FULTON AND THE CLERMONT

The Inventor's Description of His Craft and Its First Voyage.

Why an Adequate Recital of Fulton's Achievements Has Never Been Written.—"A Great Man a Hundred Years Ago."

Allen Crary Sheffield's "Fulton's Invention of the Steamboat" in the October Century contains the following:

"Robert Fulton is going to be a great man this year," recently observed a casual speaker.

"Sir," was the answer, "Robert Fulton was a great man a hundred years ago; or the author of the Ancient Mariner would not, at the end of a century, be recalling his life with gratitude."

An adequate recital of Fulton's achievements has never been written, and can it be until some future awakening, because access to his papers, sets forth the technical progress of his inventive genius, which successively produced a specimen for cutting marble, a machine for engraving flax, a double inclined plane, a canal navigation, a machine for twisting rope, an earth scoop for canal and excavation purposes, cable cutter, the first French panorama, the submarine torpedo boat and several minor naval improvements—all predecessors of the steamboat invention, the steamboat. Which to this list is added a record of his numerous paintings and miniatures, and of his far-sighted writings, including "A Treatise on Canal Navigation," his "Torpedo Warfare" and "Submarine Navigation," his "Essays in the Friends of Mankind" and another entitled "Thoughts on Free Trade," a cause of which he was an ardent advocate, and when it is remembered that he died at the age of 50 there comes a sense of wonder that so short a working span could study projects so many and so diverse.

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Fulton's own description of the Clermont is contained in a paper in possession of one of his heirs.

My first steamboat on the Hudson river was 155 feet long [illegible] drawing ten feet of water. [illegible] 60 degrees she displaced [illegible] equal 100 tons of water. Her keel represented 56 feet in the water [illegible] minus the resistance of the boat, she ran four miles an hour.

In the "National Gazette" for 1862 the editor, Mr. Samuel Wood Stanton, gives the following additional details:

The bottom of the boat was formed of yellow pine plank 13 inches thick, tongued and grooved, and set together with white lead. This bottom or platform was laid in a transverse platform and moulded out with battens and nails. The shape of the bottom being thus formed, the floors of oak and spruce were placed across the bottom; the spruce floors being 4x8 inches and two feet apart. The oak floors were reserved for the ends and were both sided and moulded eight inches. Her top timbers (ribs) were of spruce and extended from a log that formed the bridge to the deck; were sided six inches and moulded at keel and tapered sided and moulded four inches at the head. She had no guards when first built and was decked by a tiller. Her draught of water was 2½ inches.

Fulton did not take out a patent for his steamboat until February 1809, and his second patent was secured October 2, 1811. None of the patents is in existence. The United States patent office has recently stated that while the index of patents says that on February 5, 1811, a patent was issued to Robert Fulton, the office is unable to furnish a copy of it, as the records of this and other early patents were destroyed in the patent office fire of 1836. There remains, however, in possession of one of his heirs the "Notes on the Patent of 1809."

The commercial success which the Clermont attained led, within a few months, to the necessity of its enlargement and alterations, and this record preserved the knowledge of the lines adopted for the first American boat, which recently have been considered [illegible]

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We now come to the [illegible] memorable first voyage of the Clermont. On August 17, at 1 o'clock, the boat was loosed from its moorings at midday on the North river, near the [illegible], Greenwich village. [illegible] account of the event and of the feelings at this crisis have fortunately been preserved in a valuable letter to an unknown friend, which is now in the possession of Mrs. Robert Fulton Rhett, and which has never been before published. It reads:

"My Dear Sir: The moment arrived in which the word was to be given for the boat to move. My friends were in groups on the deck. Many were anxious and with fear among them. They were silent and sad and seemed to reflect. I felt no doubt of success. The engine was put in motion, the wheels began to move, and we left the city behind us at the rate of four miles an hour. The sensations I felt made me for a few minutes forget the object of my voyage. We passed Kingsbridge, the Palisades, the highlands, and at sunset we were abreast of Stony Point. The [illegible] of the mountains, the [illegible] of the rivers and of the dwellers upon them, the shores, it is impossible for me to describe. [illegible] I was the viewer of delighted scenes.

"Some [illegible] have witnessed the launch of a first man of war, the pride of her country, the terror of her foes, the bulwark of her friends; she has her thousands of men, her batteries of cannon, her [illegible] of war, her [illegible] of death. Her [illegible] I was the spectator of a scene which I hope will never be equaled. The [illegible] were pine wood, and when one fire was spread by the engineer a [illegible] of sparks was emitted.

"The guests of this memorable occasion consisted of about forty, and among them I recognized persons identified with the history of the state of New York.

"I was the viewer of delighted scenes.