

# The World's Fastest Ocean Liner May Be Restored to Sail Again

**Tied to a pier in Philadelphia for 20 years, the rusted, stripped, but still majestic S.S. United States could return to service as a luxury cruise ship.**

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN MALLON

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In July 1952, on its maiden voyage, the S.S. *United States* shattered the record for the fastest crossing of the Atlantic by a passenger ship, steaming from New York to Le Havre in less than four days. In 1969, when it went into dry dock in Newport News, Virginia, and its crew members left their belongings in their cabins, not knowing they'd never sail on it again, it still held the record. And it still does today—though it's been retired for nearly 47 years, and motionless at a pier in Philadelphia for nearly 20.

“The ship is a little worse for wear,” Susan Gibbs said not long ago as we toured the rusting hulk. She is the granddaughter of the ship's designer, William Francis Gibbs. “But it's important to keep in mind that she was so overbuilt, she's still structurally sound. The bones are solid. So it's not a pipe dream to imagine she could be resurrected.”

On February 4, [Crystal Cruises](#) announced that it had signed an option to purchase the ship from the [S.S. United States Conservancy](#), the nonprofit that Gibbs directs. Crystal—a subsidiary of a cruise-and-resort company called [Genting Hong Kong](#)—plans to spend this year studying the feasibility of restoring the *United States* as a luxury cruise vessel, which could cost as much as \$700 million. In the meantime it will pay the \$60,000 or so a month it costs to maintain the ship.

Last fall those monthly costs were threatening to doom the great ship to a sad fate: hauled out by its anchor chains onto some Texas beach and scrapped. “I thought she was going down,” said Gibbs. But the Conservancy launched a last-ditch appeal that brought new interest and enough cash from the ship’s many fans to allow it to hang on a few more months. Against all odds, it now has a chance to return to sea. The ship’s age will make that a challenge; all sorts of standards have changed.

Among the Conservancy’s FAQ on the ship, I found this entry: “How do I research whether one of my ancestors traveled on the S.S. *United States*?” Since I myself crossed the Atlantic three times on the ship, that shivered my timbers a bit.

If the *United States* were a building, it would be a National Historical Landmark. If it were an airplane, it would be in the Smithsonian. Because it’s an ocean liner—and surely one of the most beautiful, with its gracile lines and stacks swept back as if by the wind—it’s tied up at a pier on the Delaware River, between freighters offloading fruit and cocoa. When you stand on its bow today, you gaze not at foaming Atlantic breakers but across Christopher Columbus Boulevard at a Longhorn Steakhouse and a Lowe’s home improvement store.

“Why does this nation forget its historical accomplishments?” Gibbs mused as we took refuge in the Longhorn restaurant from a blustery January day. “Why is this ship languishing in obscurity?”

Through the venetian blinds we could see its blade-like bow, ready to slice across traffic into our booth. The shape of the hull below the water line was one of the secrets of the ship’s tremendous speed—and it was a military secret, as the *United States* was designed to be converted into a troopship in time of war (though it never was).

Classified too, until the 1970s, were the ship’s four, 18-foot bronze propellers. They were designed by an engineer named Elaine Kaplan. According to [A Man and His Ship](#), a biography by [Steven Ujifusa](#), William

Francis Gibbs couldn't quite comprehend that an attractive woman could be an excellent engineer—but he prized excellence above all else, and so he lived with that paradox.

Gibbs himself, though he designed one of the greatest ships of the 20th century, as well as 2,700 Liberty ships during World War II, had no formal training in his craft. After getting a law degree from Columbia University, he'd lasted only a year as a lawyer. But he'd been drawing ships since 1894 when, as an eight-year-old boy, he'd watched the launch of a 550-foot steamship, the S.S. *St. Louis*, in the Delaware River, a few miles upriver from where the *United States* now floats.

In 1913, in his father's attic, he began drawing what nearly four decades later would become the *United States*—a 990-foot ship intended, Ujifusa writes, “to be the fastest and best ever built, intended to surpass the ill-fated *Titanic* in every respect.” It was the year after the iceberg incident.

Decades later, when Gibbs finally got the chance to design his ship in reality, he divided it into 20 watertight-compartments so a mere iceberg couldn't sink it. He made it close to fireproof—he'd watched the *Normandie* burn and capsize at the pier in Manhattan—in part by using no wood on board except in the Steinway grand pianos. And he made it lightweight by building almost the entire superstructure of aluminum, giving it a power-to-weight ratio the seas had never seen.

In sea trials the *United States* broke 38 knots. On its record-setting maiden voyage, operating at two-thirds of full steam, it averaged more than 35 knots, four knots faster than the *Queen Mary's* record. As it was breaking the speed record, passengers were dancing conga lines down the promenade deck.

### **Into the Depths**

From that enclosed, sun-striped gallery, 400 feet long on each side of the ship, Susan Gibbs and I penetrated with flashlights into the engine room, to the edge of the swimming pool—back in its water-filled days you would slosh back and forth as the ship rolled—and even into the

morgue, where the occasional unfortunate traveler was chilled until landfall.

All the furnishings, from the ship's wheel to the silverware, were ripped out and auctioned off in the 1980s by a real estate developer. The next owner had the ship towed to Ukraine to rip out the interior walls: They were filled with that miraculous fire-retardant, asbestos. Today only the outlines of the cabins remain on bare floors; the toilet holes are the most recognizable feature. I was unable to locate the cabin where I had discovered seasickness.

After the maiden voyage, William Francis Gibbs never sailed on his masterpiece again—and yet “he was obsessively devoted to the ship,” said Susan Gibbs. When the *United States* was at sea he would call on the ship-to-shore radio every day for a status report. Every two weeks when she returned to New York, he would rise at dawn and have his chauffeur drive him out to Brooklyn so he could watch her steam through the Narrows—then race over to Pier 82 on the west side of Manhattan to be there when she docked. His wife Vera claimed he took pictures of the ship to bed. Vera had a separate bedroom.

Susan Gibbs never sailed on the *United States*. Her grandfather died when she was five and she barely knew him, or of him. Her own father, Frank Gibbs, never spoke of the great man.

When Frank died, she went through his belongings hoping to learn more about him. But she mostly found memorabilia about her grandfather. There were profiles in *Fortune* and *The New Yorker*. There was his portrait on the cover of *Time*, which dubbed him a “technological revolutionist.” Something clicked; a diluted version of the obsession that had animated that strange aloof man passed to his granddaughter. She went to Philadelphia to meet the ship.

Gibbs anthropomorphizes the vessel now, she said—sees her as a woman, strong, tough, enduring, but in serious need of a little sisterly aid. The *Queen Mary* has become a hotel in Long Beach, California,

the [Rotterdam](#) a hotel and museum in Rotterdam in the Netherlands. For a long time something of the kind was Gibbs's dream for the *United States*. A return to sea seemed too much to hope for. And it's far from a done deal.

The past few winters have gotten under the ship's skin; the red-white-and-black paint is coming off in enormous flakes. "Every year I come, the funnels are a little lighter, there's a little more wear and tear," Gibbs said. "In 2016, it's going to be a make or break year."

### **Mind Your Wake**

"When individual memory fails, we need reminders to help maintain our connections with the past," the author David Macaulay has [written on the web site of the Conservancy](#). Macaulay emigrated to America from Britain on the *United States* as a boy in 1957. It was the year before the first passenger jet crossed the Atlantic, sounding the death knell for ocean liners. My own first voyage on the ship was in 1964, and since then some member of my family—a sibling, a parent, a child—has always been on the opposite side of the Atlantic. That's made me a big fan of jets.

But not of the experience of jet travel—of being sealed in a can in one world and poured out into another hours later. On the *United States*, during the days in between, you felt space passing as you stepped onto the deck and the wind caught your body like a sail; felt it as you watched the foam part at the bow and rush along the sides. You watched the broad roiling wake disappear to the horizon, and it was as if the medium of life had been rendered visible, as if time had become a tangible ether. I admit I wasn't actually thinking that when I was seven or nine or even 12.

Still, it's one of my older brother's first memories, from one of the first crossings of the *United States*, in 1952 (at least he thinks it was the *United States*). He's four years old and standing on the fantail with our father and our sister, then two. Each kid is holding onto Dad with one hand and has a balloon in the other. My brother lets his go and

watches it veer and bank like a swallow into the distance, skipping off the winds, and what amazes him is how long he can watch it fly.