

Norfolk, Virginia, 1982

“That’s the SS *United States* over there,” someone exclaimed.

“Oh. That’s nice,” I replied.

The occasion was a steam locomotive excursion sponsored by a fan group, and the engine was taking on water and re-coaling. The Lambert’s Point rail yard laid across from the Mothball Fleet where the SS *United States* was one of the ships moored. Somebody was describing the ship and trying to emphasize the vessel’s importance. While being polite, I had no interest in the ships. I turned my back to them, and I concentrated only on photographing the steam locomotive. Maybe I couldn’t be blamed. Ocean liners had no interest to me. If any of my ancestors were on an ocean liner, they were either riding in steerage or shoveling coal.

Years later the *France* would re-emerge as the *Norway* — somebody remarked to me that she was the rebirth of a classic ocean liner. I was glad that they liked it. The SS *United States* would come to Philadelphia. That was nice if you were into that sort of thing.

Over time I had been involved in the preservation of historic rail vehicles and pipe organs, so after a voyage on a contemporary ocean liner, the history of transatlantic travel was a natural extension of those earlier interests. The SS *United States* was always emerging as the zenith of naval engineering and performance. Yet her interior looked somewhat plain compared to the original *Queen Mary*. Why sail on her when one could have the Art Deco elegance of the *Queen Mary*? But speed and performance, not décor, was the hallmark of the SS *United States*. With her hull built to US Navy standards and her aluminum superstructure, she must have had a solid rock-steady and secure feel over the ocean. Years later, former passengers can’t verbally describe why they preferred her – just “what a ride.”

For me the SS *United States* represents much more than just an engineering marvel. She represents a time when America could always improve upon existing technology and make it better, faster, and more efficient. We had the talent to take the design successes and failures of the past, learn from them, and distill that knowledge into something new and special. “Made in America” meant solid engineering and durable quality. For future generations she represents the ability that we once had, let drift away, but can and will reclaim.

After long consideration I’ve decided to help toward the preservation of the SS *United States* because, especially in times like these, we must save a symbol of America’s perseverance and resilience. The RMS *Queen Mary* left her home country for good. The *France/Norway* slipped away from both her home and adopted countries to be cut up. The SS *United States*’ running mate SS *America* broke up and rusted away on a foreign sand bar. If we could build such a magnificent ship, surely we have the ability to save her as the torch of America’s success and not throw her to the scrapper’s torch.

— Marie Prewett, New York, NY, September 2011