

## **Steam Bridges: Revolutionary linkages using the first high technology in history**

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### **Abstract**

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the human race remained—practically speaking—in the same place it had been for millennia. To wit, humans were beholden to the omnipotence of Nature, meaning the only way to move themselves from one place to another was by natural means. On land, this meant foot, hoof, or wheel, all of which were powered by animals; on water, it was either human-driven paddles or wind-driven sails. The one practical extension of land over water was, of course, the bridge, but including that tool, there was no reason to believe human locomotion would ever be any different.

Then, in 1807, an American named Robert Fulton built and ran the first commercially successful steamboat in history. In so doing, Fulton achieved something epically important: he proved that humans could create an artificial power to alter where they were and when they were there to practical effect. No other invention had achieved such a thing, and accordingly, steamboats may be considered the first “high technology” in history.

The practical effect of this “new mode of transport,” as some called it, was nothing short of revolutionary. Within a short period of time, a new type of bridge was created—what might be called a “steam bridge.”

This presentation will analyze the development of “steam bridges” in the United States and the United Kingdom during the first generation of steam-powered vessels, circa 1807-1819, and into the second generation in the 1820s. Of particular interest will be the different types of steam bridges that quickly developed, from cross-river to inter-city to international, as well as how and where they were first introduced, and why. Also explored will be the reactions of those people who first witnessed and used these “steam bridges.”

Finally, the presentation will suggest that steam-powered vessels, as the vanguard of a High Technology Age, also represent the beginning of a series of new “high technology bridges” that form a foundational basis for the modern era.