



# Docked & Waiting

THE FATE OF THE FASTEST  
OCEAN LINER TO CROSS THE  
ATLANTIC REMAINS UNKNOWN

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY MATTHEW CHRISTOPHER

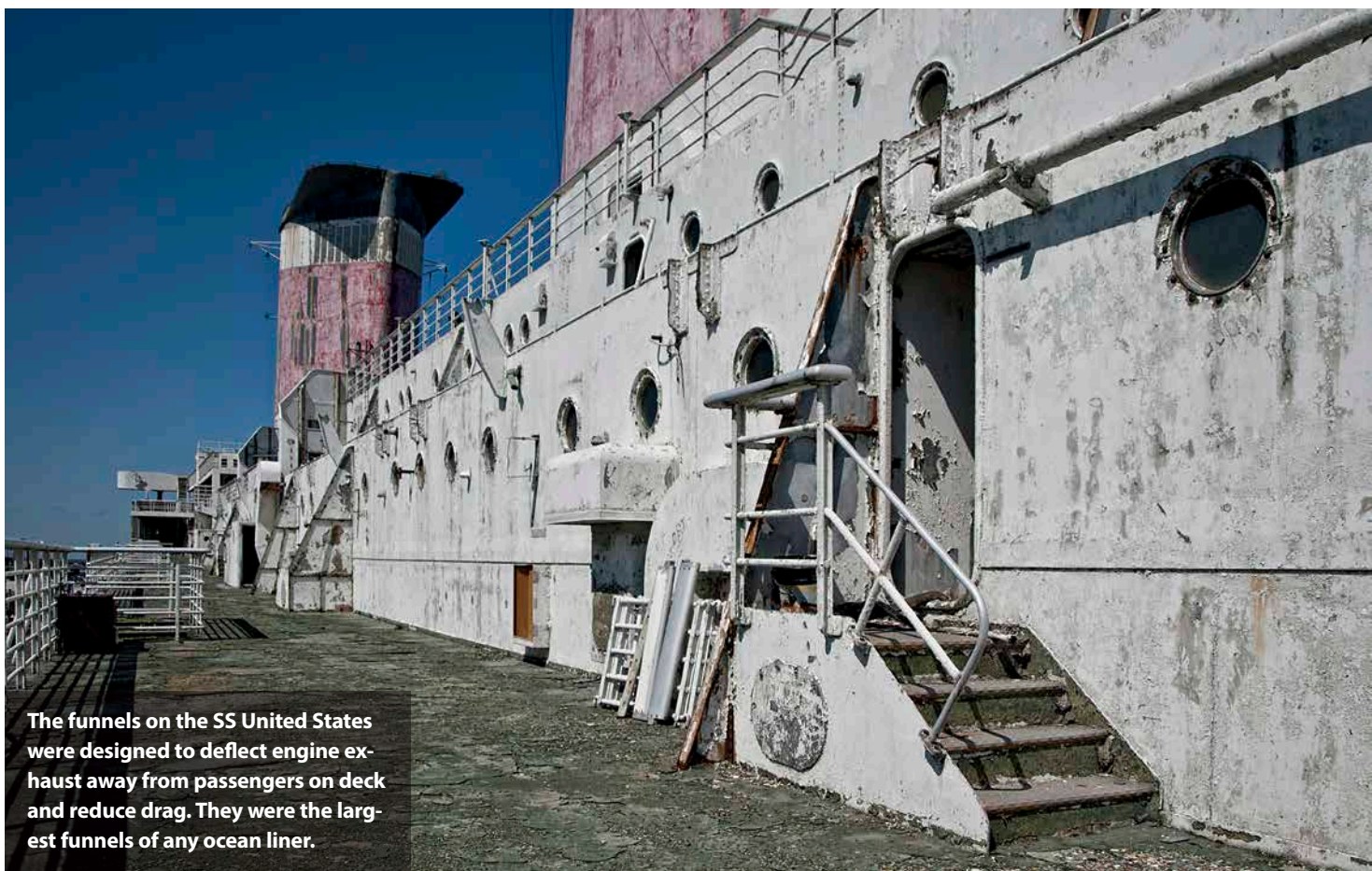
**L**OOMING ABOVE THE PORT AUTHORITY TERMINALS in Philadelphia, the SS United States appears both tantalizingly close and frustratingly far away. As a photographer who specializes in images of abandoned places, I had dreamed of boarding the decaying ocean liner for years. After numerous rejected requests and unreturned phone calls, however, it seemed as though it would never come to be.

The docks where the ship is housed are governed by the U.S. Department

of Homeland Security, and even if one could somehow sneak in and sprint all the way to the ship undetected, entry is impossible without a jetpack. The deck of the SS United States towers over the waterline, and the hatches are closed and locked except for the rare instances when the maintenance crew is aboard. Like so many other places I've longed to see yet ultimately can never gain access to, the ship seemed just out of reach.

Then about 15 years ago, I was at a barbecue with some friends who had once been passengers on the ship. They





The funnels on the SS United States were designed to deflect engine exhaust away from passengers on deck and reduce drag. They were the largest funnels of any ocean liner.

suggested that I photograph the derelict ocean liner. “I would love to,” I replied, “but I doubt I would ever be able to manage permission.”

That’s when two nearby guests approached me to say that they knew someone who just might be able to help. Usually when people say they have connections, it frequently leads to disappointment. All the same, I gave them my contact information and thanked them. I didn’t expect to hear anything more.

Months passed. I had nearly forgotten about the encounter when I received a call from a state representative’s office asking when I would like to set up an appointment to photograph the ship. I was floored. Fearful that the opportunity might evaporate, I made plans as quickly as I could.

## Fast and Famous

THE SS UNITED STATES, nicknamed “The Big U,” is neither a modern cruise ship nor a typical old passenger liner. At 101 feet wide and 990 feet long, she is 100 feet

longer than the Titanic and is the largest passenger ship ever built in an American shipyard. She is also the fastest. For many years, her top speed was classified, but it’s generally agreed that she can go as fast as 38 knots or 44 miles per hour with some reporting that she topped 44 knots or 50 mph.

She was built between 1950 and 1951 for the United States Lines at a cost of \$79.4 million (equivalent to more than \$1 billion today). The federal government agreed to chip in \$50 million of the cost with the understanding that if necessary, the liner could be used as a troopship in wartime (it could accommodate 15,000 soldiers).

When built, the SS United States was the pinnacle of American engineering and sophistication in shipbuilding: an erudite retort to the best that competing companies, such as Britain’s Cunard Line or the French Line (which would later be purchased by Norwegian Cruise Line), could offer. In her heyday, she carried such celebrity passengers as Marlon

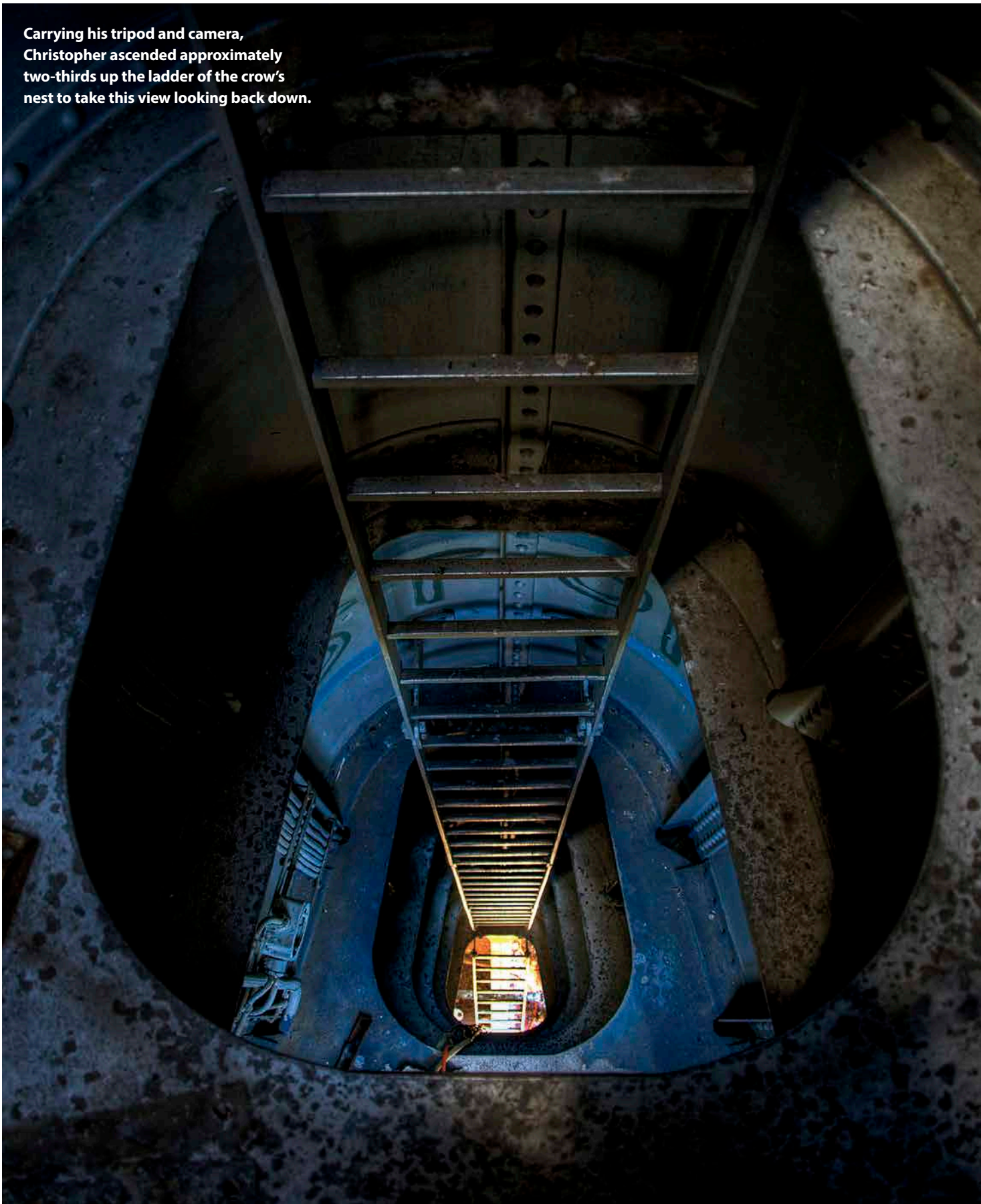
Brando, Coco Chanel, Sean Connery, Gary Cooper, Walter Cronkite, Salvador Dali, Walt Disney, Duke Ellington, Judy Garland, Cary Grant, Charlton Heston, Bob Hope, Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, John Wayne, Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, according to her current owners.

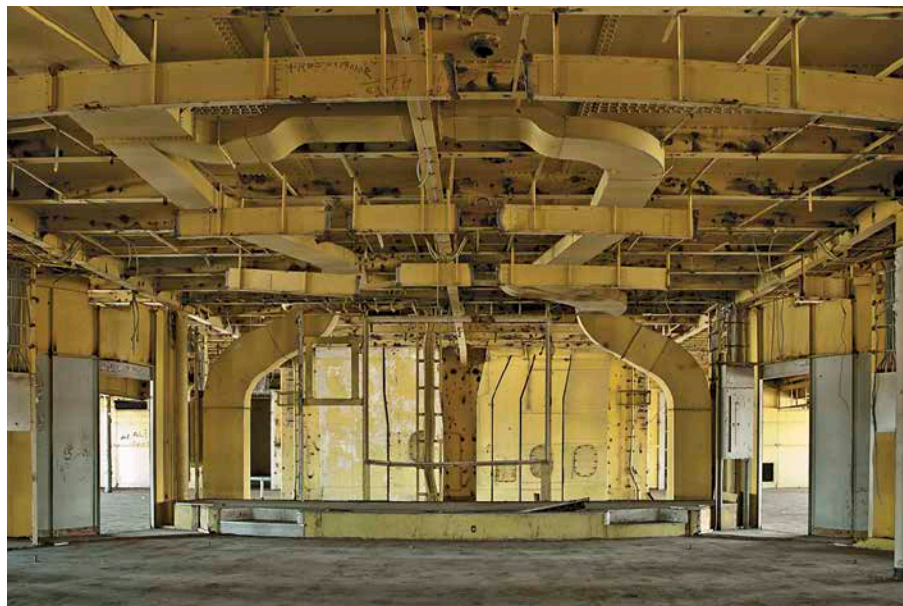
The ship was modern and impressive without being ostentatious. The interior motifs were a mixture of Native American and aquatic designs, paying homage to the elements with Modernist flourishes and a prevailing use of greens and blues. Unfortunately, by the time I came aboard, the interior of the ship had been stripped down to the steel substructure for auction and asbestos removal.

## Mothballed Masterpiece

ON THE DAY OF my visit, I arrived at the Philadelphia Regional Port Authority where I met the representative who would accompany me. We were joined by two delegates from Norwegian Cruise Line,

Carrying his tripod and camera, Christopher ascended approximately two-thirds up the ladder of the crow's nest to take this view looking back down.





(top) **This image, shot from the crow's nest, shows the ship's location at the Port Authority terminals in Philadelphia.**

(above) **Most of the interior of the SS United States was gutted because it was full of asbestos. Little remains now to show what it once looked like. This would have been the tourist class theater.**

who owned the ship at the time. As we neared the vessel, I marveled at the magnitude of the liner. Its hulk blocked the sun and seemed to stretch on forever.

Upon entering the ship, I could see that nearly every recognizable feature inside had been entirely stripped. In designing the interior, William Francis Gibbs had recalled how a horrific inferno had destroyed the *Morro Castle* in 1934, and he was terrified that fire could devastate his masterpiece liner as well. As a safety measure, he designed the ship to be as noncombustible as possible. While wood was used in the butcher's blocks and the grand piano, the rest of the fittings were custom designs that excluded it. Even the

clothes hangers were aluminum.

His fear of a mid-voyage blaze led to the liberal use of asbestos on every deck and bulkhead. Its fire-resistant quality appealed to Gibbs, who was unaware at the time of its carcinogenic properties.

After the ship was retired in 1969, she sat docked at Norfolk, Va., for more than two decades until purchased for \$2.6 million by Marmara Marine, Inc., a company that hoped to reuse her as a cruise liner. The project proved to be much more complicated than anticipated. The once-proud ship was turned away again and again at ports that wanted nothing to do with removing 15,000 square meters of asbestos.

Greenpeace referred to her as "a floating coffin" and boarded the liner to hang a banner on the side that read "Toxic Waste. Return to Sender." Eventually Ukrainian shipyards in Sevastopol took the job in 1993, but even this was not without incident. During the ship's stay there, two of the 18-foot propellers were removed and placed on the aft deck,



**The enclosed promenade may be devoid of deck chairs and passengers and in need of paint, but otherwise, it is very similar to its original appearance. Since it was enclosed and heated, this would have been an excellent place to relax and enjoy the evening during the winter months.**

damaging the railing in the process.

At one time, it was hoped that Cunard could turn her into a partner liner for its recently refurbished *RMS Queen Mary*, but that never happened. After scuffles over payments for the remediation and unauthorized scrapping of the lifeboats, davits and plumbing, the *SS United States* was finally towed to Philadelphia in 1996. She ultimately wound up at Pier 82, across the road from an IKEA store. Here, the mothballed masterpiece would sit.

## Strength and Ingenuity

**AS I MOVED AROUND** the *SS United States* with my camera, I found it nearly impossible to tell what the areas inside had once been. The exterior decks, however, were an awesome sight to behold with some still bearing the faint traces of shuffleboard courts. Areas such as the promenade decks were the easiest to imagine in their former splendor. In contrast, the grand staircase was shrouded in an obscure gloom.



I worked as quickly as I could to snap photos, but the representatives from Norwegian Cruise Line were eager to leave, and the Port Authority agent was glad to oblige them. After an hour and a half, I was escorted off the ship. While happy to have had the extraordinarily rare opportunity to photograph her, I was both dazed at the pace at which we had gone through the ship and disappointed that there were vast areas I had not been able to explore.

For example, I hadn't seen the enormous engines, which are capable of churning out an astonishing 240,000-shaft horsepower of output. On its maiden voyage July 3-7, 1952, the massive propellers thrust the liner across the ocean in three days, 10 hours and 40 minutes to secure the coveted Blue Riband award, which is presented to the ocean liner that crosses the Atlantic with the highest average speed.

As time passed, I feared I'd never get another chance to more thoroughly photograph



this neglected gem. Since her retirement, rumors persisted that the vessel would eventually be towed to a ship-breaking yard, possibly in Pakistan or Bangladesh, and cut up for scrap. I found it oddly prescient in a heartbreaking way that this former incarnation of American strength and ingenuity—named after the nation itself, no less—might be destined to be chopped up under miserable, unsafe working conditions by underpaid laborers abroad.

### S.O.S.

**SOME PEOPLE HAVE DIFFICULTY** understanding why saving this last American fragment of the vanished era of luxury ocean liners is important to me and others. Every time I post about it online, I typically receive some comments to the effect of “Who cares about that rust bucket? Sink it and turn it into a coral reef!” I cannot understand the mentality that relishes the thought of destroying the accomplishments of previous generations.

## Transatlantic Crossings by the Numbers

**1939:** Year when Pan American Airways offered inaugural transatlantic passenger service between New York and Marseille, France.

**1954:** Year jet travel began in the United States with introduction of the Boeing 367-8, or “Dash 80,” which later served as the prototype of the Boeing 707

**1957:** Year that air travel replaced ocean liners as the primary means to cross the Atlantic

**375:** Amount, in dollars, of the one-way fare for the 1939 transatlantic flight

**30:** Number of days it could take to cross the Atlantic by sailing vessel in 1776

**22:** Time, in hours, of the first transatlantic passenger service via the Boeing 314 flying boat.

**3.5:** Number of days to cross the Atlantic Ocean on the maiden voyage of the SS United States in 1951

**2, 52, 59:** Time (in hours, minutes, seconds) of the fastest transatlantic passenger flight by the Concorde on February 7, 1996

**1:** Number of transatlantic ocean liners in service today (the RMS Queen Mary 2, QM2)



COURTESY OF THE SS UNITED STATES CONSERVANCY'S ARCHIVAL COLLECTION

Every other liner of that era, with the exception of the RMS Queen Mary, which is a floating museum and hotel in Long Beach, Calif., has been scrapped or lies along the murky depths of the ocean's floor. Except for the breathless legends of their unfathomable beauty and opulence in books and in grainy black and white photographs, they have been lost forever.

One could even argue that if the SS United States wasn't an obsolete relic, she wouldn't have been retired at all. She was designed to be the last word in modern American shipbuilding, and in a way that was likely never anticipated, she was. Even now, the her speed record holds, although it seems a hollow victory in a world that has moved beyond the necessity of transatlantic travel by ship. While her fuel costs were enormous during her operating days, the expense to keep her

docked and minimally maintained today are astronomical—reportedly \$850 a day or roughly \$310,000 a year.

Plan after plan to use her for other ventures, such as a casino, a hospital ship or a museum, has faltered. Yet, ideas continue to be tossed around. She remains quite sound, after all, and the gutting of her interior might actually make it easier to repurpose her. So far, none of the proposals have led to restoration. I passionately believe that the ship can and should be restored in much the same way that the former ruins of the immigration hall on Ellis Island were saved and rehabilitated into the Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration.

Knowing that the path to restore the ship would be extraordinarily difficult and expensive, I was ecstatic when Norwegian Cruise Line sold the decaying vessel to the SS United States Conservancy in March 2011. Headed by William

Francis Gibbs's granddaughter Susan Gibbs, the conservancy was backed by a \$5.8 million donation from philanthropist H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest.

Although Susan Gibbs has only limited memories of her grandfather, who passed away when she was five, she seems to have found her calling in the SS United States. She came to know William through letters, speeches and anecdotes from those who knew him best, and she was deeply moved by stories from former passengers and crew members. Though the liner is nothing like the impressive photos of the ship during its glory days, she and the other members of the conservancy work to, in her words, "ensure that people know the ship is not only still with us but is ready to be preserved and celebrated in a way befitting a singular American achievement." She describes seeing it as

(left) During its initial crossing, the SS United States won the Blue Riband by making the transatlantic crossing in both directions in record time. (below) Shipbuilder William Francis Gibbs is photographed aboard his beloved SS United States.

a symbol of American citizens at their best and feels the ship embodies a sense of unity and can-do spirit that are needed now more than ever.

## Hope Remains

IT CAN BE DIFFICULT to judge the success of the SS United States Conservancy when you can't see the labor, love and trial and error that go into their efforts. Advocating for preservation, after all, is considerably easier than maintaining such an expensive ship or attracting developers. Still, the conservancy remains doggedly hopeful it will prevail in its mission.

In 2016, Crystal Cruises agreed to cover docking costs for the year while it conducted a feasibility study on reusing the SS United States. It eventually backed out due to "technical and commercial challenges." In 2018, the conservancy solicited then-President Trump to help restore "America's flagship" and consulted Damen Ship Repair & Conservation about redevelopment. Neither effort proved successful.

More recently, the commercial real estate firm RXR Realty has expressed interest in rehabilitating the liner as a waterfront destination, complete with hotel, museum and event venue, which could create more than 1,000 jobs. The company owns 93 properties in New York City and has developed many others, including the recently reopened Pier 57 complex, which houses Google's New York headquarters. It's not unrealistic to imagine that they could pull off a mammoth undertaking like repurposing the SS United States.

"RXR continues to press forward in updating its plans for the ship to align with a post-COVID economy, securing key partnerships and exploring locations [including Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Miami and San Francisco]," Gibbs

says. "The conservancy remains grateful for the vision, investment and support of RXR's experienced staff and first-class groups of architects and engineers."

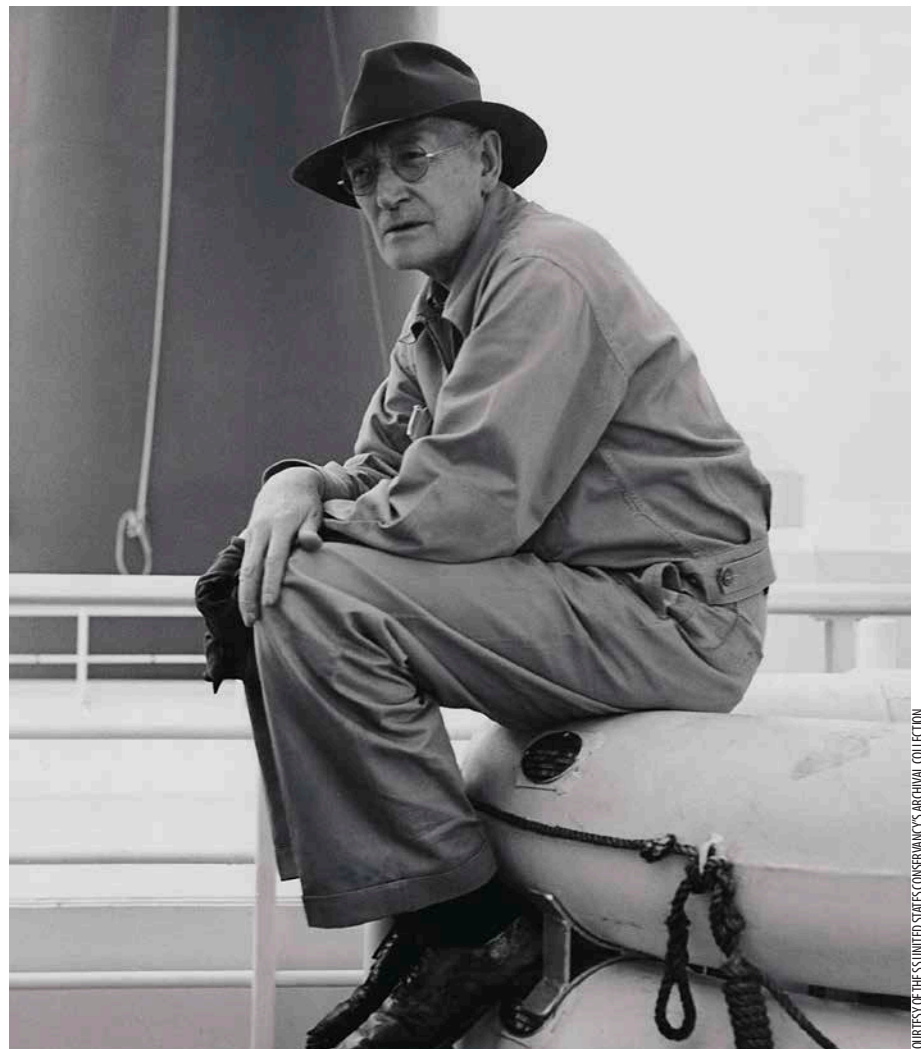
Despite the roadblocks and dead ends it has encountered over the past dozen years, the conservancy is determined to develop a "museum and visitor center [that] will explore a range of compelling themes of 20th century industrial innovation, mid-century modern art and design, maritime history and American cultural identity and artistic expression."

When asked about the conservancy's successes and hopes for the future, Gibbs responds, "Over the past decade-plus, the conservancy has built a global community of supporters from all 50 states and more than 40 countries; produced award-winning documentaries; developed a major collection of art, archives and artifacts from the SS United States;

installed major curatorial exhibitions at a number of prominent museums and galleries; and developed plans for a shipboard museum and innovation center.

"The conservancy has earned extensive national and international press coverage and raised millions of dollars to ensure the vessel remains safe and secure as she awaits her rebirth," she continues. "At each step along the way, these efforts have equipped us to share the story of the SS United States—America's story—with future generations."

It's hard to argue that these aren't major accomplishments, and the vision of such a grand liner re-envisioned as a museum coupled with mixed-use space that celebrates the ship's historic design is, indeed, compelling. While critics may argue that any signs of progress have been limited, I think a fair counterargument could be made that keeping the SS United States



COURTESY OF THE SS UNITED STATES CONSERVANCY'S ARCHIVAL COLLECTION



(right, top) William Francis Gibbs watches his SS United States in Newport News, Va. (right, bottom) Today the ship sits along a dock in Philadelphia. (far right) The ship—shown in dry dock—had four propellers: two five-bladed ones mounted aft of two with four blades. Each manganese bronze propeller weighed 60,000 pounds, and the design was overseen by Gibbs and Cox engineer Elaine Kaplan. Each of the propellers can be visited at sites today with three in New York and one in Virginia.

from being scrapped is an accomplishment in its own right.

## Back on the Ship

ELEVEN YEARS AGO, I was able to return to the SS United States. I even conducted two photography workshops that literally sold out the minute they went online. The sessions generated more than \$3,300 for the conservancy, which is admittedly a tiny fraction of even one month's operating expenses.

My students and I were happy to be onboard, walking the decks of the beautiful liner that had once carried celebrities and presidents across the Atlantic. I was thrilled to visit areas I couldn't before, including the once top-secret engine room and the crow's nest.

As I gazed out of the crow's nest to the strip malls and parking lots sprawled out before the ship's bow, it struck me that maybe as a society, we are losing the capability to incorporate things of remarkable grandeur into the fabric of our lives. We see something magnificent, and instead of feeling that transcendent awe and humility, we view it as a threat to the worth of the generally low-budget, shabby architectural constructs that pepper our cities today.

Rather than a cause for celebration, things of beauty are gleefully demolished or hacked apart to recycle the steel, aluminum or other reusable materials. This attitude leads to a failure to recognize the value of something like the SS United States on its own merit, rejecting it instead because it can't be integrated into our world.

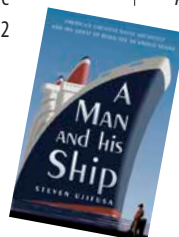
The massive cruise ships roaming our oceans today serve as seaborne vacation



metropolises, yet I believe their elegance falls far short of the passenger liners that preceded them. My hope for the SS United States is that it will be saved so that future generations can gaze up at its prow in the same awe and wonder that I did. I am hopeful that in the near future, the vessel will find a new home and a new purpose and be appreciated for decades to come. As long as the SS United States is intact, those hopes will always remain. ▼

—Matthew Christopher is a photographer who specializes in images of abandoned places. More of his work can be viewed at [abandonedamerica.us](http://abandonedamerica.us).

Of the many books about the ship, one that we reviewed back in the September/October 2012 issue is the 417-page *A Man and His Ship* by Philadelphian Steve Ujifusa and published by Simon and Shuster. Those desiring to know more about this ship and the transatlantic ocean liner industry during that time will find it an informative and entertaining read.



## WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE SS UNITED STATES?

The fate of the SS United States is as hidden as its top speed once was. It's easy to feel pessimistic about its future as mooring costs are great and reuse plans have come and gone. Still, one could also have said that the act of creating such a ship in the first place would have been improbable, yet it happened.

As frustrating as it is to witness preservation plans for so many different historic locations falter over the years, one must remember that no grand ambition is realized without the seemingly foolish, resolutely stubborn belief that something that appears outlandish is, in fact, possible. Sure, there's always a chance that belief will result in failure, but without hope, failure is inevitable.

As the mooring fees for the ship continue to mount, the private SS United States Conservancy group, who is the caretaker of the ship, has been challenged by a recent rent increase. Readers can follow the efforts to "save the ship" on the group's Facebook page at [facebook.com/SSUSC](https://www.facebook.com/SSUSC). [ssusc.org](http://ssusc.org); 888-488-7787



COURTESY OF THE U.S. UNITED STATES CONSERVANCY'S ARCHIVAL COLLECTION