Alumni

# Dock Star

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|
Summer 2014



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She has a commanding presence, even in old age. Her height, her slenderness: time can’t really take these away. Standing before her, you can see how she attracted movie idols, artists, and presidents, and why she was the love of at least one man’s life.

When the naval architect William Francis Gibbs 1912GSAS watched the christening of his steamship *United States* in June 1951, she was his greatest vision made real. That year, she was freshly painted in shiny red, crisp white, deep blue. The colors accentuated the grace of her narrow hull. Once, someone suggested to Gibbs that he loved his “big ship” more than his wife, to which he replied, “You are a thousand percent correct.”

At Pier 86 in Manhattan, seventy thousand people lined up for ten blocks to see her off. She left New York Harbor on July 3, 1952, commanded by Amelia Earhart’s former copilot. Three days, ten hours, and forty minutes later, she passed Bishop’s Rock, a tiny piece of Great Britain at the easternmost end of the North Atlantic shipping route, breaking the *Queen Mary*’s record for fastest transatlantic crossing by a passenger liner.

For almost twenty years, she’s been anchored at Pier 82 in South Philadelphia, across from an Ikea and a LongHorn Steakhouse. This stretch of waterfront is not known for its scenery. Driving directions to the ship from the highway might go something like: take a right, keep going past the movie theater and the gentlemen’s club, and after a few stoplights you will see the red ocean liner’s mighty stacks, twelve decks high. There is something magnificent in the moment you first see her, and something jarring.

The SS *United States* carried passengers to and from Europe for seventeen years. Now she’s been stranded on this industrial stretch of the Delaware River for longer than she sailed. Gibbs had made the grandest, fastest ocean liner in the world just as the golden age of the ocean liner was cresting. He died in 1967, and two years later, the ship was removed from service. The growth of air travel helps to explain her retirement. But her survival, even in an unlikely berth beside a shopping center, is a testament to her power. Whether it’s her history or her physical stature — or something beyond both — she has an effect on people.

Susan Gibbs ’89SIPA and Dan McSweeney ’07SIPA understand this well. They work for the SS *United States* Conservancy, which owns the ship. Gibbs was the

conservancy’s founding president and now serves as its executive director. Her grandfather was W. F. Gibbs. McSweeney manages redevelopment for the conservancy, which hopes to transform the ship’s empty decks into functional spaces. McSweeney’s father emigrated from Scotland to New York for a job on the *United States*, and worked onboard as a steward. For McSweeney and Gibbs, saving the *United States* from the scrap yard has become a calling.

“When my father died in 1995,” says Gibbs, “I cleaned out his garage and found a bunch of boxes full of old family papers. I went through them and saw my grandfather on the cover of *Time*. I had no idea he had achieved the renown that he had.” A few years later, she took her small daughter and her husband to see the ship in its current location.

“I brought some items from my father’s garage with me, including my grandmother’s trip diaries,” she says. “My grandfather, who was obsessed with the ship his whole life, went on only one voyage — the maiden one. Which was interesting. And mysterious. But my grandmother? Lots of trips back and forth. I started reading her entries out loud, about the cashmere stoles and the orchestra and the champagne. The juxtaposition of that vision with what I saw when I finally went onboard was haunting.”

In 1952, after her own first tour, Vera Cravath Gibbs wrote, “On the ship were scenes of great activity. A great many men were scrubbing floors, or polishing this or that. The movie theater was a gem; soft grey, with fluted wall … One room had black walls with brilliant diamond stars of illuminated glass.” From the docks, “we all looked at her as a child gazes at a Christmas tree, full of wonder.”

Looking at the same ship sixty years later, Susan says, “It was incredibly sad to see how forgotten and forlorn she was. But there was also a sense of the spirits still onboard, and the spirit of the ship herself. I didn’t think I was on a carcass, or that the story was over. There was hope.”

McSweeney feels similar optimism. In 1999, driving from New York to Quantico for service in the Marine Corps, he pulled over in Philadelphia and was enthralled by the sight of the fading red stacks. His father had kept a set of souvenir playing cards with a little painting of the ship on the back of each card. From looking at them, McSweeney understood that the *United States* was a “beautiful, well-crafted vessel.” Driving along the Delaware, he contrasted that image with what was left.

“It was so touching,” he says, “because I realized the ship was such an important piece of history, and because I could imagine my father being on it. He was somebody who spent most of his life on vessels, but the *United States* was the one he was really proud of.” Though the ship had been permanently docked by the time McSweeney was born, he says it remained “a part of my consciousness, a symbol of greatness.” His father died when McSweeney was eight. For the son, connecting to the ship is also a way to “connect with the dad I really didn’t know well, and remember his life.”

W. F. Gibbs and his firm, Gibbs & Cox, designed the ocean liner for the United States Lines. As the company’s flagship, the *United States* provided luxury travel to Grace Kelly, Marilyn Monroe, Salvador Dalí, and John F. Kennedy. She brought immigrants to US soil, and American students to Europe (when Bill Clinton won a Rhodes scholarship, he took the SS *United States* to England). Then, in 1969, she was docked, and over the years, sold to various owners, stripped of her furniture and fittings, and towed all the way to Turkey for asbestos removal. McSweeney has heard that her last private owner, a New Jersey real-estate developer, may have won her in a card game. When the owner died, Norwegian Cruise Line bought her, with the intent of returning her to service. That plan never materialized, and in 2011, NCL’s parent company came awfully close to selling her for scrap. “At the eleventh hour,” according to Susan Gibbs, philanthropist and Columbia Trustee emeritus H. F. “Gerry” Lenfest ’58LAW, ’09HON made a large donation to the conservancy, which then bought the ship before the scrapping company did.

“She was built at a time when ‘made in America’ really meant something,” Lenfest has said, “and that is a legacy that cannot be lost.” In fact, Lenfest’s father worked for a firm that made some of her windows.

The conservancy hopes to transform her into a stationary business and public space: one area would be dedicated to a museum, and another area would become a commercial enterprise, like a hotel, event space, restaurant, or market. At nearly five blocks long, she has the room for creative redevelopment. Indeed, she has always been a multipurpose space. In a speech he gave at Columbia in 1959, W. F. Gibbs asked a gathering of engineers to imagine his creation as the Waldorf-Astoria built on top of the Queensborough Bridge, built on top of a power plant.

With such dreams in mind, Gibbs and McSweeney recently invited a group of architects and developers aboard. They boarded the ship through the once-crowded

crew area, climbed a narrow staircase, and entered the first-class accommodations. What were once two-room suites with private bathrooms were now distinguishable only by raised edges in the floor. The furniture was gone, as were the walls. The first-class dining room, where Duke Ellington played for guests, was dark and silent. In the middle of the old lounge, a large, sculpted, aluminum bar still stood, and one barstool still had its brown cushion. (The metal bar was evidence of the architect's obsessive fireproofing: interior designer Dorothy Marckwald strictly used noncombustible materials, down to plastic shuffleboard pucks, though Gibbs allowed one mahogany piano, because "the damn fools we went to couldn't build a piano unless it was made of wood.") On the rear sports deck, one of the ship's four propellers, designed by engineer Elaine Kaplan, was strapped upright to the shuffleboard court. And on the windowed upper promenade, where passengers once looked out over the open ocean, a goose had built a large nest.

You could call it patriotism, or respect for design, but people talk about the SS *United States* with something that sounds like love. By way of example, Susan Gibbs says this about her grandmother: "You would think that being married to my grandfather, who was clearly in love with the ship, she might have felt a little threatened, a little jealous. But she was clearly infatuated herself."

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