY

James Watt, a studious lad, seated in his mother's kitchen in Greenock, Scotland, watched the lid of the teakettle rise and drop back from the pressure of the steam within. He realized then that steam was power. This discovery, and the boy's ability to apply it in the first stationary steam engine, brought about the railroad of today.

In Hoboken, N. J., Colonel John Stevens, distinguished engineer, a man of wealth who had served as an officer in the Revolutionary War and as New Jersey's colonial secretary when he was 27 years old, read of the invention of the young Scot in an English journal and ordered one of the Watt stationary engines shipped to him. But he did not want an engine that could only hoist things or pump water. His heart was set on the development of his country and he believed that if he could adapt this invention to transportation he would bring about a means of swift communication by land and water.

When the adaptation of steam power to boats was assured by the successes of John Fitch, Robert Fulton and Stevens' own "Little Juliana" (the first steam ferry in the world), the indefatigable engineer turned his attention to the development of a steam-propelled wagon.

This was a period when a change in the method of hauling freight from one part of the state to the other was under consideration. Canals, expensive as they were to build and to maintain, seemed to be the only alternative to the horse-drawn wagons traveling the almost impassable roads.

As early as 1812 Stevens had urged Governor Clinton of New York to abandon plans for the proposed Erie Canal and to substitute a railroad. He claimed that a speed of 20 to 30 miles an hour could be attained with railroad cars and declared that 100 miles an hour might be achieved.

The colonel was an old man, well in his seventies, but he was indomitable. He had traveled in vain to New York, Pennsylvania and even as far as North Carolina, trying to have the legislatures appropriate funds for his railroad building plan. But he was considered a visionary, and Chancellor Robert Livingston of New York bade him try out his railroad himself in order to see whether there was really anything practical in his plan.

In 1825 he completed construction of an experimental "steam waggon," as he called it, built a circular track on the grounds of his Hoboken estate (now occupied by the athletic field of Stevens Institute), and invited the members of the Society for Internal Improvement, of which he was the founder, to wit-