



The designer of the SS United States, William Francis Gibbs, admires his handiwork in New York City, the ship's home port, in this photo from the 1950s or '60s. *COURTESY OF SUSAN GIBBS*

## Fans of World's Fastest Ocean Liner Put Out a Distress Call

By **JESSE PESTA** | *The Wall Street Journal*

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PHILADELPHIA—Dan McSweeney has a few ideas for saving the United States.

That would be the SS United States—the fastest ocean liner in the world. Bigger than the Titanic and fast enough to water-ski behind, she's a steamship so sophisticated, her capabilities remained a Cold War secret for decades.

She transported royalty and starlets. Her crew served frog legs in first class. Before the dawn of the

jet age, the SS United States was the Concorde of her era.

Admirers call her the “Big U.” Today, she could be in big trouble.

The once-proud ship is rusting away in the Delaware River, across from an Ikea. Its owner, cruise line NCL Group, has put her up for sale.

“This is the endgame,” says Mr. McSweeney, a 39-year-old former active duty Marine officer with infectious enthusiasm for the vessel. Sometimes he goes on ship-touching trips, sailing into the river with a few like-minded individuals to put their hands on the hull.

Mr. McSweeney and a small band of the ship’s most loyal fans fear the worst: That the Big U will get sold to “ship breakers”—metal scavengers who will gut and fillet the SS United States on a beach somewhere in India, where many old ships go to die.

The symbolism isn’t lost on them. “What does it say if the United States is towed to Asia for scrap?” asks Steven Ujifusa, another ship aficionado.

NCL declined to comment. In a March statement, NCL said it would focus on seeking a U.S. buyer.

Many of the save-our-ship team have personal ties to the SS United States, including Charles B. Anderson, a New York maritime lawyer: His father was the longest-serving captain. Mr. Anderson has a letter, penned in 1957 by the Duke of Windsor, congratulating his dad on an impressive feat of parallel parking: Docking the 990-foot vessel without the aid of a tugboat during a tug strike.

“We watched every phase of the intricate seamanship involved with the greatest interest and admiration,” wrote the duke, who was on board with the duchess.

The Big U’s fan club includes Susan Gibbs, whose grandfather designed the ship, and Susan Caccavale, whose mom designed the propellers.

Ms. Caccavale, who teaches at Hofstra University, took part in a recent ship-touching trip. “We were all just touching the ship and saying, ‘Wow, this is great!’” she says. “I wanted to jump through one of the portholes.”

The team has its work cut out for it. During a recent gathering, a question came up: What does it actually cost to dock the ship? “It behooves us to do some research on that,” Mr. McSweeney said.

In July, their group, the SS United States Conservancy, lined up a promise from Gerry Lenfest, a Philadelphia philanthropist, to kick in \$300,000 toward the purchase price if, he says, other people cough up the rest.

The SS United States was built in 1952, at a cost of \$78 million, with twin goals: Recapture the trans-Atlantic speed record from the British, and serve as a lightning-fast troop carrier if the need ever arose. (It didn’t.)

The ship was a full-service trans-Atlantic ocean liner, with three orchestras. On her first Atlantic crossing, in July of 1952, the ship demolished the eastbound speed record, long held by the Queen Mary, averaging an unheard-of 35.6 knots, or 41 miles a hour. Coming back, she broke the westbound record. Speed was a point of national pride for the ship’s designer, William Francis Gibbs.

In a 1964 New Yorker interview he referred to rival British designers as “condescending, supercilious bastards.” When his ship took their records, he said, “they had to come down a peg.”

Today, it’s the SS United States that has come down a peg. In the jet age, her purpose faded. It’s been decades since she moved under her own power.

As time passed, the Big U suffered many indignities, including being towed to Ukraine in the 1990s to be stripped of asbestos. The ship’s kidney-shaped bar from first class ended up in a restaurant in

Nags Head, N.C. Its dinner plates pop up on eBay.

One of the ship's formerly top-secret propellers now sits at the back of a parking lot in New York City, towering over tour buses at the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. A recent visit to the propeller detected little activity except for a snoring bus driver.

Today, the SS United States still holds the westbound speed record. But in the 1990s, a catamaran ferry named the Great Britain claimed the eastbound record. Old animosities rose again.

“Giving the trophy to the Great Britain would be like awarding the Wimbledon Cup to a ping-pong player,” said an official at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, in a statement at the time. (Today, yet another ship holds the eastbound record.)

A few years ago, NCL hatched a plan to return the Big U to glory. After the 2001 terrorist attacks, cruises in U.S. waters gained popularity amid worries about traveling abroad. NCL bought the ship in 2003 with the idea of sailing her around Hawaii.

That didn't work out as planned. This year, NCL put the SS United States on the market.

“It is an incredible ship,” says Colin Veitch, NCL's chief executive when the company bought it. “That ship is a survivor.” Mr. Veitch remembers the Big U from his youth. A great-aunt who regularly sailed on it would bring him flags she plucked from the dining-room table centerpieces.

One recent Friday, a group of admirers gathered in Philadelphia for a ship-touching trip. But the weather was too stormy to venture out on the river. Instead they went to the Ikea across the street and looked at the ship through the windows.

The SS United States loomed over the parking lot. “To see it up close...really wondrous,” said Mr. McSweeney.

Ms. Gibbs described the menu from the ship's maiden voyage, which “reads like a spoof” of haute

cuisine, she said: Diplomat Pudding with Melba Sauce. Vegetable Dinner a la Hoover.

By the window, a college student named Alexander Hovnanian snapped a photo of the ship. Looking out through the rain, he said the scene reminded him of a “myth,” or maybe the Titanic.

Mr. McSweeney and friends decided to go for a beer. One person mentioned, but quickly rejected, a nearby bar named Eulogy. It wouldn’t strike the right mood.

Because despite the odds, this group is optimistic. Sure, the ship’s interior was stripped down to the metal as part of asbestos abatement. But that offers a clean slate to that special buyer—someone with a bit of interior-decorating vision, perhaps. Someone in the market for a fixer-upper steamship.

Mr. McSweeney says the conservancy has decided to “professionalize.” He’s now got the title of executive director. A national fund-raising SOS is just around the corner, he says.

He has many ideas for how to save that ship. The SS United States could become a nautical museum, he says. Or a centerpiece in a riverside hotel and convention center. Or, she could be reborn as a humanitarian-relief ship.

“Imagine there’s another tsunami,” Mr. McSweeney says, and the SS United States comes steaming to the rescue, once again dashing across the sea. That would be “kind of a cool thing,” he says.