

NEWPORT NEWS

Group aims to save ‘perfect ship’

By SHANNON HUMPHREY MABE
shumphrey@dailypress.com | 757-247-4795

NEWPORT NEWS — As a young boy, William Francis Gibbs was fascinated with ocean liners.

That fascination turned into a lifelong obsession for Gibbs, and one of the greatest pieces of American history: the SS United States.

The SS United States, a trans-Atlantic ocean liner, was built by Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Co. in 1952.

Hugh C. “Jr.” Ewing, 88, was one of the men who helped build the ship.

“My dad was a young apprentice in the shipyard, and he worked on mechanical stuff in the engine room of the ship,” said Tim Ewing, his son. “He went out on sea trials once it was done, and was one of the men that calculated how fast the ship was going.”

The 500,000-square-foot ship, with a top speed of 38 knots (44 mph), was 990 feet, with 12 decks.

The ship’s speed was a key factor for Gibbs when designing the vessel.

“In 1914, (when Gibbs was 28 years old), he sketched his vision for the fastest ship in the world,” said Susan Gibbs, granddaughter of William Francis Gibbs.

Gibbs’ vision led to his flunking out of Harvard, much to the dismay of his parents.

“All he wanted to do was design ships in his dorm room,” said Susan Gibbs. “It was a dream of his to design the perfect ship.”

Gibbs’ dream was realized once the \$78 million vessel was ready to set sail June 3, 1952.

On its maiden voyage, the SS United States crushed the trans-Atlantic speed record, completing the run in 3½ days.

The ship, billed as the largest passenger ship ever built in America, still holds the trans-Atlantic speed record, with no other passenger ship crossing the Atlantic faster in both directions.

Susan Gibbs remembers the stories of her grandfather’s love for the SS United States.

“He would have his driver take him from his office down to the pier to see the ship off on its trans-Atlantic runs,” she said.

“Then, when the ship was



CHRIS GARDNER/AP PHOTO

The ocean liner SS United States sits in the water of the Delaware River where it is docked at an pier in South Philadelphia, in this Nov. 13, 1998, file photo.

returning, he would be out there at dawn to see the ship coming home over the sunrise, before dashing to Pier 86 to see it docked and greet those aboard.”

History in jeopardy

Since the SS United States left service in Nov. 14, 1969, it’s had an unsure future, changing hands several times.

In 2003, amid talk of the ship being sold as scrap, Norwegian Cruise Lines purchased it in hopes of returning it to full seagoing service.

Those plans soon fell apart with the global economic crisis, forcing Norwegian to offer the ship up for sale in 2009.

Again, more scrappers came knocking.

The SS United States Conservancy group was formally founded as a nonprofit in 2004.

“Our mission is to save the ship,” said Susan Gibbs. “There’s something about this ship that touches a nerve with people, and I think it’s because it hearkens back to an era in our nation when we could and did produce the best.”

People in Newport News are doing their part to save the ship, as well, hosting events to help raise money for the conservancy’s efforts. One of those events is happening May 30.

“I can remember my dad taking

About the SS United States

■ **SS United States Program.** 6:45 p.m. Wednesday, Chestnut Memorial, 1024 Harpersville Road, Newport News. Susan Gibbs will speak about the SS United States and the Conservancy’s latest efforts to save the ship.

■ Visit www.ssunitedstatesconservancy.org to learn more about the conservancy’s efforts to save the ship or to make a donation.

me on the ship when I was five or six years old, and just thinking how amazing it was,” said Tim Ewing. “There I was standing next to the huge smoke stacks in red, white and blue, and I was this little fella.”

“It’s all about taking pride in something that was built right here in Newport News,” said Ewing, a shipyard worker for 32 years.

Future plans

The SS United States Conservancy is currently working on a two-step process to support the vessel’s restoration and redevelopment.

First, through its SS United States Redevelopment Program, the conservancy has issued a request for qualifications that will lead to a formal request for proposals, according to Susan Gibbs.

“The deadline for the request for qualifications is June 1, and we

have been encouraged by the initial level of interest,” she said. “Upon reviewing the submissions, the conservancy will identify a small number to submit full proposals, with a goal of selecting a partner or consortium by late fall.”

Plans for the ship include a 20,000-foot shipboard museum, with reconstruction of some of the key iconic rooms, which will be housed in the ship’s former observation deck. Plans could also include a casino, hotels and restaurants.

There are different price points for the refurbishment of the ship, with a complete build-out of the ship’s interior, including the museum, costing between \$200 million and \$300 million, according to Susan Gibbs.

Another option would be a staged development plan, restoring the exterior of the ship, as well as one or two decks. The cost for this plan would be \$25 million.

“This would allow the ship to begin generating its own revenue

to help with future costs,” Susan Gibbs said.

The conservancy bought the ship from Genting Hong Kong, parent company of Norwegian Cruise Lines, in February 2011. The purchase price was \$3 million. In addition to the purchase price, philanthropist H.F. “Gerry” Lenfest also provided \$2.8 million to cover 20 months of the vessel’s carrying costs. That 20 months is up Nov. 1 of this year.

“There’s always that danger looming that the ship could be sold as scrap,” said Susan Gibbs. “But we’re still raising funding and building national and international support to help extend our time frame.”

Since acquiring the ship in 2011, the 7,500-member conservancy has raised \$620,000. The ship’s upcoming 60th anniversary campaign goal is \$1 million, according to Susan Gibbs.

Gibbs’ new dream

“I think my grandfather would be saddened, almost heartbroken, to see what’s become of the ship,” said Susan Gibbs. “When you see it how it is now, it’s a forlorn picture. It looks forgotten, untended to, and that’s not what he envisioned.”

Gibbs is reminded of how her grandfather classified the greatness that was the SS United States.

“The SS United States will not be the largest ship in the world, but as you know when we speak of the greatest men in the world we never think of a circus giant in that classification,” William Francis Gibbs said. “We think of the men who have led the world and who have the attributes that one applies to great leaders in every line of endeavor. It is in that sense that this ship is the greatest ship in the world.”

For the men who worked on the SS United States, as well as served aboard, the ship will always be the greatest and hold a special meaning, conservancy members say.

“When you talk to my dad and the other old-timers that worked on this ship, they’ll all tell you it’s the proudest ship they’ve ever served on. They’ll always tell you the United States comes number one,” Ewing said.

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