

Letter from Robert Fulton to George Washington about Canal Building, February 5, 1797

LONDON, February 5th, 1797.

SIR, - Last evening Mr. King presented me with your Letter acquainting me of the Receipt of my publication on Small Canals, which I hope you will soon have time to Peruse in a tranquil retirement from the Buisy (sic) operations of a Public Life. Therefore looking forward to that period when the whole force of your Mind will Act upon the Internal improvement of our Country, by Promoting Agriculture and Manufactures : I have little doubt but easy Conveyance, the Great agent to other improvements will have its due weight And meet your patronage.

For the mode of giving easy Communication to every part of the American States, I beg leave to draw your Particular attention to the Last Chapter on Creative Canals; and the expanded mind will trace down the time when they will penetrate into every district Carrying with them the means of facilitating Manual Labour and rendering it productive. But how to Raise a Sum in the different States has been my greatest difficulty. I first Considered them as National Works. But perhaps [Image 2] an Incorporated Company of Subscribers, who should be bound to apply half or a part of their profits to extension would be the best mode. As it would then be their interest to Promote the work: And guard their emoluments.

That such a Work would answer to Subscribers appears from such Informations as I have Collected, Relative to the Carriage from the neighbourhood of Lancaster, to Philadelphia. To me it appears that a Canal on the Small Scale might have been made to Lancaster for 120 thousand £ and that the carriage at 20 shillings per ton would pay 14 thousand per annum of which 7000 to Subscribers and 7000 to extension. By this means in about 10 years they would touch the Susquehanna, and the trade would then so much increase as to produce 30,000 per annum, of which 15,000 to Subscribers, the Remainder to extension; Continuing this till in about 20 years the Canal would run into Lake Erie, Yielding a produce of 100,000 per annum or 50 thousand £ to Subscribers which is 40 per cent.; hence the Inducement to subscribe to such undertakings.

Proceeding in this manner I find that In about 60 or 70 years Pensilvania (sic) would have 9360 miles of Canal equal to Bringing Water Carriage within the easy Reach of every house, nor would any house be more than 10 or 14 miles from a Canal. By this time the whole Carriage of the country would Come on Water even to Passengers -and following the present Rate of Carriage on the Lancaster Road, it appears that the tolls would amount to 4,000,000 per year. Yet no one would pay more than 21 shillings and 8d per ton whatever might be the distance Conveyed; the whole would also be Pond Canal on which there is an equal facility of conveyance each way. Having made this Calculation to Show that the Creative System, would be productive of Great emolument, to Subscribers, it is only further to be observed that if each State was to Commence a Creative System It would fill the whole Country, and in Less than a Century bring Water Carriage within the easy Cartage of every Acre of the American States, — conveying the Surplus Labours of one hundred Millions of Men.

Hence Seeing that by System this must be the Result, I feel anxious that the Public mind may be awakened to their true Interest: And Instead of directing Turnpike Roads towards the Interior Country or expending Large Sums in River Navigations — Which must ever be precarious and lead — I could wish to See the Labour, and funds applied to Such a System As would penetrate the Interior Country And bind the Whole In the bonds of Social Intercourse.

The Importance of this Subject I hope will plead my excuse for troubeling (sic) you with So long a Letter, And in expectation of being Favoured with your thoughts on the System and mode of Carrying it into effect, I remain with the utmost

Esteem and Sincere Respect,

Your most obedient Servant

ROBT. FULTON