

# Scattered Treasures: Curatorial Efforts to Preserve Historic Artifacts From the SS *United States*

by Mark B. Perry & Susan Gibbs



*The SS United States shows off its fine profile as it slowly steams approaching New York City in this undated photo.*

*photo: Braun Brothers Collection, Steamship Historical Society Archives, [www.ssha.org](http://www.ssha.org)*

When maritime artist Ken Marschall and historian Eric Sauder boarded the laid-up SS *United States* one morning in 1986, they were greeted by the ship's sole occupant: a security guard who was working double duty as an appraiser and cashier. The guard told the men that virtually everything aboard was for sale (with the odd exception of the interior hand railings), and that he'd determine the prices when the two were ready to leave with their treasures.

"It was utterly surreal," Marschall recalled, describing how he and Sauder felt both honored and humbled when they realized they were the only people aboard save for the guard. The electrical systems were still functioning in some areas, but a flashlight was needed in others. "It was startling and sad to discover most spaces thoroughly ransacked or dismantled for important, salable items for the auction two years before," he continued, referring to the historic 1984 Guernsey's multi-day sell-off of the bulk of the ship's art, artifacts, furnishings, glassware, fittings, and everything else that had once been required to carry passengers across the Atlantic Ocean in comfort, style, safety, and speed.

Eric Sauder remembered the liner being eerily quiet with only the occasional noise echoing in the abandoned corridors. "As we wandered through the ship, we saw thousands of artifacts that had not been sold at the auction—hundreds of linen table cloths and napkins piled high on the equipment in the galleys, dozens of stateroom telephones in a mound in a first-class cabin, furniture piled in heaps all over the ship, filing cabinets in the Chief Engineer's office still stuffed with original paperwork..." Marschall added that it was as if "the crew had walked away only days before."

In fact, the crew of the SS *United States* had "jumped ship" some 17

years prior to Marschall's and Sauder's visit—a span equal to the entire service life of the storied liner. The oft-told tale is that in November of 1969, the ship had sailed from New York to Virginia for her routine annual overhaul in preparation for another year of sailings and her first "Around The World" cruise. Once she was secured in Newport News, Commodore Leroy Alexanderson gave the routine order "finished with engines," unaware that it would be the last time those words would be uttered from the bridge. Shortly thereafter, he received the news from the shipping line that the vessel was to be mothballed indefinitely, her crew released from their jobs, and that all future crossings and cruises had been cancelled. It was an abrupt and unceremonious end to a stellar career, brought about by rising fuel and labor costs as well as the popularity of jet travel which now made crossing the Atlantic a matter of hours rather than days.

In those early ensuing months, the SS *United States* received the care and maintenance deserving of America's legendary flagship and transatlantic speed champion. With her top-secret design and national defense features, the laid-up vessel was still an invaluable asset to her namesake's country. Having been designed to be converted within 24 hours from a luxury passenger liner into the world's most formidable troop ship, she would remain on standby should that need—or any other—arise. For that purpose, the Big U (her affectionate nickname) was hermetically sealed and dehumidification equipment run throughout to keep the still pristine superliner—which had enjoyed a reputation for always being "spick-and-span"—in top shipshape condition while her future was determined. Sadly, that future remained elusive and uncertain for the next several decades.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, a number of schemes to revitalize the

immaculate and intact liner were explored. The U.S. Department of Defense conducted a feasibility study with the goal of converting her to a military hospital ship, but ultimately decided to forgo that option. Another failed proposal called for her to become a floating hotel and casino in Atlantic City. Norwegian Cruise Line (the company that would coincidentally later purchase the vessel in 2003) showed interest in acquiring her to be used as a cruise ship, but ultimately chose to go with the better-suited, similarly laid-up SS *France*. With no viable scenario emerging, the U.S. Maritime Administration sold the superliner to Seattle real estate developer Richard Hadley who intended to convert the SS *United States* into a time-share cruise ship. Given that his plans called for a drastic overhaul of the vessel's public and private spaces, Hadley contracted with Guernsey's Auctioneers to sell off the ship's contents.

For three days starting on October 5, 1984, the public was invited to tour every nook and cranny of the still intact liner and preview everything aboard. Bidding would follow on the 8<sup>th</sup> through the 14<sup>th</sup>, resulting in the proud flagship being picked clean of most of her distinctive and signature design elements and a multitude of treasures that had adorned her interiors. Maritime memorabilia collectors, former passengers and crew, liner enthusiasts, restaurateurs, hoteliers and others made off with massive troves of authentic in-service items whose provenance was unquestionable. While it was undoubtedly sad to see the mighty ship slowly being stripped of her unique mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century character, some took solace in knowing that, for the most part, these artifacts were ending up in the possession of people who understood both their historic and financial value, and would appreciate and preserve them accordingly.



After the auction, it was still possible to visit the SS *United States* and salvage what hadn't sold. It was during this period that Ken Marshall and Eric Sauder found themselves venturing from deck to deck, exploring both public areas and crew spaces in search of overlooked gems. Sauder recalled that the two men "walked all over the ship from the bridge down to the engine and boiler rooms—nothing was off limits. Despite her ransacked condition after the auction, she was still very much a time capsule to her last day of service in 1969, and even though we had two days to look around, that simply wasn't enough time. We could easily have spent a week on board." Ultimately, they were able to purchase and preserve an assortment of paper ephemera, a stateroom blanket, telephone, and more. As a result, the men joined the ranks of other unofficial curators of these important objects during their lifetimes.



*An ignoble pile of unsold SS United States' custom designed and made furniture in 1986.*

*Photo © and courtesy of Ken Marshall / SS United States Conservancy Archives*

Ultimately, Hadley's time-share cruise plan joined all the other foundered schemes and the ship was once again put up for sale. Subsequent events are well-known among SS *United States* and liner aficionados, including the largely stripped-down liner's unceremonious tow to Turkey and then to Ukraine for asbestos removal in 1993. While there, what furnishings and fittings still remained—the flotsam and jetsam left in the wake of the auction and years of selective scavenging—presumably went to private homes, antique stores, or scrap merchants throughout that part of the world.

The venerable and storied SS *United States*, now a beautiful ruin stripped to the bare steel bulkheads throughout her expansive interiors, was towed back to America where she was ultimately tied up at Pier 82 in Philadelphia, once again adrift in limbo awaiting either a new beginning or a final end. When her then owners defaulted on their debt, the ship was next sold to businessman Fred Cantor, then Norwegian Cruise Line, and finally, in 2010, thanks to the generosity of Philadelphia philanthropist H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest, to the non-profit preservation group, the SS United States Conservancy. (In disclosure, the authors of this article, Susan Gibbs and Mark Perry, are respectively the executive director and a founding board member of that organization.)

For the Conservancy, the immediate task at hand was the security and preservation of the superliner itself, and over the past seven years since above left: Buyers tour the bridge prior to the 1984 auction.  
below left: Auction goers stroll the still inviting First-Class Promenade deck prior to the 1984 auction.

*Photos courtesy of Robert G. Lenzer / SS United States Conservancy Archives*

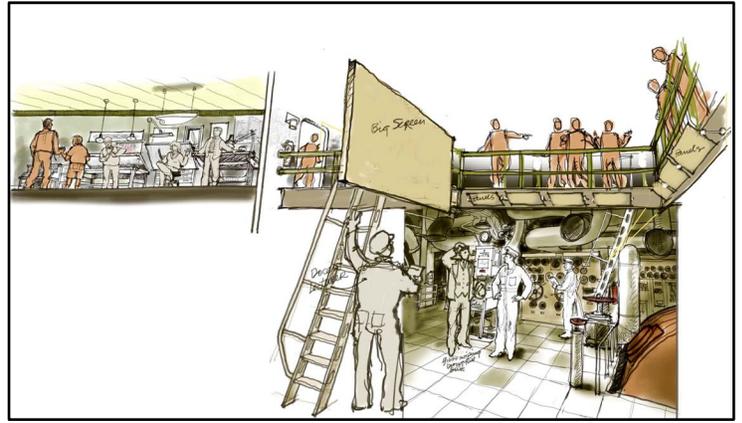
acquiring the vessel, it has succeeded in raising funds from thousands of supporters from all 50 states and almost 40 countries to cover the ship's ongoing carrying costs while exploring various redevelopment proposals from entrepreneurs, commercial real estate developers, and even cruise lines to repurpose what is now essentially a vacant horizontal skyscraper ready to be fitted out for any number of exciting possibilities. While her distinctive interiors may be gone and her exterior faded and peeling, the hull and superstructure of the SS *United States* remain nearly as strong as the day she was launched. The Conservancy's goal is to see that exterior restored to its legendary "spick-and-span" red-white-and-blue appearance, and in success, some of her more famous public rooms recreated with authentic and reproduced furnishings and artwork.

One critical requirement of any reuse scenario is for ample space to be set aside for the SS *United States* Center for Design and Discovery—the Conservancy's long-planned maritime history museum which will have an emphasis on exploring the Big U's emergence as a singular American post-war achievement. The museum will also examine a range of compelling subjects, including mid-century modern art and design, 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial innovation, the transatlantic liner era, and American cultural identity and artistic expression. The Conservancy envisages a stunning collection of art and artifacts from the ship's service career as well as interactive exhibits sharing the journeys and stories of the ship's passengers and crew, including those featuring celebrities, political leaders, immigrants, servicemen and women, and others.

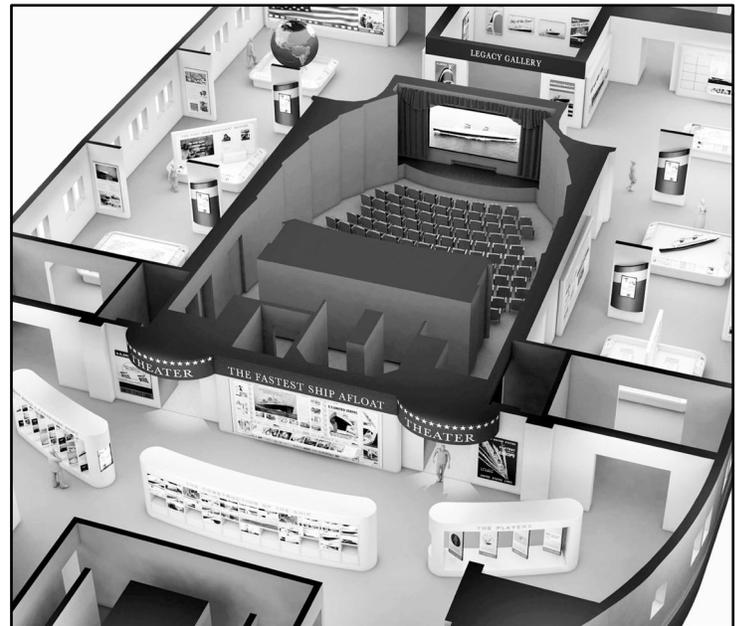
To advance these plans, the Conservancy convened a formal design charrette in which some two dozen experts in museum planning, marketing, and exhibit design gathered to help generate the Center's plans and renderings. Efforts were intensified to enlarge the Conservancy's permanent collection of SS *United States* artifacts, furnishings, fittings, equipment, artwork and fixtures as well as an ever-growing vintage film, photography, and ephemera archive. The organization's efforts are ongoing to expand its permanent collections, develop additional traveling and temporary exhibitions, launch an oral history initiative, and design educational modules that explore the role of the SS *United States* in the context of Cold War history, labor relations, maritime transportation, immigration, race and ethnicity, and other topics.

All of this has proven to be a uniquely challenging endeavor given that the '84 auction and years of unsupervised and undocumented salvaging of artifacts has resulted in the original contents of the ship being scattered across the globe—virtually everything irrelevant to her engine rooms but irreplaceable to her legacy and aesthetic. Several years ago, the Conservancy conducted a formal survey of individual and institutional collectors of important items from the SS *United States*. While the locations of some pieces are known, others have vanished into private collections, museums, homes, offices, and storage facilities. Recently, a banquette from the First-Class Observation Lounge appeared for sale on eBay, soiled and damaged, apparently having been stashed in a shed for decades.

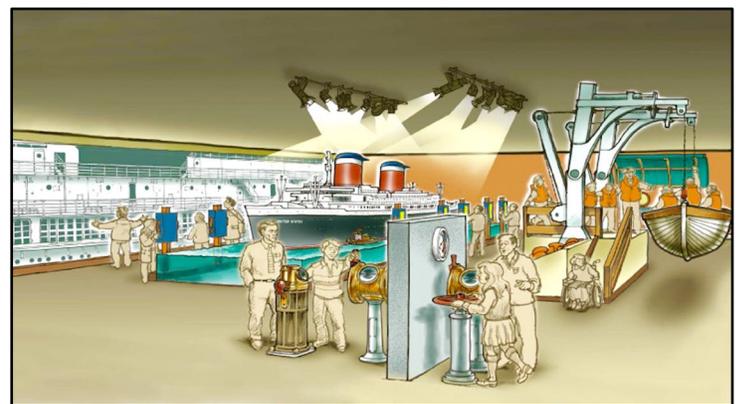
Like that sofa, treasures from the ship still surface from time to time through auction houses, antique dealers, estate and yard sales, flea markets, bazaars, ocean liner memorabilia specialists, online sellers such as eBay and Etsy, and other sources. Word of mouth plays an important role as well. Stashes of furniture, signage, and other important pieces have turned up in vacation homes and then offered



Artist's rendering of a proposed concept for converting one of the engine rooms for museum use.  
image: SS United States Conservancy



Computer simulation of a proposed concept for the onboard SS United States Center for Design and Discover.  
image: SS United States Conservancy



Artist's rendering for a proposed museum space concept.  
image: SS United States Conservancy

through private sale. Many of these recovered artifacts are in good to mint condition, while some bear the patina of time and neglect.

Undaunted in its quest to save both the liner and her legacy, the SS United States Conservancy continues to build its collections of unique artifacts and memorabilia. The organization has relied on the generosity of its supporters who have contributed funds toward keeping the ship afloat until her future is secured, and others who have

donated items for inclusion in the Conservancy's permanent collection. Other generous supporters have made designated donations to acquire her major and irreplaceable objects for inclusion in the planned museum and traveling exhibits. With their assistance, the organization has already acquired a stunning wall panel from the First-Class Private Restaurant on Promenade Deck by artist Charles Tissot. This was the centerpiece of three such panels, and one of the others was recently on display as part of the Peabody Essex Museum's exhibit "Ocean Liners: Glamour, Speed, and Style" which closed October 9<sup>th</sup> in Salem, Massachusetts, and is scheduled to open on February 3, 2018 at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. In preparation for the opening, the Conservancy has been working with the Victoria & Albert on a new audio-visual component to help expand the exhibition.

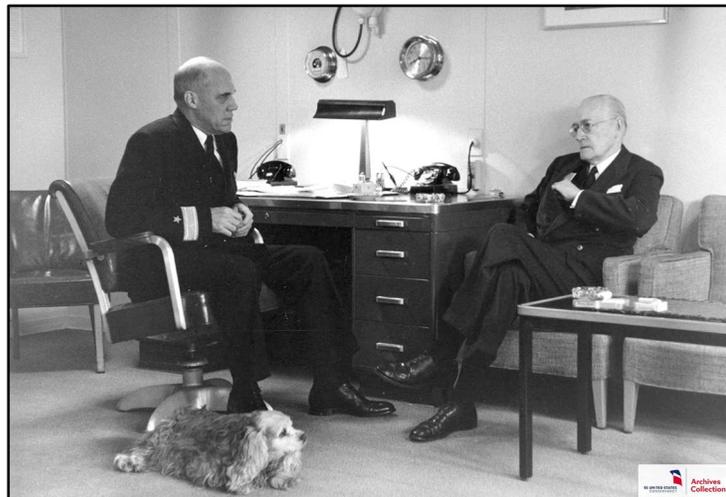


left: The stunning wall panel by artist Charles Tissot that once adorned the First-Class Private Dining Room on Promenade Deck.  
right: One of the Tissot panels in situ during the ship's service career.



photos: SS United States Conservancy

Earlier this year, the Conservancy received a very generous donation of the complete set of furniture and other items from the ship's Captain's Quarters. This lot consists of everything from the Commodore's desk, shelving, bed and nightstands, to the lamps, safe, and other fixtures. It also includes a master key to the entire vessel. The collection was donated by Steve Williams, whose uncle Melvin Williams had a passion for the SS *United States* and collected the items in the 1980s. Williams, who grew up just north of Boston, recalls that his uncle developed a fascination for large vessels while on deployment to the European theater during World War II. Upon



Captain John Anderson and William Francis Gibbs confer in the Captain's office, the furnishings of which were donated to the Conservancy by Steve Williams.  
Photo courtesy of Charles Anderson / SS United States Conservancy Archives

donating the items to the Conservancy, Williams remarked, "I have grown older and have a greater appreciation, understanding, and respect for the accomplishments of the people that came before us. Like my uncle and the SS *United States*' designer, William Francis Gibbs, I believe we are honored to be the guardians of great moments in history."

The Conservancy also continues to be honored with gifts of museum-worthy pieces both small and large. Contributor Charles Beer recently donated two 12-foot-long aluminum lifeboat oars as well as a four-piece set of stateroom furniture (along with the original Bible that was placed in that room) and two accompanying lamps. A rare and important emergency life raft was received from supporter Terrence Mahoney, and may well have been featured in the iconic B.J. Nixon photograph of William Francis Gibbs in which the ship's designer

admires his creation while perched atop a stack of such rafts. The Mariners' Museum, along with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the Sarah Forbes Estate and the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hunnicutt III, donated a major assortment of over 700 items from the SS *United States* last year. This extraordinary gift is comprised of furniture, models, artwork, and archival materials including a unique assemblage of black and white photos taken by Albert W. Durant aboard the ship during its top-secret trial runs in early 1952. Durant was Virginia's first black city-licensed photographer, and his images related to the Big U highlight the ship's African American kitchen staff and stewards. In addition to these major contributions, passenger lists, issues of the ship's daily newspaper *The Ocean Press*, menus, cruise brochures, deck plans, and other trip ephemera have been donated to the Conservancy by former passengers, crew, and others. Some memorabilia collectors have even pledged to bequeath all or parts of their collections to the preservation group as part of their estate planning.

In addition to these generous gifts, the Conservancy has also endeavored to catalog the historically significant artifacts that still remain aboard the SS *United States* having evaded the prior auction, sales, and asbestos removal. Among these are signage, door handles, audio speakers, light fixtures, the vessel's telephone switchboard, printing press, the Cabin-Class bar, and most of the ship's once top-secret engine room equipment that remains *in situ*. The plan is for any of these pieces threatened by future rehabilitation of the ship to be carefully removed, restored, and preserved for archival and display purposes.



The rack that once held the ship's signal flags remains in situ in the base of the radar mast is among the still-aboard items cataloged by the Conservancy.

Photo courtesy of Mark Perry



The ship's telephone switchboards that once crackled with onboard and ship-to-shore calls, remains aboard the mostly stripped SS United States.

photo: courtesy of Mark Perry

In success, The SS *United States* Center for Design and Discovery will be at the heart of America's repurposed national flagship, and will attract visitors who will experience and learn all about this iconic ocean liner and her significance to national and global maritime history. Should circumstances result in the liner itself being lost, either recycled for scrap metal or converted into an artificial, underwater reef, the Conservancy remains determined to find a land-based location for its important collections. Either way, the irreplaceable

legacy of the SS *United States* as represented by her unique and exceptional artifacts will endure for future generations.

For more information about how you can help support the ongoing work of the SS *United States* Conservancy or to explore the possibility of donating or loaning items from your own collection, please email [info@ssusc.org](mailto:info@ssusc.org) or visit [www.ssusc.org](http://www.ssusc.org). All donations are tax deductible as permitted by law.

