

The Ghost Ship on the Delaware

By Steven Ujifusa

For PlanPhilly

Thousands pass by the Ghost Ship on the Delaware River every day. They speed past it on Columbus Boulevard, I-95, and the Walt Whitman Bridge. They glance at it while shopping at IKEA. For some, it is just another eyesore on Philadelphia's desolate waterfront, no different from the moldering old cruisers and troop transports moored in the South Philadelphia Navy Yard.



The Ghost Ship on the Delaware.

www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org

Some may pull over to the side of the road and take a closer look through a barbed wire fence. They then realize that the Ghost Ship is of a different pedigree than an old troop transport. Its two finned funnels, painted in faded red, white and blue, are dramatically raked back. Its superstructure is low and streamlined, lacking the balconies and large picture windows that make today's cruise ships look like floating condominiums. Its hull is yacht-like, defined by a thrusting prow and gracefully rounded stern.

Looking across the river to Camden, one might see that the hull of the Ghost Ship bears more than a passing resemblance to the low-slung, sweeping one of the battleship U.S.S. *New Jersey*. This ship is imposing without being ponderous, sleek but still dignified. Even though her engines fell silent almost forty years ago, she still appears to be thrusting ahead at forty knots into the gray seas of the North Atlantic.

Finally, if one takes the time to look at the bow of the Ghost Ship, it is clear that she has no ordinary name. The letters, streaked with rust, spell out: *United States*. Why was she considered worthy of such a name? What was her original purpose? And how did this clearly once-mighty vessel end up in Philadelphia?

The Story of William Francis Gibbs and his Ship of Dreams

The S.S. *United States*, like many triumphs of construction, was a product of engineering innovation and artistic inspiration. Her designer, William Francis Gibbs, did not attain his ultimate goal until late in life. Throughout his entire career, he was motivated by a dream that started during his Philadelphia boyhood.

Born in 1886, Gibbs came from a prominent Philadelphia family. Like many well-to-do fathers with gifted sons, the elder Gibbs insisted that his son become a lawyer. The son's passions lay elsewhere. While an undergraduate at Harvard, Gibbs spent most of his time teaching himself the fundamentals of engineering and naval architecture. While other students studied the Latin and Greek, Gibbs created his own naval architecture curriculum in his dorm room, studying the designs of the latest British warships.¹



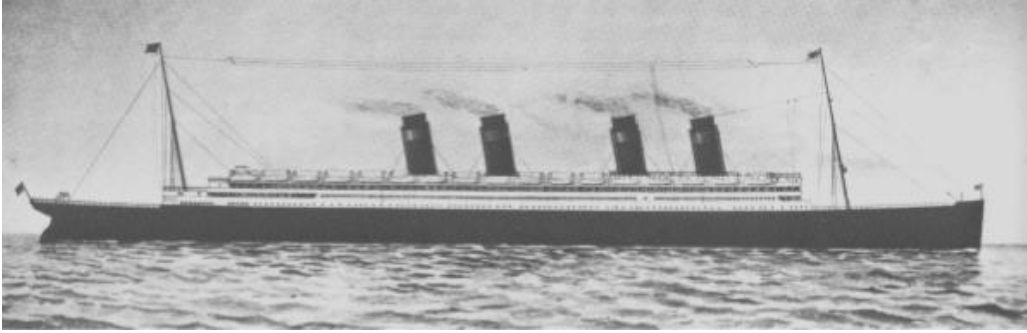
William Francis Gibbs (1886-1967)

www.ss-united-states.net/WebPages/PagesGibbs.htm

Soon after graduating from Columbia Law School, Gibbs turned his back on the career his father had chosen for him. He formed a naval architecture firm in partnership with his brother Frederic, which eventually became known as Gibbs and Cox. In 1916, he started plans for a thousand-foot long American superliner to rival ships such as Britain's *Olympic* and *Titanic*.² In fact, Gibbs secured the same financial backers as the ill-fated *Titanic*: J.P. Morgan and Company.³ World War I interfered with his plans, and the American superliner project was indefinitely postponed.

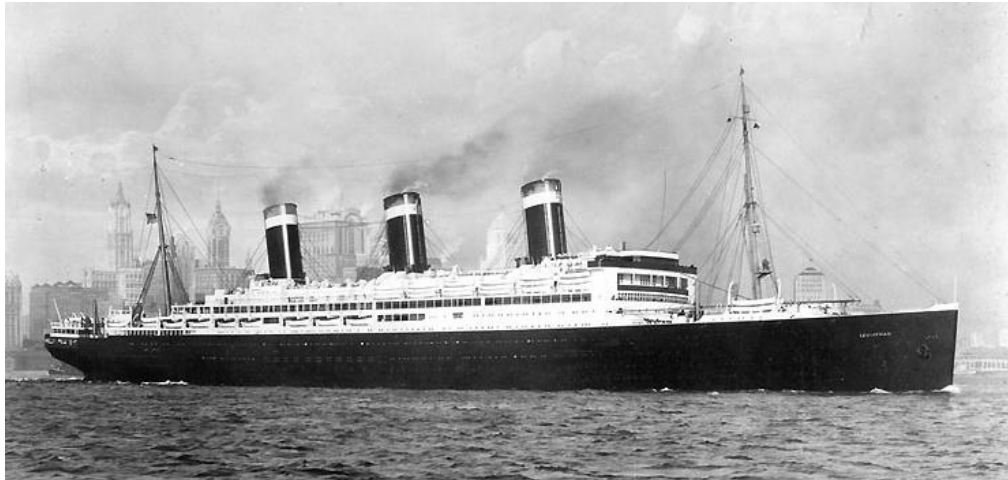
After the war, the superliner project remained on hold. Instead, Gibbs was given the task of rehabilitating the former German imperial flagship *Vaterland*, built in 1914 and the largest ship in the world. The liner had been caught in New York at the start of the war and had been seized by the United States government for use as a troop transport. When the German builders demanded \$1 million for the ship's blueprints, Gibbs audaciously decided to redesign the battered ship from scratch.⁴ The rechristened *Leviathan* emerged in 1923 as the flagship of the United States Lines, a faster, more efficient, and more

luxurious liner than the original, and a tribute to Gibbs' mastery of his craft. In 1940, Gibbs and Cox completed the *America*, one of the most advanced vessels of the day and boasting many of the features that would later find their way into the "United States. Although superbly engineered and elegantly decorated, the 35,000 ton *America* was too small to satisfy Gibbs' ultimate goal.



Preliminary sketch of Gibbs' first designs for a 1,000 foot long superliner made c.1914. Note the resemblance to the ill-fated *Titanic*.

<http://www.ss-united-states.net/WebPages/PagesGibbs.htm>



Perhaps Gibbs' most challenging assignment was the transformation of the seized German superliner *Vaterland* (built in 1914 and then the largest ship in the world) from a U.S. Army World War I troopship into the S.S. *Leviathan* without the aid of the original builder's plans.

www.history.navy.mil/photos/images/h43000/h43553.jpg



The S.S. *America* of 1940. Although luxurious and revolutionary in design, at 35,000 gross tons she was far smaller than the superliner that Gibbs truly wanted to build. Gibbs would incorporate many of her design features into the S.S. *United States*. Her shattered hull now lies wrecked on a Canary Islands beach.

www.simplonpc.co.uk/ChandrisAustralis02.html

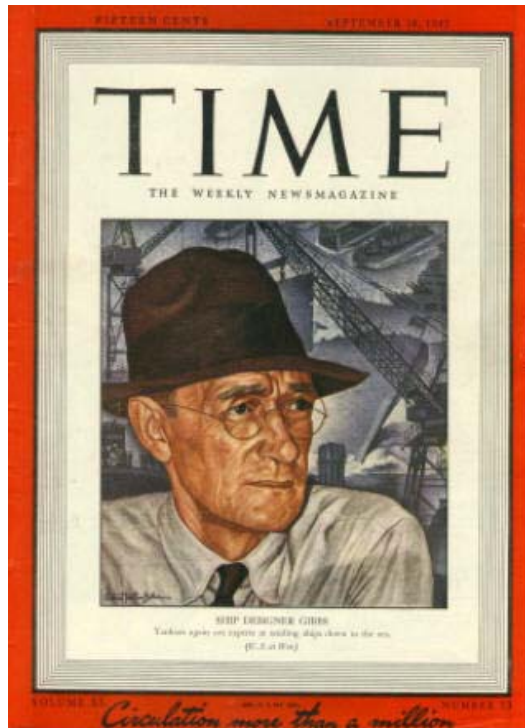
See the S.S. *America* on a leisurely cruise to Bermuda in 1963, the year before she was sold to the Chandris Line to become the immigrant ship *Australis*. Her big sister *United States* can be seen at their New York pier.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=sexpP0decXM

During World War II, the firm of Gibbs and Cox oversaw the designing of hundreds of destroyers and Liberty ships. Gibbs was impressed with the troop carrying capacities of the British liners *Queen Mary* (1936) and *Queen Elizabeth* (1940). During one Atlantic crossing, the 83,000 ton *Queen Mary* carried 16,000 troops and crew, the largest number of people ever on a single vessel. Such feats of transport led Winston Churchill to say that the troop carrying capacity of the two *Queens* shortened the war in Europe by at least a year. He wrote:

Built for the arts of peace and to link the Old World with the New, the *Queens* challenged the fury of Hitlerism in the Battle of the Atlantic. Without their aid the day of final victory must unquestionably have been postponed.⁵

The United States government, which had relied on ships such as the *Queen Mary* to transport their troops to the European front, took notice of such statements. After the scrapping of the 54,000 ton *Leviathan* in 1938, there was no such comparably sized liner remaining in the American merchant marine.

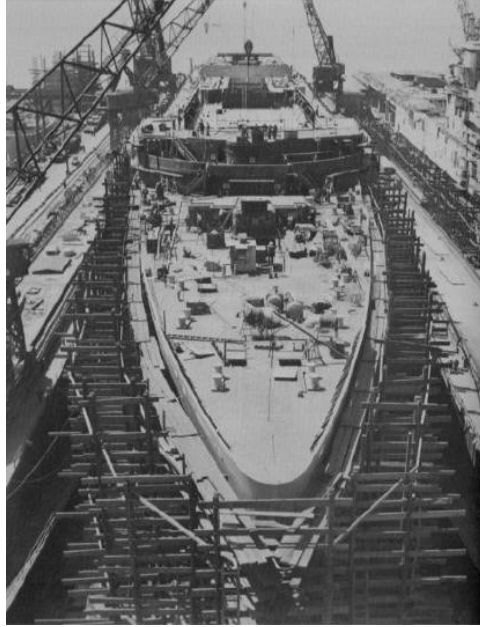


William Francis Gibbs on the cover of *Time*, September 28, 1942. Gibbs' contribution to the war effort added to his reputation as a naval architect.

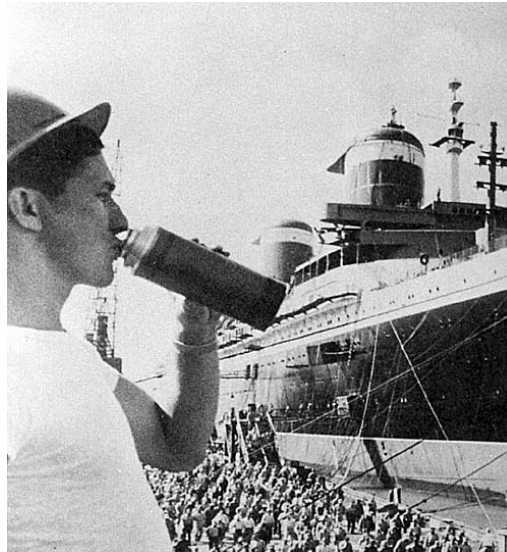
<http://www.ss-united-states.net/WebPages/PagesGibbs.htm>

By the war's end, Gibbs' reputation as a naval architect was second to none. The firm of Gibbs and Cox had designed an incredible 70% of all military tonnage built during World War II.⁶ The time was right for him to finally design his 1,000 foot long superliner. The United States Lines, impressed with Gibbs' previous passenger liner work, gave him the green light to proceed with the most advanced and refined liner in the world.

Gibbs' plans had to satisfy the requirements of two parties. The United States Lines, tired of playing second fiddle to British and French competitors, wanted a ship that would be appealing to passengers. The United States military, which was paying for the majority of the project's \$70 million price tag, wanted a ship built to naval specifications. That meant she had to be fast, fireproof and able to stay afloat after taking multiple torpedo hits. She also had to be able to be converted from an ocean liner carrying 2,000 passengers to a troop ship carrying 15,000 soldiers in 48 hours. After extensive testing and revisions of plans, construction on the S.S. "United States" commenced in 1950 in the shipyards of Newport News, Virginia.

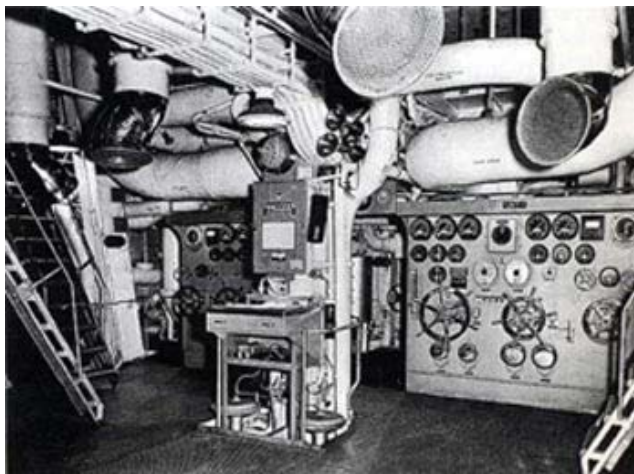


The S.S. *United States* under construction in Newport News, Virginia, c.1950.
www.oceanlinermuseum.co.uk



A shipyard worker takes a break. Hundreds of his colleagues stream aboard to install the vessels machinery and interiors. www.ssunitedstates.org

To meet the demands of both the passenger trade and the United States military, the offices of Gibbs and Cox fashioned a ship that was long and low in profile, with an overall length of 990 feet and a width of 100 feet, and a gross tonnage of 52,000, making her considerably lighter than the *Queen Mary*. To save on weight, Gibbs had the superstructure, masts and funnels of the ship made out of aluminum, while the hull was built of steel plating of the highest grade. The *United States* had four propellers driven by steam turbines that produced an unheard of 240,000 horsepower, even as the ship's propeller configuration and underwater shape were classified secrets.



One of the ship's two engine rooms. The ship could steam 10,000 miles without refueling.
www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org

Gibbs was not much interested in a ship with luxurious interiors. The furniture and fittings were designed to be removed quickly so that the she could be converted into a troop carrier. Unlike older liners, which boasted sweeping vistas and multi-deck public rooms, the *United States*, like a military vessel, was heavily compartmentalized. Gone were the richly paneled and padded interiors of the past. No wood or flammable fabrics were used in the ship's interior construction. Not even the artwork that graced her passenger accommodations was immune from this utilitarian ethic. Gwen Lux carved her sculpture "Expressions of Freedom," the centerpiece of the first class dining room, out of a lightweight, fireproof material known as "foam glass."⁷ Steinway and Sons did draw the line when it refused to provide aluminum pianos for the ship's lounges.⁸ What resulted was a ship of modern, elegant comfort in first and cabin class, and plain functionality in tourist class.



The First Class Observation Lounge
www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org



First Class Dining Room.

The sculpture "Expressions of Freedom" can be seen above the captain's table. Although elegant and comfortable, this room was relatively plain compared to first class dining rooms of older liners.

www.artymesia.com



Cabin Class Lounge. While first class catered to the international business and social elite, cabin class was geared more towards middle class professionals.

www.artemysia.com



Tourist Class Library. Tourist class was traditionally the domain of traveling students and immigrants.

www.artemysia.com

For more photographs of the ship's interiors:

www.artemysia.com/artyen/portfolio/flash/films/cutaway_elements/opencutaway.html

In June 1952, the new flagship of the United States Lines was ready for her sea trials off the coast of Virginia. When her engines were first opened up at full speed, hurricane force winds were whipping up the Atlantic. Despite the punishing seas and howling wind, the United States thundered through the swells at 35 knots. When the weather calmed down and the ship was retested, her performance astounded her officers and satisfied the meticulous William Francis Gibbs, who had supervised every aspect of her construction. She had a top speed of over 43 knots, close to 50 land miles per hour, and a sustained top speed of 38 knots. This was 6 knots faster than the *Queen Mary*, then the fastest ship on the Atlantic.⁹



The S.S. *United States* photographed on her trials at her top speed of 43 knots.

www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org

After a gala reception upon her arrival in New York City, the S.S. *United States* departed on her maiden voyage to Southampton, England on June 3, 1952. In command of the vessel was Commodore Harry Manning. Keeping close watch over the new ship's performance was her designer William Francis Gibbs. Heading up the list of VIP passengers was President Truman's daughter Margaret.

After passing the Ambrose lightship at the entrance to New York harbor, Manning gave the orders for full speed ahead. The crossing was rough, with blinding fog and heavy winds which caused the ship to pitch from side to side. Despite the bad weather, Manning and Gibbs were determined that their ship would capture the "Blue Ribband" of the Atlantic on her maiden voyage. Her crew felt just as motivated. Her chief engineer William Kaiser remembered:

We were Americans trying to do something that had not been done by our country in a hundred years. It wasn't only confidence in the United States we were gaining as we whipped into the home stretch, but also confidence in ourselves. The foreign flags had had a monopoly on this sea-queen business entirely too damned long. We could build ships to beat them, and we had men smart enough to run the ships too! Every man jack down in those engine holds was fighting for something, just as Manning had fought and was fighting in the bridge.¹⁰

On the morning of June 6, the *United States* swept past Ireland's Bishop's Rock. She had slashed the *Queen Mary's* record time by ten hours, making the 3,100 mile voyage in three days, ten hours and forty minutes at an average speed of 36 knots.¹¹ She had steamed so fast that the Atlantic had stripped most of the black paint off her bow.

Gracious in defeat, the captain of the "Queen Mary" sent Commodore Manning the following cable upon the ship's arrival in Southampton: "Welcome to the family of big Liners on the Atlantic."¹²

Between 1952 and 1969, the *United States*, known to passengers and crew affectionately as "The Big U," sailed effortlessly between the two continents. If England had the two "Queens," America had its "First Lady of the Sea." During those years, she carried up to three thousand passengers and crew at a time without a single major mechanical breakdown. Following her record breaking voyage, the United States Lines decided to operate her at a reduced 32 knot service speed to save on fuel. She still remained the fastest ship speed on the Atlantic. Despite her relatively austere passenger accommodations, she quickly became one of the favorite ships of the rich and powerful, boasting regular passengers such as former presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Bob Hope and Princess Grace of Monaco.¹ She also carried a young Rhodes Scholar from Arkansas named Bill Clinton, who was on his way to Oxford University.¹³

¹ In the late 1950s, the author's grandparents Joseph and Judith Follmann traveled first class to Europe and cabin class on the return trip. The author's mother remembers being upset that her parents took the family dog abroad but left her and her brother back at school!



The S.S. *United States* steams out of New York bound for Southampton. www.ssunitedstates.org



By the mid-1960s, a long weekend was too long compared to a six hour jet flight. www.uncommonjourneys.com

By the late 1960s, with the advent of jet aircraft, it became apparent that the days of the great transatlantic liners were numbered. What did a speed record of three and a half days matter when the transatlantic journey could now be made in six hours? One by one, liners great and small were pulled out of service, stripped of their luxurious fittings and sold for scrap.

The "Big U" held on longer than most. During the mid 1960s, the S.S. *United States* was diverted to warm water cruising during winter months, when Atlantic crossings were too rough except for the hardiest passengers. It became clear that this fast ship with few outdoor facilities was ill-suited for lazily plodding around the Caribbean. With passengers melting away, labor costs rising, and fuel prices increasing - she consumed 700 tons of oil a day - the United States government finally pulled the plug on the liner's operating subsidy in 1969. With no fanfare, the liner was quietly towed to Newport News, Virginia, tied up at an old pier, hermetically sealed, and left to sit. And sit she did for over twenty years, her exterior growing scarred with rust, her public rooms cavernous and vacant, and her powerful engines stilled.

In 1992, the liner was purchased by Marmara Marine, which planned to return the vessel to cruise service. After a long tow to Turkey, she was stripped of all of her asbestos-laden interior fittings and partitions.¹⁴ She was then towed to Philadelphia for restoration at the Navy Yard in 1996. The new owners hoped to operate the *United States* as a running mate to Cunard's *Queen Elizabeth 2*, the only ship left in regular transatlantic service. However, the deal collapsed and the owners went bankrupt. The now completely gutted liner was left to languish again, this time on the Delaware River waterfront. In 2003, the shell was purchased by Norwegian Cruise Lines, which is currently evaluating the vessel for refitting as a cruise liner.¹⁵



All of her interiors are now completely gutted.

www.oceanlinermuseum.co.uk

The elements and decades of neglect have taken a severe toll on the vessel in recent years. According to Greg Norris, vice president of the S.S United States Conservancy, the ship is now silted into her berth at the pier. She rides high in the water - drawing 22 feet instead of her original 36 feet - because of the removal of so much of her interior in Turkey. The insulation between the aluminum superstructure and the steel hull is disintegrating, causing galvanic corrosion at these joints. Many of her portholes have been shot out by vandals, letting rainwater infiltrate the ship and pool on her decks. Sections of her decks are now close to rusted through. Because of these safety hazards, no visitors are allowed on board the ship.¹⁶ Despite all of this, she continues to endure as she has for over 50 years, her classic features and racing lines remaining as striking and awe-inspiring as ever.



Stern view of the S.S. *United States* from the Delaware River. Her racing lines are still apparent despite four decades of neglect. www.ssunitedstates.org

Current Placement on the Delaware River

The Delaware waterfront, like the great ship silently moored on its banks, was once vibrant and alive. A century ago, it was a teeming gateway to the city known as the “workshop of the world, a forest of masts, yards, funnels and rigging, punctuated by the bellowing of whistles and hissing of steam, the shouts of stevedores and sailors, and the smell of coal smoke and seawater. Liners and cargo vessels brought passengers and goods from Europe and beyond to the Philadelphia docks. Countless South Philadelphians made their careers either in the merchant marine or in the Navy Yard.



A typical Delaware waterfront scene, 1914. The waterfront was the outlet for the goods produced by the “workshop of the world.” www.phillyhistory.org

Today, the waterfront has few remnants of its days as the teeming gateway to the “Workshop of the World.” The forest of masts, funnels, and warehouses has been

replaced by a sterile desert of concrete, bricks and plantings. The only noises are the roar of traffic on I-95, the screams of seagulls, and the lapping of the river against its banks. Many piers have been demolished, abandoned or turned into condominiums. The ships are almost all gone. The cruiser U.S.S. *Olympia* and the tall ship *Mosholu* are static attractions. Aside from the regular cargo ships and the Camden ferry, the only mobile ship's on the waterfront are the barkentine *Gazela* and the tugboat *Jupiter*. However, they are museum pieces rather than actual vessels of commerce.

One attempt at bringing back the nautical theme of the Delaware waterfront is the Dockside, a set of condominiums built on a large pier projecting in the river. The Dockside supposedly takes inspiration from an ocean liner docked at a pier, with its stepped back "superstructure" and hint of a funnel on its roof.

Compare the Dockside and the S.S. *United States* as structural forms and how they relate to the waterfront. The Dockside, situated on a pier, is best viewed from a distance by PATCO commuters on the Ben Franklin Bridge. Its windows and balconies look outward to the Delaware River and to Camden waterfront. However, to the passerby on Columbus Boulevard and the residents of South Philadelphia, the Dockside only shows a gated garage entryway, tall blank wall, and guarded doorway.



The Dockside presents a blank, closed off front to the passerby on Christopher Columbus Boulevard. <http://www.4wallsinphilly.com/cc/dockside/dockside.htm>

Further south on Columbus Boulevard sit a real ocean liner docked at a pier. The *United States* faces the passerby with a sharp prow, sculpted funnels and rounded superstructure. This is an object meant to plow through winds and water of the North Atlantic like an arrow, and therefore does not close itself off from the viewer. While the Dockside sits planted like a grounded barge in the Delaware River, the *United States* appears to still be in motion.



The S.S. *United States* presents a different face to the passerby when docked at Pier 86 in New York City. Until the mid-1960s, the Hudson River was lined with many liners of many nations. This sight drew crowds of sightseers and captivated drivers on the West Side Highway. www.pier90.org

The best place to get a sense of the ship is inside the IKEA restaurant, whose windows perfectly frame a frontal view of the *United States*. With some imaginative effort, the IKEA visitor can see smoke coming out of the liner's funnels, streamers fluttering from her upper decks, and crowds waving from her promenades. Her whistles let out a deep bellowing roar, the water around her stern begins to foam as two tug boats start pushing her back into the Delaware. After pushing out of the pier, she then begins to move forward, first under the Walt Whitman Bridge, and then out to the great Atlantic beyond.

Case Studies of Three Transatlantic Liners

As the great age of ocean liners came to an end in the late 1960s, almost all of the transatlantic liners were scrapped. Built with deep drafts, powerful and fuel-hungry engines, and lacking outdoor swimming pools thanks to the weather of the North Atlantic, the old liners proved to be uneconomical to operate in the warm waters of the Caribbean. But there are significant exceptions that should be reviewed as case studies.



The RMS “Queen Mary” (1936) at Long Beach, California, with the brand-new “Queen Mary 2” (2004) in the background. www.cunardimages.com

The Queen Mary: The *Queen Mary's* status as one of greatest ships on the Atlantic and an icon of Great Britain played a large part in her preservation. She is probably the most famous liner in history after the *Titanic*. After three decades of service as a luxury liner in peacetime and as a troop transport during World War II, she was retired by the Cunard Line in 1967. She was sold to the city of Long Beach, California to be the centerpiece of its revitalized waterfront.

The economic obstacles of converting transatlantic liners into cruise ships have proved immense. They increase exponentially when the ship becomes a permanently docked attraction. Ocean liners, like hotels, need a constant stream of revenue in order to be maintained properly. Their hulls need to be constantly scraped and painted to avoid damage from corrosion. Their powerful engines, machinery, and internal systems have to be serviced regularly. They no longer burn oil or diesel for electric power, so they become dependent on land-based power, water and waste removal sources.

After her arrival, the *Queen Mary* was extensively modified for her new life as a hotel and convention center. Her three steel funnels, sensitive to the corrosive salt air of the Pacific Ocean, were removed and replaced with aluminum facsimiles. In order to make her more economical to operate, most of her machinery was dismantled and most of her non-first class interiors were gutted or sealed.¹⁷ Although she has become a well-known landmark on the Long Beach waterfront and a popular tourist attraction, the loss of much of the interior appointments and machinery has definitely detracted from her appeal. She is now technically a building rather than a ship.

Official Website of the RMS *Queen Mary*, Long Beach, California:

www.queenmary.com



The S.S. “Norway,” aground at the scrap yards of Alang, India, December 2006. She is currently at the center of a bitter environmental battle in the Indian Court system.

<http://www.maritimematters.com/norway.html>

The France: One large liner was able to make the transition from transatlantic liner to financially successful Caribbean cruise ship. The *France* was the last superliner built exclusively for the transatlantic trade. At 1,035 feet long and 66,000 tons, she was the longest ship yet built upon her completion in 1962. She sailed as the flagship of the French Line until 1974. That year, the French government pulled her operating subsidy in the same way the American government did with the *United States*. She sat idle and forgotten between 1974 and 1979 in a backwater of Le Havre.

She was saved from the scrappers by Norwegian Cruise Lines, which transformed her into the first Caribbean mega-cruise ship. The re-born S.S. *Norway* boasted an expansive open deck and lido space and refitted public rooms, but retaining a significant amount of her irreplaceable French artwork and decor. She continued as a popular cruise ship until 2003, when a boiler explosion ended her career. There was an attempt by a concern in Dubai to purchase the *Norway* and renovate her into a floating hotel, but nothing materialized. After a full and varied 44 year lifespan, the former flagship of two nations now sits rusting and decayed on a muddy beach in India, her graceful hull and winged funnels awaiting the breakers torch. A landmark maritime law battle now rages in the Indian courts between the ship breakers and environmental activists about the disposal of hundreds of tons of asbestos used in her construction.¹⁸

More on the history of the S.S. *France/Norway*

<http://www.oceanlinermuseum.co.uk/France%20index.htm>

Historic footage of the French Line's majestic S.S. *France*. The second fastest ship on the Atlantic when she entered service in 1962, she was the last transatlantic liner built in the grand tradition.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFWacTqMeyM&mode=related&search=>



The *Rotterdam* undergoing restoration in Wilhelmshaven, Germany, 2007.

<http://www.ssrotterdam.net/>

The Rotterdam: The S.S. *Rotterdam* was spared the *Norway's* fate a few years ago. Built as the flagship of the Dutch fleet in 1959, this moderate sized liner proved to be relatively easy to convert to cruise service as a boutique luxury cruise ship when the transatlantic trade died. This was due to her progressive design and relative economy of operation compared to her larger sisters. She was sold by Holland-America in 1998 to a small cruise operator which ultimately went bankrupt. It seemed that she too would end up being dismembered on a beach in India. Fortunately, the *Rotterdam*, which still retained most of her luxurious 1950s art deco furnishings and artwork, was purchased by a group of investors known as "De Rotterdam BV." She is currently being restored to her original 1959 appearance in Germany and stripped of all asbestos used in her initial construction. By the end of 2007 she will be permanently docked on the Rotterdam waterfront as a hotel, museum and convention center.

Official website of De Rotterdam BV: www.derotterdam.com

Photographs of the on-going restoration of the S.S. *Rotterdam*:

<http://www.ssrt.nl/fotogalerie.php>

Grassroots Preservation Efforts

In Philadelphia and beyond, there have been numerous attempts at the grassroots level to raise awareness about the plight of the S.S. *United States*. Several foundations have been established to preserve the ship's historical legacy and to advocate for her preservation. This includes rallying the support from former passengers and crew, as well as inspiring a younger generation previously unfamiliar with the ship.

Perhaps the most comprehensive effort is being led by the S.S. United States Conservancy. This organization has taken a progressive, multi-media approach to educate the public about the significance of the vessel in American history. The S.S. *United States* is treated by the Conservancy as a geographic place, with her own special traditions and memories. In addition to news updates, the Conservancy sponsors seminars, dinners, and an online photo-archives and oral history project, in which former passengers and crew can share their experiences aboard the ship during her years of service. A number of home movies made by passengers and crew, many of which have never been publicly available, have been released online as part of the S.S. United States Conservancy film archive project.





Two photographs of an unidentified family from the 1950s submitted to the S.S. United States Conservancy photo archives project. www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org

The president of the Conservancy is Susan Gibbs, the granddaughter of William Francis Gibbs. Like him, Susan had no formal training in naval architecture or maritime history, and she has no direct connection with the family firm of Gibbs and Cox. What spurred her on was a passion to preserve both her grandfather's legacy and an American maritime achievement.

"It would be a tragedy if this maritime triumph would be allowed to disintegrate ... the ship was really this triumphal expression of America's post-war maritime abilities," she stated on a to-be-released documentary on the S.S. *United States*.¹⁹

Of her grandfather, she said, "He's example of somebody who had a dream and worked a lifetime to achieve it."²⁰

Movies compiled by the S.S. United States Conservancy:

Movie taken by former ship's purser Jim Green, traveling as a passenger, during a Caribbean cruise in 1964. The music is from a recording of the ship's Meyer Davis orchestra. Toward the end of the film, she is shown underway at her full speed of 43 knots (almost 50 miles per hour):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5o8xIVhN4E>

Trailer of the to-be released documentary "The Big U: The Story of the S.S. *United States*":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Sex1qjiVX8&mode=related&search=>

Home movies from the crew of the S.S. *United States*, showing the everyday lives of the men and women who ran the ship:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIhZAQZM410&mode=related&search=>

Websites of S.S. United States preservation organizations:

S.S. United States Conservancy: www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org

S.S. United States Foundation: www.ssunitedstates.org

S.S. United States.com: www.ss-united-states.com/

A New Ship of State, a Floating Hotel, or Razorblades?

The S.S. United States Conservancy is currently working with Norwegian Cruise Lines, the ship's current owner, on their evaluation for the reuse of the ship as revitalized cruise ship as part of their "NCL America" project. Conservancy Vice President Greg Norris, who serves as chief liaison with NCL, is closely involved with the current efforts to return the ship to cruise service, and offered valuable insights as to potential options for the vessel.

According to American maritime law, only ships registered in the United States may sail non-stop between U.S. ports. Operating ships under the American flag is extremely difficult because of high labor costs and regulation. Hence, most cruise lines register their vessels under flags-of-convenience such as Liberia and the Bahamas. In order to take advantage of the difficult but potentially highly profitable American route, Norwegian Cruise Lines launched NCL America and started construction on a set of ships to be staffed with American trained crews and registered in American ports. As of 2007, NCL America operates three newly built cruise ships under American registry and staffed by American crews. According to Norris, The S.S. *United States*, purchased in 2003, is potentially the next ship to be added to this fleet of new builds.²¹

Norwegian Cruise Lines purchased the *United States* for strategic reasons. Still registered in New York City, she is one of the few passenger vessels in the world today that can sail between major American ports such as New York and Miami, or between San Francisco and Honolulu. Now that three new ships have been constructed as part of the NCL America project, the next question is whether refitting the *United States* is a viable alternative to the construction of another new ship. According to Norris, NCL America first must become profitable before they undergo a refit of the *United States*. This refit could cost upwards of \$250 million, comparable to the cost of a new cruise ship. The costs of holding onto the S.S. *United States* have been considerable for NCL. Since her purchase in 2003, the company has spent approximately \$3 million a year in docking and maintenance costs.²²



NCL America's new 81,000 ton *Pride of America*, finished in 2006, dwarfs the S.S. *United States*. Her two U.S. flagged sisters are the *Pride of Hawaii* and the *Pride of Aloha*. www.ncl.com

If the S.S. *United States* will be returned to cruise service, she faces additional obstacles to the ones that forced her out of service in 1969. The first is the cost of bringing her up to stringent 2010 Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) regulations. According to the S.S. United States Conservancy:

The Board of the SS United States Conservancy sincerely hopes that NCL will be able to refurbish the ship in a manner consistent with her listing on the National Register. However we recognize that NCL, as the current owner and steward of the SS *United States*, intends to return the liner to an active service career. As such, alterations must be made to the vessel to reactivate her and bring her up to date with modern SOLAS and other regulatory requirements. This will involve (as NCL has stated) a complete reengineering of the vessel from a steamship to a modern, environmentally sensitive, efficient vessel equipped with diesel-electric propulsion.²³

According to Norris, the S.S. *United States* passed NCL's preliminary engineering evaluation for 2010 SOLAS requirements for stability and ability to stay afloat in the event of a collision if hit dead-amidships.²⁴ This is a testament to the superiority of her design by William Francis Gibbs and her construction by Newport News Shipbuilding nearly sixty years ago. In order to meet SOLAS fuel efficiency standards, her powerful steam turbines - the only part of the ship's interior left relatively intact - will have to be dismantled and replaced by more environmentally-friendly, cost-effective engines. In her original configuration, the *United States* would burn 400 tons of oil per day even with one of her two engine rooms shut down. A modern cruise ship burns only 200 tons. Nonetheless, Norris states that NCL has not ruled out the possibility of *United States* as once again being the world's fastest ship.²⁵

The second obstacle is the dramatic shift of customer expectations during an ocean voyage. By today's standards, the *United States* is not a particularly large vessel. The *United States* is dwarfed by such megaships as the brand new 150,000 ton transatlantic liner *Queen Mary 2* and Royal Caribbean's 160,000 ton *Independence of the Seas*, not to mention her potential NCL America fleetmates.

In the 1950s, even first class passengers were content to have cabins with portholes rather than windows, and bunks rather than separate beds. Although considered comfortable enough in her day by the world's social and business elite, the S.S. *United States* has no outdoor lido decks, soaring atriums, mega-theaters, and balcony suites. These are amenities that the average cruise ship passenger takes for granted. Today, the driving force of cabin layout on cruise ships is not just size or luxury, but how many private balconies can be crammed into the ship's hull. These market forces create ships that are luxurious on the inside, but are boxy and ungainly on the outside.

After passing the 2010 SOLAS requirements, NCL must then determine if the ship can be rebuilt to carry enough passengers to make her profitable. If the S.S. *United States* is returned to service as a cruise liner, she would probably be best used as a "boutique" cruise liner, serving a select clientele that prefers classic luxury and service to the party atmosphere on today's megaships. Norris states that NCL CEO Colin Veitch desires to capitalize on S.S. *United States* as America's ship of state in the same way the historically-British (but now American-owned) Cunard has with the new *Queen Mary 2* and the classic *Queen Elizabeth 2*.²⁶

Even if she preserves her "ship of state" profile, the *United States* probably will have to have additional balcony cabins constructed on her upper decks to make her economically viable. Norwegian Cruise Lines faced this dilemma with the S.S. *Norway*, the former French transatlantic liner *France* mentioned earlier. Although a hugely popular when she entered cruise service in 1980, by the early 1990s passengers were turning to ships with balconies and modern cabins. NCL's solution was to add two prefabricated decks of cabins with balconies and floor-to-ceiling windows to her superstructure. This made her more competitive with her newer fleet mates, but definitely spoiled her classic, ocean greyhound profile.

Similar modifications will probably have to be made to a revitalized S.S. *United States* to make her commercially viable. One possible way to minimize the number of additional decks stacked onto her superstructure would be the cutting of balconies into her hull.²⁷



The S.S. *France* as originally built in 1962. Her low, sleek profile was kept intact from her days as a transatlantic liner when she was converted to the cruise liner *Norway* in 1980.

http://www.cruiseserver.net/travelpage/ships/fr_franc.asp



S.S. Norway (ex-France) had two decks of pre-fabricated balcony cabins added following a 1990 refit. Such modifications will probably have to be done to the S.S. *United States* to make her desirable to modern travelers should she return to service.

<http://www.ssnorway.no/images/sailingdays/pages/Norway101-CdeB.htm>

If Norwegian Cruise Lines ultimately decides that the ship cannot be returned to service due to the prohibitive cost, the next best way to the S.S. *United States* from the breakers would be to convert her into a static floating attraction in either Philadelphia or New York City.

The location of the hotel and restaurants on her upper decks (formerly mainly first class space) makes sense because most of her largest public rooms are located in the superstructure. The steel partitions that demarcate her most notable public spaces, such as the first class smoking room, ballroom and observation lounge still remain in place, and their interior finishes can be recreated or modified in their new incarnations as restaurants, bars, and meeting rooms. One major public room below the superstructure that still exists as an empty space is the first class dining room. The first class dining room was located deep within the ship and amidships, as this where the motion of the ship was the least apparent. This space, which is over would probably best be suited as a large meeting room for conventions and other gatherings, much like the first class dining room aboard the *Queen Mary*.

Since the partitions between the cabins no longer exist, hotel room of modern sizes with up-to-date sanitary and plumbing systems can be installed. The large windows and parallel promenades on her upper decks will allow plenty of light and ventilation into these spaces. Large, modern hotel rooms could be constructed in the now vacant cabin spaces to house visitors.



Sunday brunch in the former first class dining room aboard the *Queen Mary*, Long Beach, California. www.queenmary.com

The lower decks are more problematic because of light and access, so it would probably be best if they were kept sealed and used as flex or exhibition space until more suitable uses could be found. In order to create airy hotel rooms in her lower decks, the portholes in her hull could be enlarged into windows much like on the tall ship *Mosholu* moored at the Independence Seaport Museum.



A scene from an Indian scrap yard. The desolation and dangerous working conditions are obvious. <http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/bigbreak/story.html#>

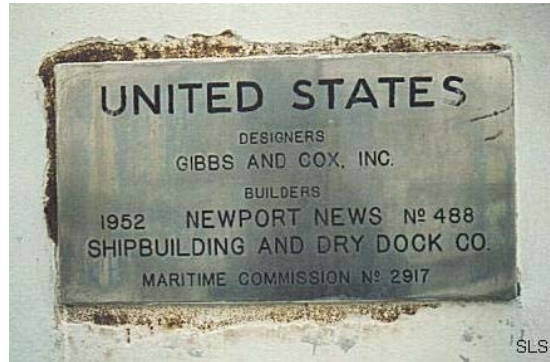
Then there is the irreversible fate that has befallen many other historic ocean liners: after a long tow around the horn of Africa, she will be dragged by her anchor chains onto an oil-smearred beach in India or Bangladesh. There, the fastest ocean liner in the world and the former pride of the American merchant marine will be slowly ripped to pieces by laborers—many working barefoot and gloveless—and melted down to make razor blades, guardrails, and chicken wire.

More on the scrapping of ocean going vessels in Third World Nations:

<http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/bigbreak/story.html#>

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/317229.stm

5. Conclusion



Although the ship has been tarnished by 40 years of neglect, the shipbuilder's plate fastened to her superstructure still remains pristine. www.oceanlinermuseum.co.uk

The Ghost Ship on the Delaware indeed has a compelling story to tell to the thousands of people that drive by her each day on the Walt Whitman Bridge, gaze at her through the windows of the IKEA dining room, or look down on her from the skyscrapers of Center City. One Philadelphian who knew her in her prime once remarked: "She looks sad."

If her owners are willing to spend the large amount of money required to return the S.S. *United States* to service, there is no doubt she will stand out as a ship of remarkable pedigree and history, even if balconies are added to her upper decks and she can never again race through the seas at 35 knots. Should she become a static floating attraction in Philadelphia (or New York), filled with restaurants, hotel and convention space, she will provide a striking, majestic icon for the Delaware waterfront, helping to at least visually reconnect the city to the sea.



**The S.S. “United States” at midnight, March 24, 2007.
Her decks are silent, her portholes dark, and seagulls shriek around her funnels.
Photograph by author.**

Ships in themselves, no matter how large and magnificent, are inherently lifeless objects. If the S.S. *United States* has a soul, it comes from the people who have conceived, built, traveled, and manned her. Her designer William Francis Gibbs spent a lifetime of energy and talent bringing the “United States” from dream to reality. The “Big U” has borne hundreds of thousands of passengers, from celebrities to immigrants alike, in safety and comfort across the Atlantic. During her nearly twenty years of service, she never had a major breakdown that taxed the strength and patience of her officers and crew. It is this collection of effort, talent, and memories that give great ships such as the S.S. “United States” an essence that distinguishes them from conventional vessels.

For now, the ship once known as the “First Lady of the Sea” lies asleep at her Delaware River pier, old and careworn, but still majestic and graceful. She may seem sad, but she still strains at her lines, yearning to bear a new generation of passengers out into the open sea.



Waving farewell to friends and family as the ship pulls away from the pier.
www.ssunitedstates.org

The voice of the S.S. *United States*:

<http://www.ss-united-states.net/whistle.wav>

¹ America's Flagship: the S.S. United States

<http://www.ss-united-states.net/WebPages/PagesGibbs.htm>

²The S.S. United States Conservancy

<http://www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org/History.html>

³The Big U: The Obsession of William Francis Gibbs

<http://www.ssunitedstates-film.com/history.html>

⁴ Vaterland: Hamburg America Line

<http://ocean-liners.schuminweb.com/ships/vaterland.asp>

⁵ Quoted from Great Ocean Liners

<http://www.greatoceanliners.net/queenmary.html>

⁶The S.S. United States Conservancy

<http://www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org/History.html>

⁷America's Flagship: the S.S. United States

<http://www.ss-united-states.net/WebPages/PagesConstruction.htm>

⁸Nautiques

<http://www.nautiques.net/page.htm?PG=features>

⁹The S.S. United States Conservancy

<http://www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org/History.html>

¹⁰The Race for the Blue Ribband

<http://flare.net/users/e9ee52a/luxury%20liner%20row.htm>. Compiled from New York Times articles & magazine article *Power for a winner* by W Kaiser. Edited by Fay Richards.

¹¹ S.S. United States Foundation

<http://www.ssunitedstates.org/theship.htm>

¹²The Race for the Blue Ribband

<http://flare.net/users/e9ee52a/luxury%20liner%20row.htm>. Compiled from New York Times articles & magazine article *Power for a winner* by W Kaiser. Edited by Fay Richards.

¹³ S.S. United States Saved From Scrap Heap – To Be Restored and Sail Again

<http://www.theautochannel.com/news/2003/04/15/159337.html>

¹⁴S.S. United States Foundation

<http://www.ssunitedstates.org/theship.htm>

¹⁵Norwegian Cruise Lines Acquires U.S. Flagship S.S. United States

<http://philadelphia.about.com/cs/travel/a/norwegiancruise.htm>

¹⁶Interview with Greg Norris, Vice President, S.S. United States Conservancy, March 26 and 27, 2007.

¹⁷RMS Queen Mary

<http://www.sunymaritime.edu/StephenBLuceLibrary/QM.htm>

¹⁸Maritime Matters: Ocean Liner History and Cruise Ship News

<http://www.maritimematters.com/norway.html>

¹⁹The Big U: The Obsession of William Francis Gibbs

<http://www.ssunitedstates-film.com/trailers.html>

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Interview with Greg Norris, Vice President, S.S. United States Conservancy, March 26 and 27, 2007.

²²Ibid.

²³The S.S. United States Conservancy

<http://www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org/ConservancyUpdate2.html>

²⁴Interview with Greg Norris, Vice President, S.S. United States Conservancy, March 26 and 27, 2007.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.