



Smithsonian

*National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center*

## Guide to the John Stevens Collection, 1808-1881

NMAH.AC.0333

Don Darroch and Robert Harding

6/29/89

Archives Center, National Museum of American History  
P.O. Box 37012  
Suite 1100, MRC 601  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7012  
Business Number: Phone: 202-633-3270  
Fax Number: Fax: 202-786-2453  
archivescenter@si.edu  
<https://americanhistory.si.edu/archives>

## Table of Contents

Collection Overview .....	
Administrative Information .....	1
Biographical / Historical .....	1
Scope and Contents .....	2
Names and Subjects .....	
Container Listing .....	

## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
<b>Title:</b>	John Stevens Collection
<b>Date:</b>	1808-1881
<b>Identifier:</b>	NMAH.AC.0333
<b>Creator:</b>	Watkins, J. Elfreth (John Elfreth), 1852-1903 Stevens, John, 1749-1838 (Creator)
<b>Source:</b>	National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Transportation
<b>Extent:</b>	0.5 Cubic feet (2 boxes)
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	Collection documents rge career of inventor and engineer John Stevens.

---

## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

Immediate source of acquisition unknown.

### Provenance

This collection was transferred from the Division of Transportation (now Division of Work and Industry) to the Archives Center in June 1989.

### Processing Information

Collection processed by Don Darroch and Robert Harding, 1989.

### Preferred Citation

John Stevens Collection, 1808-1881, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

### Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

### Conditions Governing Use

Collection items available for reproduction, but the Archives Center makes no guarantees concerning copyright restrictions. Other intellectual property rights may apply. Archives Center cost-recovery and use fees may apply when requesting reproductions.

---

## Biographical / Historical

John Stevens (1749 1838) of New York, inventor and engineer, graduated from King's College (now Columbia University) in 1768. Admitted to the New York Bar in 1771, he served as treasurer of New Jersey during the

Revolutionary War. He became interested in steam powered navigation in 1787 and for the next fifty years was active in building and promoting steam boats and trains, securing numerous patents, and inventing such important developments as the screw propellor. He established the worlds first steam ferry, between New York City and Hoboken, New Jersey and later built the first operating steam locomotive in the United States Stevens secured a charter from the Legislature of Pennsylvania for the Pennsylvania Railroad, from Philadelphia to Lancaster County. Two of John Stevens' seven sons, Robert and Edwin were also prominent engineers and developers of transportation equipment who collaborated with their father.

---

## Scope and Contents

The main component of this collection is a double-spaced typewritten document of 858 pages transcribed (apparently in 1903) from original records and consisting of correspondence, newspaper articles, technical descriptions, legal documents, and other material relating to John Stevens, his professional work and career. Some of the correspondence is between Stevens and his rival inventors, such as Robert Fulton, credited with producing the first steamboat.

Other documents in the collection are the original papers incorporating the Danville and Pottsville RR in 1831 and a carefully detailed survey and cost estimate of the Camden and Amboy RR in 1830.

---

## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

### Subjects:

- Locomotive builders
- Locomotives
- Railroads -- 19th century
- Steam engineering
- Steam engineers
- Steam-engines
- Steamboats

### Types of Materials:

- Correspondence -- 1930-1950

### Names:

- Camden and Amboy Railroad.
- Danville & Pottsville Railroad Company
- National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Transportation

### Places:

- New Jersey
- Pennsylvania

## Container Listing

Box 1, Folder 1	Record of typed material, 1903
Box 1, Folder 2	pp. 74-144 of typed material, 1813 Notes: Correspondence of John Stevens with William J. Duane of Pennsylvania State Legislature and others relative to a project for elimination of a sandbar that obstructed navigation of the Delaware River below Trenton, NJ. A 20 page letter ("statement of facts") of Robert Fulton to Cadwallader Colden, Esq. detailing alleged misdeeds and false claims of John Stevens relevant to steamboats. Also draft agreements between John Stevens and Robert Fulton and others regarding rights of steamboat navigation on the Delaware, Chesapeake, Santee, Savannah and Connecticut Rivers and between Providence and Newport.
Box 1, Folder 3	pp. 145-208 of typed material, 1813 Notes: Letters of John Stevens to Cadwallader Colden, including a 52 page reply (apparently never sent to Colden) to Robert Fulton's "statement of facts" (see folder 2), detailing Stevens' negotiations with Fulton and Livingston over rights to operate steamboats and Stevens' history of inventions and improvements in developing the steamboat.
Box 1, Folder 6	pp. 344-374 of typed material, 1830-1879 Notes: 6 pp. 344-374 of typed material Philadelphia newspaper account of first run of new steamboat Burlington on Delaware and testimonials to John Stevens. Secretary of Treasury Samuel D. Ingham's letter to John Stevens inviting suggestions for means of preventing explosions of steam boilers. Extract from 7th edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica on American development of steam navigation giving large credit to Robert L. Stevens. Letter of Stevens' four sons offering for exhibition a replica of John Stevens' 1804 steamboat. Opinion of three judges appointed by the American Institute who after examining Stevens' 1804 replica, attested to its validity as to time of manufacture and to design of screw propellor. "Reminiscence of an Old Traveler" describing career of John Stevens. New York World newspaper account of development of Hoboken ferry service by John Stevens and his sons, including the "horseboats" (paddle wheel ferries driven by horses).
Box 1, Folder 4	pp. 209-279 of typed material, 1814-1818 Notes: 4 pp. 209-279 of typed material Correspondence of John Stevens with Robert L. Stevens (his son) regarding manufacture of steamboats and with James A. Stevens (son) including notes by John Stevens on possible steamboat routes and resulting revenues in Europe. Application to James Monroe, U.S. Secretary of State, for a patent on methods for propelling boats (the U.S. Patent Office at that time was in the Department of State). Correspondence of John Stevens and Louis Condit, U.S. Representative from New Jersey, regarding Congressional action to extend Stevens' patents. Letter by Stevens

stating his intention to sue "the owners of the Burlington boat" for infringement of Stevens' and Fulton's patents. Letter by Stevens to W.A. Duer on principles of hydro dynamics of paddle wheels. Report of NC legislature's committee on claims of Robert Fulton and Oliver Evans which were in conflict with Stevens' patents regarding navigation by steamboats in NC and other states

Box 1, Folder 5

pp. 280-343 of typed material, 1819-1825

Notes:

Several documents asking relief by the legislatures of New York and Pennsylvania from grants of exclusive rights of steamboat navigation to Fulton and Livingston. Proposals for improving navigation above tide water on the Susquehanna and Delaware Rivers by a new system of locks invented by John Stevens. An act by the Pennsylvania Legislature authorizing construction of such locks. An agreement between three of Stevens' sons to establish the Union Line of steamboats to run from Philadelphia to Trenton and New Brunswick in New Jersey

Box 1, Folder 7

pp. 375-402 of typed material, circa 1826-1829

Notes:

John Stevens' technical descriptions of steam pipes, boilers and other components of steam engines.

Box 1, Folder 8

pp. 403-431 of typed material, undated

Notes:

John Stevens' "Essay on High Pressure Steam Engines" including disasters resulting from explosion of steam boilers.

Box 1, Folder 9

pp. 432-444 of typed material, circa 1850

Notes:

Sketch of John Stevens' life and work from Prof. Robert H. Thurston's "Growth of the Steam Engine." This contains detailed descriptions of Stevens' technical improvements in steamboats and trains.

Box 1, Folder 10

pp. 445-525 of typed material

Notes:

"Pamphlet on Railroads" by John Stevens, originally released in 1812 and republished with a preface by Charles King in 1852. This pamphlet proposed the construction of a railroad from Lake Erie to Albany in lieu of a canal which had been proposed by a New York State Commission. Stevens' railroad, which would have propelled a 100 ton cargo at four miles per hour using a 20 horse power steam engine, was estimated by him to cost only one third the projected outlay for the canal. Stevens' proposal was rejected by a New York State government committee which had doubts about the feasibility of the scheme.

Box 1, Folder 11

pp. 526-553 of typed material, 1812-1815

Notes:

Letters and statements by John Stevens proposing the construction of railroads between various points in New Jersey.

Box 1, Folder 12

pp. 554-577 of typed material

Notes:

Letter to President James Madison dated 3/9/1816 from John Stevens proposing construction of a combined railroad water transportation system from Providence, RI to Savannah, Georgia,

a distance of more than 1,000 miles. Stevens argued this route would reduce transit time by half and would have important national defense benefits by avoiding the risks of enemy naval interference with commerce on the open seas (as in the war of 1812). A letter (unsigned) to Senator Calhoun (1/22/1817) seeking U.S. Government support for a Trenton New Brunswick (NJ) railroad. John Stevens' letter to President Monroe (10/21/1818) further supporting railroads. Letter to W.H. Crawford, Secretary of the Treasury (10/31/1818) further asking public support for railroads. Letter to Thomas Jefferson (11/7/1818) and a reply from Jefferson (11/23/1818) pleading "infirmities of age" for not reading Stevens' papers, but supporting generally "every improvement which may better the condition of mankind". A similar reply from James Madison (11/17/1818). A letter to W.H. Crawford (11/27/1818) and reply (12/4/1818) stating that no money was available to support Stevens' plans.

Box 1, Folder 13

pp. 581-593 of typed material, 1819-1920

Notes:

Letters by Stevens to John Jay and William Duane proposing railroad construction in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Letter to John Stevens from his son, James A. Stevens, raising questions about feasibility of using wooden railway tracks.

Box 1, Folder 14

pp. 595-678 of typed material, 1821-1823

Notes:

Letters and memorials to state legislatures of New York and Pennsylvania proposing construction of railroads including routes from Philadelphia or Harrisburg to Pittsburgh, and from Utica to Albany. Text of a bill introduced in Pennsylvania Legislature to authorize construction of a "Pennsylvania Railroad" from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh by John Stevens. A paper written by Stevens to induce sales of Pennsylvania Railroad stock. "Journal of Route of Railroad" begun by Stevens on 7/14/1823 which was a survey of the proposed route from Philadelphia to the Susquehanna.

Box 1, Folder 15

pp. 679-702 of typed material, 1823-1824

Notes:

Letter to John Stevens from Timothy Dewey in Liverpool, England on railroad construction problems and railroad stock prices there. Stevens letter to director of Pennsylvania Railroad and letter to Matthew Carey. Patent granted to Stevens for method of railroad construction (tracks elevated on pillars).

Box 1, Folder 16

pp. 703-760 of typed material, 1824-1826

Notes:

Letters and memoranda of John Stevens relating to construction of railroads and comparison of efficiency of using horses or steam as motive power. Letters promoting the concept of railroads and the bright economic future for them. .

Box 1, Folder 17

pp. 761-802 of typed material, 1826-1830

Notes:

Letters to DeWitt Clinton and others promoting the proposal of a railroad from Albany to New York City. A description of Stevens' proposed "Improvements in the construction of railways, steam carriages and steam engines adapted thereto". Additional

descriptions of Stevens' proposal for improving steam driven "inclined planes" and the engines for powering them. Letter to Martin Van Buren, Secretary of State, outlining improvements Stevens foresaw in railroads.

Box 1, Folder 18

[pp. 803-858 of typed material, 1822-1852](#)

Notes: Papers by Stevens on various subjects, including: the superiority of railroads over canals and steamboats; elevated railways; high pressure steam engines; comparison of Stevens' engines with those used in England. Finally, a eulogy of Stevens by Senator Stockton of New Jersey in 1852.

Box 2, Folder 1

Original folders, 1831

Notes: Handwritten documents recording establishment of Danville and Pottsville Railroad.

Box 2, Folder 2

Danville & Pottsville RR. Documents, 1831

Notes: Detailed survey and cost estimates for construction of the Camden and Amboy Railroad submitted by John Wilson, civil engineer, 1830.

Box 2, Folder 3

Survey & Cost estimate, Camden & Amboy RR, 1830

Notes: Original folders (4 in number) of 858 page document.

Box 2, Folder 4

Duplicates

Notes: Duplicate pages for 858 page document.