Robert Livingston Stevens Biography

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Biography

Robert Livingston Stevens regarded himself as a naval architect. Indeed he designed and built more that twenty ferries and steamboats in his life, continuously trying to increase both safety and speed in his vessels. Stevens was born in Hoboken, New Jersey on October 18, 1787. He was the son of John Stevens, an early proponent of steam navigation and later railtransportation, and one of the first people to receive a patent under the 1790 United States patent law.

Robert assisted his father in the construction of *Little Juliana*, a small steamboat driven by screw propellers that crossed the Hudson River in 1804. In June 1809 he captained their *Phoenix*, a lOO-foot paddle wheel steamboat, on its maiden voyage to Philadelphia. This trip is recorded as the world's first sea voyage made by a steamship. After this trip Stevens piloted the *Phoenix* as a ferry along the Delaware River. The War of 1812 led Stevens to ideas of developing metal-clad ships but navy officials showed no interest until the 1840s and Stevens was unable to construct one before his death.

By 1830 Robert joined his father's railtransportation company. He traveled to England to study locomotives and bring back some iron rails. As a result, he designed the T-shaped type of rail which is still used. He also discovered that iron rails set on wooden cross ties over a gravel bed provided a safer and more comfortable ride than other methods of the day.

That same year the Stevens family organized the Camden and Ambay Railroad and Transportation Company with Robert as president and chief engineer. Using the John Bull locomotive from England, the first steam railroad service in New Jersey began in 1831. A Stevens innovation that became important because it helped to reduce the number of derailments on sharp curves was a two-wheeled guide called a *pilot* that he attached to the front of the John Bull. This pilot assisted in leading locomotives around the numerous curves in American railways and became a necessity for that reason for many decades.

In 1844 Stevens returned to his naval roots and designed the *Maria*, a yacht that was known as the fastest sailing ship for the next twenty years. He died in Hoboken on April 20, 1856.