



Ship Shape

One proud American couldn't stand idly by while the storied SS *United States* lay rusting in a harbor.

BY CULLEN THOMAS

WHEN SUSAN GIBBS FIRST laid eyes on the SS *United States*, it was wallowing in the Delaware River at Philadelphia's Pier 82, sagging like a prizefighter on the ropes after too many blows. Pigeon droppings decorated her hull and cobwebs hung like tinsel from her portals.

Gibbs could hardly believe this was the same ship that had inspired a ticker-tape parade down Broadway after breaking the trans-Atlantic speed record in 1952, escorted four U.S. pres-

idents across the Atlantic, and played a top-secret role in the Cold War as a U.S. troop ship.

"It was very painful," Gibbs tells Newsmax, struggling to describe the grief she felt at seeing the once-grand vessel reduced to a rusting hulk.

It was especially poignant because her grandfather, the remarkable naval architect William

Frances Gibbs — a self-taught man who oversaw the production of the "liberty ships" that helped save Britain in World War II — had poured his heart and soul into making it perhaps

BETTER DAYS *United States*' maiden voyage to Europe, 1952. Inset, a rusting SS *United States* in Philadelphia.

the greatest cruise vessel the world had ever seen.

When she first saw the ship that day in 2001, it was on the verge of being cut up and sold for scrap metal. But Gibbs saw past the rust, the peeling paint, and the barnacles. She saw a ship holding up under the ravages of time with quiet dignity. She felt it was still alive.

"There was still a sense of power," she recalls. "The fact that she was still floating meant she still had a chance, I guess. I had forgotten about the ship in



my life, and it was clear that the nation had forgotten about her as well.”

Gibbs decided to join the SS United States Conservancy as its executive director, and to do everything she could to restore the ship to its former

glory. Now, over a decade later, the Conservancy has launched a major drive to refurbish the once-proud vessel. The SS *United States* was a symbol of American might, built by a nation flush with victory that boasted an unrivaled manufacturing base. Affectionately nicknamed “the Big U,” the ship was over three football fields long, with 12 decks stacked beneath its signature twin red, white, and blue funnels. It was then — and remains today — the largest passenger ship ever built in the United States.

Her construction cost a whopping \$78 million in 1950s dollars. But the U.S. Navy picked up \$50 million of that tab, due to her secret Cold War status as a troop carrier. The details of her sleek hull design and other elements were classified, and for good reason. If war broke out, the ship would be rapidly converted to ferry U.S. troops into battle in Europe. She was put on alert only once, during the Cuban Missile crisis. But she was never called into duty.

With her powerful engines and unprecedented use of aluminum, the ship had a maximum speed of 38 knots (44 mph). On her maiden voyage, she set the trans-Atlantic speed record from New York to Cornwall, England, surpassing the previous mark by more than 10 hours. In fact, the record books

show the SS *United States* still holds the record for the fastest westbound Atlantic crossing by a cruise vessel.

In fact, it turned out the only thing that could catch up to the SS *United States* was technology. The rise of air travel in the 1960s and the advent of the pleasure-cruise megaships rendered the ship obsolete. In 1969, after carrying more than a million passengers, she was removed from service.

The ship nearly made a comeback in 2003, when Norwegian Cruise Line flirted with pressing her back into service in the Hawaiian Islands. But after studying the refurbishment cost, NCL

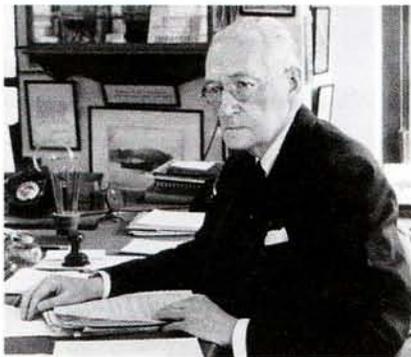
put her up for sale.

In 2010, rumors circulated that the SS *United States* would soon be scrapped. But in February 2011, the SS United States Conservancy assumed ownership. The organization has since launched the “Save the *United States*” campaign. It hopes to raise enough money to refurbish the ship and put it on permanent display in “a major waterfront setting,” perhaps New York, Philadelphia, or Miami.

“This is one of the last of the great ocean liners of the 20th century,” says Thomas Basile, a consultant to the conservancy. “They’re all gone. Except for the *Queen Mary*, *QE II*, and a couple of others, they’ve been chopped up and sold for scrap. Our flagship shouldn’t face the same fate.”

If Susan Gibbs has anything to say about it, the SS *United States* will one day receive the respect it deserves.

Today, the SS *United States* stands as a reminder of a sometimes forgot-



OVERSEERS

William Gibbs (above) oversaw *United States*’ production. Granddaughter Susan (left) is seeing to its resurrection.



Famous Vessel Played Host to A-List Celebrities

With a civilian passenger capacity of 1,928, the SS *United States* hosted a *Who’s Who* of celebrities of the 1950s and ‘60s. Their ranks included Bob Hope, Katharine Hepburn, and Rita Hayworth. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor sailed her across the Atlantic, requiring an extra cabin to store their 98 pieces of luggage.

Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy all sailed aboard the magnificent vessel. In 1968, a young Rhodes scholar from Arkansas named Bill Clinton traveled in tourist class, traveling in style to continue his studies abroad.

Even the *Mona Lisa* was a passenger. When the French government loaned the painting to the United States for display, Leonardo’s masterpiece was apportioned her own stateroom replete with security guards. □



ROYAL WAVE The Duke and Duchess of Windsor onboard, 1962.

ten heroic era. “It might have been a calling,” Gibbs says of her decision to dedicate herself to saving the ship that her grandfather lovingly built more than 60 years ago.

“It was a calling; that this ship needed not just me, and this is an important point. The *United States* is a champion. I felt called to serve.” □