



SS United States: Manhattan On The High Seas

During the heyday of the transatlantic liner, few sights were more familiar to New Yorkers than their city's flagship, the *SS United States*. People would travel from miles around, making the journey to Pier 86, just to see this magnificent vessel in harbor. With her rakish red, white, and blue funnels, her silver colored masts and lifeboats, her immaculate appearance embodied everything that was great about our country post World War II. So familiar was she to the denizens of this grand city, that precisely at twelve noon when she sounded her massive, thunderous horn, people as far away as the West Side would regularly check and adjust their watches. The most technologically sophisticated ocean liner in history and to this day still the fastest ever to ply the rough waters of the North Atlantic, she was actually designed to military specifications and was a classified top secret weapon during the Cold War, capable of transforming from a luxurious mid-century modern passenger liner to an ultra-fast troop carrier within 24 hours. While she was never called to serve this dual purpose, as a passenger liner she did exemplify the spirit of New York City, her home port of registry, with a distinctive style all her own.



"Everyone who sailed her felt that unique American experience, that New York experience," says former crew member Joe Muchulsky, Jr., who is interviewed in a new one-hour documentary from Big Ship Films and WTTW National Productions. Entitled *SS United States: Lady in Waiting*, the film is a valentine to a largely forgotten chapter in American history, a chapter in which New York, the port of choice for the major liners of the 20th Century, played a central and indelible role. "Imagine New York at that time, with that pace, put into a ship," Muchulsky added.



Designed by the preeminent naval architect of the past century, William Francis Gibbs, her maiden arrival in New York harbor in June, 1952, created a media frenzy about America's new glamour girl, rumored to be the fastest ship ever built. As she was readied for her maiden voyage on July 3, 1952, she was a commanding presence on luxury liner row with those gorgeous twin funnels towering overhead, as much a part of the Manhattan skyline as the Chrysler Building. When she was opened up for public tours, thousands paid fifty cents each just to stroll her decks and public rooms. She was such a modern cultural icon of the day that even *Vogue* magazine featured their new July cottons with a fashion shoot aboard.

Every one of the 48 states in the union contributed in some way to her design and

construction, but the city of New York contributed her soul. The artwork aboard, all by American artists, was considered cutting edge. Foam glass sculptures by Gwen Lux (her *Expressions of Freedom* was seen in the first class dining salon), metal bas reliefs by Austin Purves, and illuminated etched glass panels by Charles Gilbert, were just a few of the artists whose works made the ship a veritable MOMA at sea. With the finest intercontinental and American cuisine, sophisticated and bright modern interiors, and a ratio of 1 crew member to every 1.5 passengers aboard, her service was considered impeccable.



Her sailing days and nights at sea were accompanied by the soundtrack of the Meyer Davis Orchestra. Mr. Davis was regarded as the maestro of premiere New York society at the time, and his dance orchestras were often booked twelve years in advance. A typical evening would feature everything from classic Gerswhin, Porter, and Berlin to lively dance medleys of the latest Broadway hits. So popular was the *SS United States* that she even appeared in *Playboy* when New York artist LeRoy Neiman was asked to paint his impressions of her for the magazine. “Traveling aboard the *SS United States* was like staying at the Ritz-Carlton or the Waldorf-Astoria or any of the finest luxury hotels,” says Susan Gibbs, granddaughter of the ship’s designer.



Abruptly pulled from service in 1969, the victim of rising fuel and labor costs and the advent of transatlantic jet travel which reduced the journey to five hours instead of five days, the ship still exists, moored and derelict at a pier in Philadelphia. Although she’s been completely gutted of her state-of-the-art modern interiors, there is a movement afoot to save the ship and either return her to sea or restore and return her to New York as a stationary hotel, convention center and museum. *SS United States: Lady in Waiting* covers the history of The City’s signature ocean liner’s past, present, and future, and features interviews



with such notables as Walter Cronkite, LeRoy Neiman, maritime historian William H. Miller, Jr., and Susan Gibbs, now president of the SS United States Conservancy, a national non-profit organization seeking to save the vessel and preserve her legacy.

Joe Rota, who served aboard the ship as waiter, photographer, and Harry S. Truman’s preferred bellboy, is also interviewed in the film and recalls her spirit fondly. When asked to encapsulate what made the *SS United States* so special, he replied simply, “She wasn’t just a ship, she was like a city.” And without question, that city was her home.