Among the thousands of documents preserved in the British Library’s holdings of the papers of Horatio Nelson is a brief note, dated 4 September 1805, from one Robert Francis, writing from 13 Sackville Street, Piccadilly; the writer sought an interview with Lord Nelson concerning the former’s naval inventions, while the Admiral was on his last brief visit to England. The note does not appear in Sir Nicholas H. Nicolas’s standard edition, The Dispatches and Letters of Vice-Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson, 7 vols. (London, 1844–6). The document (Add. MS. 34931, ff. 68–69v; fig. 1) relates clearly to naval matters, but seems at first sight to have no more significance than the other countless similar requests from promoters of far-fetched projects frequently received by men of Nelson’s fame and then usually ignored.

In fact, however, ‘Robert Francis’ was the name adopted by the noted American naval inventor Robert Fulton (1765–1815), then resident and working in London. He seems to have used the name Francis during his transactions with Pitt’s Government between 1804 and 1806 (see below), in order to mislead French spies, but to have dropped it thereafter. Fulton was an active promoter of steam power as the energy source of the future, and of submarine warfare; some of his views appear unorthodox today. He seems to have seen submarines and submarine bombs primarily as a means ultimately of promoting free trade, by clearing the seas of navies; however, such views, or variations of them, were held by many of the more radically inclined men of his day. Fulton was of course far from being the first or the only experimenter in Britain or America in his chosen fields of work; he had built partly on the work of others. Up to 1805, however, his career, both as a pioneer in steam navigation and in submarine warfare, had proved only partially successful at best. His early attempts, in England in the 1790s, at innovations in canal-planning and steam propulsion had made little impact. He had then sought patronage from the French. The wars with France appeared to provide an opening for Fulton’s submarine weapons; his experiments attracted some support at first, arousing the interest of Napoleon, but his submarine experiments in France were pronounced a failure (the vessel, the Nautilus, sank). A torpedo attack on the British fleet also failed. French officialdom, initially supportive, moreover, had come to treat Fulton’s weapons coolly; it was felt by many that their use was dishonourable, unethical and inhumane. Napoleonic France had also proved distasteful to Fulton, a firm republican, and so, a disappointed man, he had resolved to change sides. Napoleon had become finally fully aware of the potential of Fulton’s work, but his last-minute efforts to secure
Fulton's services failed, and Fulton, after some encouragement from the British government, had returned to Britain via Holland in April 1804.

Fulton, tireless in adversity, proceeded to seek support for his projects from a number of senior British ministers, including Lord Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty, the Home Secretary Lord Hawkesbury, Lord Castlereagh, President of the Board of Control and Secretary of State for War, and, not least, William Pitt, the Prime Minister. Members of Pitt's administration and of succeeding governments, including Lord Grenville, a future Prime Minister, were to receive detailed letters and papers from Fulton concerning his submarine navigation plans and his projects for developing naval mines and torpedoes. The British had known of Fulton's earlier work, and, despite
reservations on the part of some parties, at first proved ready to encourage him. Many of Fulton’s letters to statesmen and others in the years 1804–6 have been published, including a number of his ‘Francis’ letters, but the present manuscript seems not to have been noted.

Fulton had after initial disappointments met with some success in gaining a contract and money from the Admiralty under Lord Melville. The latter was attempting to reform the navy, and to bring new energy and ideas into play. Success at sea for Fulton was slow in coming, however. The first planned attack on the French fleet at Boulogne in 1804, using Fulton’s submarine bombs or ‘coffers’, ended in failure; only one torpedo fired and the rest were easily destroyed. Attacks on the fleet at Calais and again at Boulogne in 1805 were no more successful. The removal from office of his notable ally, Lord Melville, in April 1805 had been a further setback. Fulton was now looking for new backing for his weapons from one of the most successful seamen of his time, and one of the most popular men in Britain. Fulton’s note is brief but his message conveys nothing but optimism before arguably the greatest exponent of traditional naval skills:

My Lord

had Mr Davison been in Town he was to do me the honor of introducing me to your Lordship; I am the inventor of what has been called submarine navigation carcasses[?] and the kind craft [sic] known by the name of Catamarans with which inventions I conceive your Lordship might do much execution in many cases of blockade – it is on the application of those engines I wished [ed crossed out] to see your Lordship and as I am convinced you will find the explanation of them interesting I should be extremely happy to have a few minutes conversation before you leave Town, if you will be so good as to mention an hour when I may wait on you either here or in town, you will much oblige your Lordships

Most obedient and very humble
Servant
Robt Francis

September the 4th 1805
Sackville Street piccadilly
No. 13

Nelson does seem to have been open to some extent to new ideas about naval warfare, though on the whole he expected to beat the enemy primarily by using the old, tested methods, employed flexibly with his usual skill and planning. He knew of the work of Francis, and of other inventors, such as Colonel William Congreve the rocket expert, but was to tell Castlereagh on 3 October, probably in connection with Congreve’s rockets, that while rockets might annoy the enemy fleet ‘I depend more upon hunger for driving them out, and upon the gallant officers and men under my command for their destruction, than any invention.’ However various plans for rockets and mines and other devices were in circulation at the time; the use of mines and submarines could well have proved an effective way of damaging and unnerving the enemy, and Nelson would not have been slow to spot this; any interview between the two men might then have proved
momentous and fruitful. If Fulton had won Nelson's backing earlier, he might well have gained more Government support, and his later opponents, the Whigs, might have been more ready to assist him. Although Fulton's record up to then would not have commanded much respect in higher naval circles, the practical Nelson might well now have proved more responsive to new inventions than many other naval leaders of his time, particularly if Fulton had had the backing, as he claimed, of Davison, Nelson's close friend.

Why had Fulton not contacted Nelson earlier? He was an obvious man to approach. Probably Fulton had felt for a time that his government work, paid for with official finance, might have been progressing promisingly, and that there was no need for more supporters. The major problem was, probably, that Nelson for most of the period was at sea, seeking out the enemy. Only for brief intervals, such as during this visit home near the end of his life, was Nelson available for interview, and available to Fulton as a potential backer.

In fact there appear to be no more references to any meeting in Nelson's papers. The letter's endorsements provide no clue as to what, if anything, happened later. It is not even certain that Nelson received the letter (unless at sea). The note clearly reached Merton, but when is not known; no address appears on the letter; it may have gone first to a London address, as Fulton seems to indicate. A secretary has endorsed the letter, but that could mean that the letter was simply filed, unseen and unanswered. The name 'Robert Francis' may not have meant very much to a secretary.

The course of events in September 1805 makes it highly unlikely that Nelson ever arranged to meet Fulton. News had reached Nelson on 2 September that the enemy fleets had left Cadiz. William Pitt and Nelson had agreed earlier, on the 1st, on a plan of action, and Pitt had put Nelson in command, to act if the enemy fleets should sail from port. Nelson's last days in Britain were consequently largely spent in farewell dinners and frantic preparations for sailing to rejoin the fleet. He was to set sail from Portsmouth for the last time on 15 September.

Once Nelson was at sea, Castlereagh and others were keen to employ Fulton's mines and Congreve's rockets against the enemy at Boulogne and, under Nelson's guidance, at Cadiz. Nelson proved willing to try the inventions, though sceptical about the chances of success. Nelson wrote: 'About twelve sail of the line are anchored in the great Bay; and if gun and guard-boats, which I should suppose are pretty numerous, do not prevent them, the way is open to Mr Francis. But I have but little faith; however, that is for his Majesty's Ministers: he shall have every assistance from me.'

Ironically, since Nelson's departure success had finally come to Fulton. He managed on 15 October 1805, probably with the support of Alexander Davison and others, to arrange for improved torpedoes to be tested against a 200-ton Danish brig, the Dorothea, off Walmer; the brig was destroyed. '[The explosion] lifted the brig almost bodily and broke her completely in two', Fulton reported to Lord Castlereagh: '...she did not appear to make more resistance than a bag of feathers, and went to pieces like a shattered egg-shell.' Fulton became the first man in history to sink a large vessel with torpedoes.
Fig. 2. Fulton’s sketches of the destruction of the *Dorothea* by submarine bombs. Add. MS. 71593, f. 138v
A memorial/report prepared by Fulton on the experiment is preserved in a recently-acquired portion of the Dropmore Papers, the papers of Lord Grenville (Add. MS. 71593, ff. 131–143v), illustrated with Fulton’s sketch drawings (fig. 2).

The immediate results of the success for Fulton were more money, and another letter to Nelson from Lord Castlereagh; it was planned that Fulton and Congreve were to supply the weapons to enable the Royal Navy to attack Cadiz. Castlereagh wrote on 27 October:

Since your Lordship sailed, the power of Mr Francis’s instrument have [sic] been satisfactorily ascertained by an experiment upon a large vessel purchased for that purpose...I hope to forward both these weapons soon to your lordship, and I am sure your lordship will facilitate their application.

Nelson never received this letter; he died while defeating the enemy fleet at Trafalgar. The battle both established Britain’s naval supremacy and in effect ended Fulton’s plans as far as they involved Britain. Great Britain, it is true, for a time still feared invasion, but now, it was decided, had no need of new weapons. The elements also turned against Fulton. Boisterous weather caused the attack on Boulogne to be postponed, this time finally. Some of those who formerly supported Fulton, moreover, now began to change sides. He did not help his case by seeking from Pitt in January 1806 the incredible sum of £100,000 for his services, with additional extras, such as the continuation of his annual pension of £2,500. The final formal end to all his plans came with the death of Pitt in January 1806. His contract expired; the new Whig/Grenville administration showed next to no interest in his work, and took little or no action to assist him; they were also in no hurry to meet his claims. He was to stay on in Britain for nearly another year, attempting in vain to obtain backing and the money he believed was owing to him for his work, but, frustrated, left Europe with a small sum, awarded grudgingly by Grenville’s arbitrators, to arrive back in the United States in December 1806.

This general initial caution on the part of governments and people was in part understandable, especially in the light of Fulton’s past uneven performance. His failure in Britain to impress with his ideas for weaponry, as well as with his steam power experiments, was also partly due to continued moral objections to his labours. Many British people as well as French were reluctant to consider the use of Fulton’s weapons, believing them to be unethical, with potentially fearsome consequences likely to arise from their use. Certainly one of the witnesses of the Dorothea experiment of 1805, Fulton’s friend, Edmund Cartwright, cleric and inventor of the power-loom, who had for some time shared his interest in steam power and its application, would have agreed:

I have thought much on the subject, and cannot but conclude that were your invention adopted to the extent you think it capable of, it would be equally ruinous and destructive to the trade of every maritime power, and therefore I sincerely hope for the general happiness of mankind it will never be resorted to.

Cartwright in fact was to be one of the arbitrators appointed in 1806 to settle on Fulton’s
compensation. He thereby was to perform a small final service for his friend, though not one fully appreciated by Fulton.9

Fortunately Fulton had never severed all links with America; he had continued experiments with steamboats there in partnership with others, and from 1807, with official approval, he was to become a successful pioneer in the United States in the conveying of passengers and goods by steam power, following satisfactory tests with his vessel, the Clermont. He was also to build there in 1814 the first steam-propelled warship, the Demologos, or Fulton the First.

After Nelson's death, a disappointed Fulton was still to employ his talents both on steamboat experiments for peaceful purposes, and on weapons of destruction; he was to do so, however, for his native United States.10 Fulton's steam navigation successes, if they had come about in Britain with official backing, might well have speeded up the adoption of steam power for naval purposes. As it was, Britain's naval authorities continued for a time largely to delay the use of steam power. Naval experts and seamen, moreover, on whom governments were dependent for advice, continued to disagree among themselves as to the value of work such as his. Steam power was not widely adopted for naval use in Britain until the 1830s, and as late as the 1850s old naval hands believed that steam propulsion could not function in heavy seas. This British neglect meant that Fulton's successes with steam navigation and naval warfare in the States after 1806 helped in effect rather to bring about the gradual undermining of British naval superiority later in the century.

Nelson at Merton, then, in early September 1805 was feverishly settling his affairs, and saying farewell to family and friends.11 It is very unlikely that he found time for a hurried meeting with Fulton while preparing for his journey to Portsmouth, if, indeed, he ever knew of the letter from 'Mr Francis'. However, a great number of Nelson's letters and papers survive, notably in the British Library, but also in a number of institutions and collections all over the world, and more information may still survive hidden in Nelson correspondence. Perhaps Fulton's large collection of papers in the United States, also divided up between several institutions, might reveal more.12 The latter also wrote much about his experiments and on his problems with British officialdom,13 and it is possible that some pamphlet or letter may cast more light on the matter.

It is far more likely, however, that the rush of events made such a meeting impossible. It seems, therefore, that this unnoticed - and probably unread - note from 'Robert Francis' is the only evidence that such a potentially historic encounter was ever contemplated. Trafalgar then not only made Britain master of the seas; it led to the death of the victor, Nelson, helped to postpone for years British adoption of steam power, and also dealt a severe blow to the British prospects of a then little-known American inventor, a man, however, about to make major advances in the application of steam to travel by sea.

210
For instance, see Fulton to Paul Barras, 27 Oct. 1798; Add. MS. 35747, f. 53.

Fulton himself claimed that sources told him that the action of 1804 made seamen and citizens at Boulogne hostile to any plan of invasion.

Alexander Davison, government contractor, and agent for Lord Nelson; fined and imprisoned for fraud in 1808. I can trace no reference to Fulton or to his schemes in Nelson's letters to Davison in 1805, including September 1805 (Egerton MS. 2240), or elsewhere.

This word can mean iron shells, but was also used by Fulton to indicate underwater bombs. It is faintly underlined, perhaps by Fulton, but more likely by a secretary of Nelson's.

Nelson stayed in Albemarle Street on occasions from late August 1805; see Nicolas, op. cit., vol. vii, pp. 18–19. He was certainly in town on the 2nd; either he, or perhaps his friend Scott or a servant ordered three pipes—a very large quantity—of port from a wine merchant, James Lavel of St Martin's Lane; the bill was auctioned in Aylsham, Norfolk, in September 1805. Other bills, including some from Aug.-Sept. 1805, were sold at Sothebys, 13 Dec. 1994, lot 339.


See William Barclay Parsons, Robert Fulton and the Submarine (New York, 1922). For one of Fulton’s attempts to see Lord Grenville, the Prime Minister, see Add. MS. 59282, ff. 115–116v (Fulton to Grenville, 20 June 1806).

Cartwright to Fulton, 29 Aug. 1806; Add. MS. 71593, f. 131v. Cartwright seems to have been writing to Lord Grenville as late as 9 Oct. 1806 on ‘Fulton's business’, according to a Letter Register in the Dropmore Papers, Add. MS. 69072, f. 18r; the letter seems to have gone to Thomas Grenville at the Admiralty, but its contents and any further action cannot be traced in the Dropmore or Thomas Grenville Papers in the British Library. For Fulton’s letters to Cartwright see [Margaret Strickland?], A Memoir of Edmund Cartwright (1843; reprinted Bath, 1971). The present letter does not appear there.

In 1814, however, Fulton seems to have created a floating battery, propelled by steam and sail power; see Melville Castle Muniments, 2/530/1–2, memorandum by Col. Barclay, 23 Nov. 1814, referred to in John W. Raimo, A Guide to Manuscripts Relating to America in Great Britain and Ireland, rev. edn (London, 1979), p. 288.

For Nelson's last days in Britain, see for instance Tom Pocock, Nelson (London, 1987).

Fulton’s papers are now to be found in a number of American institutions, including the Library of Congress, New York Public Library, the New York Historical Society and Columbia University. There are also apparently some papers in the Patent Office Library; see F. D. Herbert, Robert Fulton’s Original Drawings (New York, 1934).

For instance, Robert Fulton, Torpedo War and Submarine Explosions (New York, 1810).