

# The BIG U



A Documentary on the Ocean Liner  
**S.S. United States**

A film by  
**rock creek**  
productions, inc.



# The Story of the S.S. United States

**“All the good that America could produce was in that ship.”**

**Gerard Petroni,  
First Assistant Engineer**



The S.S. *United States* on Christening Day, June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1952.

*The Big U* is a story about passion, adversity, monumental accomplishment, and a forgotten American icon. It's a story of engineering ingenuity, technological superiority and one man's lifelong dream. It's a story about the romance of the seas, the glamour of celebrity, the end of one age and the dawning of another.

This film is the story of one man, William Francis Gibbs and the most stunning of all his accomplishments, the grandest passenger vessel to ever sail the Atlantic Ocean, the flagship of America, pride of her merchant marine, the *S.S. United States*.

On her maiden voyage in July of 1952, “The Big U” as she was affectionately known, shattered the east- and west-bound speed records, and transatlantic passenger travel was never the same. She sailed for seventeen years without a single significant mechanical problem, only to find herself unable to compete with modern jet aircraft. She now sits on the Delaware River in Philadelphia, rusting, largely forgotten and stripped of her fittings but not her dignity.

We aim to tell the story of this great vessel and the man who designed her so that they may take their rightful place in American History.



to improve their ability to move soldiers around the world quickly. Unfortunately, postwar military downsizing and budget cuts made it difficult to fund this objective. It was, in a large part, through William Francis Gibbs' sterling reputation, superior designs, and determined advocacy that the Maritime Administration was convinced to fund his great ship, and the *S.S. United States* was born.

The history of Gibbs and his beloved ship is an American story told through the oral histories of those who built the *S.S. United States*, worked aboard her, and traveled upon her. Compelling and personal memories collectively reveal the story of the technological advancements that signified America's global supremacy following World War II; they also tell a story of American manufacturing, labor, and of the end of an era in transatlantic oceanliner travel.

Even before its first transatlantic crossing, the *S.S. United States* was a superliner above and beyond all others. Her entire sailing career, in fact, was conducted at such a high level as to make the elegant and the impossible seem routine. But all this disappeared in a day. No, the ship didn't sink; rather the realities of airline competition, the economics of fueling, staffing, and maintaining such an immense machine caught up to her, and in late November of 1969, the death knell of an era in transatlantic passenger travel was finally sounded.

In her day, the *S.S. United States* was the most glamorous way to cross the Atlantic: picture the Duke and Duchess of Windsor boarding with their entourage and their 98 steamer trunks, taste the five-star fare in the first class dining salon - presented with impeccable service, feel the fine salt air on your face as you steam eastward across the vast open sea. For her passengers and crew, life on the Big U, no matter how brief, was a special and magical time.

**We invite you to become a part of this ship and a part of this story. Share in the glamour, the magic and the adventure of one of the most powerful and elegant machines ever built.**

**“After the loud and fantastic claims made in advance for the liner United States, it comes as something of a disappointment to find them all true.”**

**– Britain's Punch Magazine, 1952**

For centuries, seafaring nations' power and prestige rose and fell in direct proportion to the strength of their navy and merchant marine - consider the histories of Britain, Spain, Portugal, and Japan. During World War II, the U.S. government saw the advantage and value of using large, fast passenger liners as troop ships, and after the war, sought this capability in order



The S.S. *United States*, pictured above steaming up the Hudson River, sailed from 1952 to 1969.

## NEW HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

*The Big U* offers new historical knowledge about the S.S. *United States* and its builder William Francis Gibbs, as well as addressing broader cultural and historical issues that provide the context for the story. The film will examine the romance and lure of seagoing travel, a modality that lasted for thousands of years, but has now largely been eclipsed by the airplane. It examines the relationship between the S.S. *United States* as a cultural icon and the perception of the United States of America, both at home and abroad, during the 1950s and 1960s. Additionally, the film shows how this man and this ship fit into the larger story of American achievement, ingenuity, and invention, and it examines future prospects for the ship and how she might once again be given a useful role in our nation's continuing endeavor to understand and define our past, our present, and our place in the world.



The S.S. *United States*, during her final stages of assembly at Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Co., Newport News, VA, 1952.

“Could it be any better than having a beautiful June day and sailing to Europe on the S.S. *United States*? Those gorgeous funnels, the wind blowing in your face, passing the Statue of Liberty and the New York City skyline, and knowing you’re crossing to Europe on the fastest, safest, finest ship in the world...”

Bill Miller,  
*Maritime Historian and Author*

## Flagship of a Nation



One of the S.S. *United States*' massive funnels at Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company.

In this program we ask and attempt to answer the following questions:

- What drove William Francis Gibbs to create the S.S. *United States*?
- What does it mean to be Flagship of a Nation?
- What was her historical context and what did she mean to America?
- What made her so grand and what made her obsolete in just 17 years?
- Why has she been largely forgotten and what may become of her?
- Why does this particular ship evoke such emotion in people?

# The Story of the S.S. United States



Nick Starace is interviewed aboard his boat *Mon Tressor II* at a marina overlooking Manhattan by Rock Creek's Rachell Shapiro. Starace worked aboard the *S.S. United States* as 3<sup>rd</sup> Assistant Engineer in 1957.

## INTERVIEWS

As of January 2006, we have conducted over 70 telephone pre-interviews, and 12 on-camera interviews in high-definition video. These interviews have been conducted with crew members, passengers, builders, and enthusiasts associated with the *S.S. United States*. Over the next 6 months, we plan to schedule and conduct more on-camera interviews with individuals located across the country and into Canada. And we are continuously searching for interesting and compelling stories about the *S.S. United States* and her designer William Francis Gibbs. If you have a story, anecdote or fond memory please contact us with your information.

## EXPERTS, SCHOLARS & SPECIAL GUESTS

The filmmakers have enlisted a renowned group of scholars and experts to inform our documentary, to ensure historical accuracy, and to provide contextual significance to our work. These individuals range in expertise from cultural and labor scholars to maritime and engineering historians and authors.

**Frank Braynard** Internationally recognized maritime historian, author, and artist; organized "Operation Sail" for the NYC Bicentennial; curator of Merchant Marine Museum; program director for South Street Seaport Museum

**Daniel Walkowitz, Ph.D.** Prof. of Social & Cultural Analysis and History at New York University

**Jane Brickman, Ph.D.** Prof. of Humanities at Kings Point, the US Merchant Marine Academy

**William "Bill" Miller** Internationally recognized maritime historian, author of dozens of books on maritime history, including on the *S.S. United States*

**Richard Sennett, Ph.D.** Prof. of Sociology at MIT and the London School of Economics

**Mark Crispin Miller, Ph.D.** Prof. of Media Ecology in the Department of Culture and Communication at New York University

We have also identified several prominent individuals associated with the vessel who we hope to interview. We are currently attempting to recruit these individuals, including former President Bill Clinton, former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, and Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY), among others.

## Archival Materials

Several sources for archival materials including film footage, photographs, historical documents, and memorabilia have been identified. Primary sources are:

- **National Archives** (Paramount and Universal Newsreels, other donated sources; 35mm and 16mm film)
- **The Mariners' Museum**, Newport News, VA (16mm film, photographs, original blueprints, original ship's logs, passenger lists)
- **Kings Point Merchant Marine Academy Museum** (Unites States Lines corporate correspondences, original Gibbs & Cox engineering models, and photographs)
- **South Street Seaport Museum**
- **Maritime Industries Museum**
- **Individual Memorabilia Collections** (primarily crew members and passengers, donated 8mm film, photographs, and shipboard items)
- **Steamship Historical Society of America** (photographs, film, engineering plans, original advertising and print materials)
- **S.S. United States Foundation Archives** (photographs and film)

*Our search continues for supporting film, photographs, historical documents, and memorabilia.*

*If you have any personal treasures you would like to share, please let us know about them.*

*Even the smallest memento may have significance when presented in the proper context.*

Call us at 703.453.0400, or visit us online at [www.ssunitedstates-film.com](http://www.ssunitedstates-film.com)

# The Complete Picture

## AUDIENCE

The expected audience for this film is one similar to those who watch PBS' American Experience. According to their own data, the typical viewer of PBS programming is more likely to be male, have some post-graduate education, work in a professional or managerial position and own over \$50,000 in stock when compared to a sample of American adults.

The target for this program is a wide national audience. Individuals with a love of the sea, a passion for history or a sense of pride and nostalgia for America.

**For those who imagine the romance of the sea...** we'll describe the ship as a microcosm of the United States complete with births, deaths, celebrations and tragedies, dedication and deal-making.

**For those who love the glamour of celebrity...** we'll examine how more heads of state traveled aboard her than any other ship, how everybody who was anybody in the world of entertainment sailed upon the ship, the rich and famous of the era.

**For those interested in American History...** we'll examine the impact and significance of William Francis Gibbs in America's successful efforts in winning WW II, as well as the significance of the *S.S. United States*.

**For the patriot in all of us ...** there is the connection to a strong symbol of America's preeminence in the world and the image of a peaceful, unmistakably American ambassador in foreign ports.

**For those fascinated with engineering and technology...** there is the sheer size, the raw speed, the marvelous design, the ingenious advances that make this vessel the most significant passenger liner of all time.

**For the Greatest Generation...** we present a vessel dreamed, designed and built by men and women of this time period and showcase a demonstration of maritime excellence and global supremacy in the post WWII era.



## THE FILMMAKERS

Producers Tim Phillips and Steve Agnew have worked together professionally for over two decades on a variety of film, videotape, and interactive projects. Together, they own **Rock Creek Productions, Inc.**, a small, full service, and award-winning production company, which was established in 1996.

Primarily serving government and corporate clients, Rock Creek has garnered over 30 industry awards with work supporting training, marketing, fund raising, promotions, independent film, television commercials, and documentaries.

Production services are offered in 35mm and 16mm film, High Definition, Betacam-SP, and DVCAM videotape formats. Postproduction is offered on high-end, broadcast quality Avid Media Composer/Adrenaline digital non-linear editing systems.

*To learn more about Rock Creek Productions, Inc. please visit our website at [www.rock-creek.com](http://www.rock-creek.com).*



## HIGH DEFINITION

"The world is moving to High-Definition television. We made a strategic decision to shoot this film in HD rather than standard definition video or film in order to lend to it the weight that we thought this subject deserved. With HD we can achieve the look of film without the cost and that lets us shoot more interviews, shoot longer interviews, and devote more time to capturing the best images possible. With HD, we know that this is going to be a beautiful, compelling film."

Steve Agnew  
Director of  
Photography

Ship historian Bill Miller during an interview with Rock Creek Productions' director Tim Phillips.

# The Story of the S.S. United States

**“The *United States* must be considered one of the finest vessels ever built in this or any other country. She is a symbol, and how do you lay up a national symbol?”**

**Andrew E. Gibson,  
Head of the Maritime Administration, 1969**

## DISTRIBUTION PARTNERSHIPS

The filmmakers' first goal is a national broadcast on a networks such as PBS, The History Channel or the Discovery Channel (We intend to finish with principal photography and begin work in postproduction to complete a rough cut of the final program prior to finalizing distribution).

## PRODUCTS

The outcome of this project is a feature-length (90 minute), high-definition documentary film airing before a national audience.

*The Big U* has an international appeal, as well, especially in Europe, where the countries of Britain, France, Germany, and Italy competed with the United States in building and sailing transatlantic passenger liners.

A companion DVD will be offered for sale both through the distributor's channels and via the dedicated website [www.ssunitedstates-film.com](http://www.ssunitedstates-film.com). The DVD will include the uncut version of the film, as well as additional interview footage and transcripts, production stills, information about the ship, blueprints, links, teaching aids and information on the film's development team and sponsors.

## FUNDRAISING EFFORTS - MAJOR DONORS

The filmmakers are currently pursuing an initiative to raise funding through grants by public endowments, private foundations, corporate donors, as well as individuals who have a clear commitment to the *S.S. United States*. *The Big U* is currently under consideration for development grants from several public and private foundations.

## DONATIONS & CONTRIBUTIONS

Please consider making a tax deductible donation to the *The Big U* and ensuring her rightful place in American History. While donations of any size are welcome, a donation of \$1,000 or more will have a dramatic role in advancing the completion of the film.

A donation of \$1,300 provides for one day of post-production editing.

A donation of \$2,500 enables us to transfer 10 minutes of archival film to high-defintion video.

A donation of \$5,000 enables us to conduct one day of on-camera interviews.

A donation of \$10,000 assists us compose an original music score.

## Budget Summary

Our complete budget for the film is **\$685,500**, and is broken down into the following four categories:

### Preproduction

**\$144,900**

Research and story development, initial outreach to establish contacts (attending meetings, email, letter writing campaigns), determination of availability of media resources, visits to museums, conducting and transcribing telephone pre-interviews; coordinating video production shoot.

### Production

**\$121,935**

Conducting on-camera interviews, including crew, equipment, tape stock, and travel expenses, digitizing photographs, stills, flat art, and memorabilia.

### Postproduction

**\$341,615**

Rough cut and final editing, transfer and color correction of all archival film, development of an original musical score and sound effects, conforming master tape, creating closed-caption broadcast master videotapes, acquiring archival footage and purchasing broadcast rights.

### Fundraising, Marketing and Distribution

**\$77,050**

Research of public, private, and corporate grant-making organizations, writing letters of inquiry, writing grant applications; developing web-site and paper-based marketing materials, contacting potential distribution partners, developing a trailer/DVD, developing and placing advertisements.

**A detailed itemized budget is available upon request.**

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## How Sponsorship Money Helps

Producing a documentary film is an expensive venture. Conducting research, making contacts, writing correspondence, transcribing interviews, developing a storyline, identifying assets and relevant scholarship, developing web-based and paper-based marketing materials all requires significant time and labor. Some of these tasks require travel to other cities and states. Conducting on-camera interviews requires study, preparation, and coordination, and is the single most expensive task in documentary filmmaking, especially considering equipment costs, crew, tape stock, and travel expenses – a single interview can run into the thousands of dollars.

Similarly, locating archival footage is one thing; acquiring it and obtaining the broadcast rights is another, transferring and color correcting it for use in our film is yet another – and all of these tasks come at a price. Editing is an arduous task in which over a hundred hours of footage from many sources and thousands of still images, graphics, and animations are trimmed down to a 90 minute program. And we cannot forget the music (Creating an original score in which images and emotions and the timing of events are finely crafted for the presentation).



As you can see, there are many tasks requiring labor, equipment, and expertise – things that all cost money. The filmmakers have already invested more than \$60,000 of their own funds to begin the effort, and are committed to continuing development. However, significant additional support is required in order to complete the film in the manner in which it deserves.

The S.S. *United States* crossed the Atlantic Ocean at speeds as high as 35.59 knots. Her record-breaking speeds reduced travel time for the trans-atlantic journeys by as much as 10 hours.

## A Call for Help



If you ever sailed aboard the S.S. *United States* or have an appreciation for the significance of this historical icon, please consider helping to immortalize her on the big screen. *The Big U* will raise awareness of her plight, reveal William Francis Gibbs' contribution to our nation, and may provide impetus to the ships' current owners to restore her to her former glory.



*The Big U* allows the audience to travel back to the days when great fanfare accompanied boarding an ocean liner and when travel to and from Europe was considered glamorous and exotic. Through archival film and photographs, memorabilia, and personal recollections, *The Big U* brings us all back not just to the experience of life on board the ship but also to the culture and aura of America in the 1950s and 1960s.



While documentaries continue to grow as a popular medium for moviegoers, independently produced films must assume a large financial risk. Having sailed aboard the ship in the late 1960s, director Tim Phillips began this film with a commitment to honoring the ship and what she symbolized. However, in order to see this film to completion, the filmmakers must rely on grants from public and private foundations as well as on generous donations from individuals who have a vested interest in the story and the future of the S.S. *United States*.

# S.S. United States "Fun Facts"



The only wood onboard was the butcher's block and the Steinway Piano.



The Duke and Duchess of Windsor traveled with 98 pieces of luggage, and bought an entire suite just to store them.

The Mona Lisa was transported on the SSUS in 1963. Instead of sailing in the storage hold like everything else, she got her own private suite with guards.



W.F. Gibbs never went to school for naval design or architecture. He was completely self-taught, yet still went on to earn the name "Mr. Navy."



More Presidents and Heads of State traveled on her than any other ship.



Rita Hayworth had her toilet seat stolen while onboard. Years later it was revealed that one of the crew was the culprit.

She was the first ship in the world to have climate controlled air conditioning in all of her cabins - even the crew's quarters.



Walt Disney filmed a movie onboard the SSUS in 1962 called "Bon Voyage."



Her top speed was kept as a military secret until the 1970's when it was revealed she could go 44.7 knots (over 50 mph). To this day no ship of her size has ever come close to breaking her speed record.



The S.S. United States cost \$79 million to build.