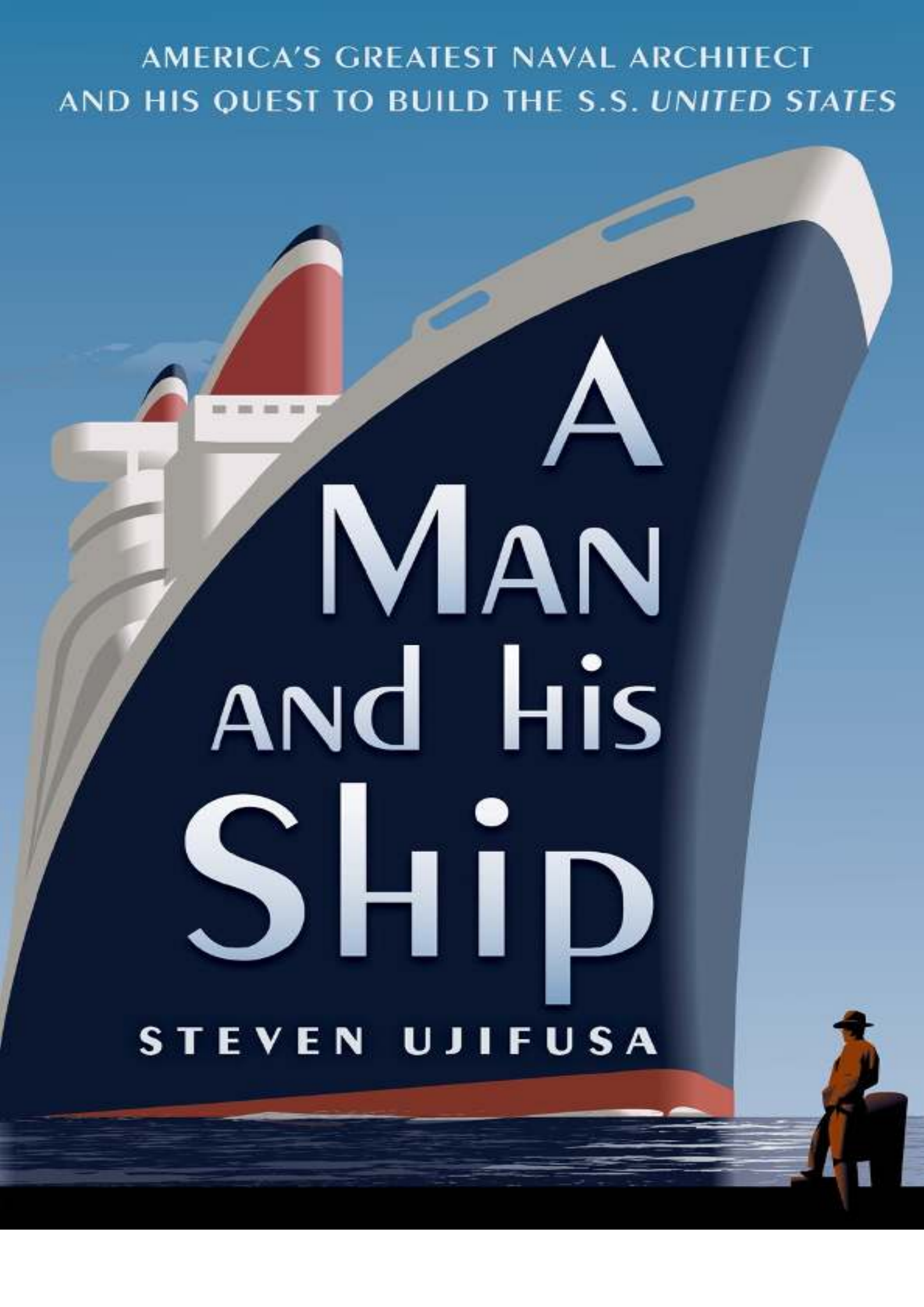


AMERICA'S GREATEST NAVAL ARCHITECT
AND HIS QUEST TO BUILD THE S.S. UNITED STATES



A
MAN
AND HIS
Ship

STEVEN UJIFUSA

"A Man and His Ship, a hugely entertaining re-creation of the age of the ocean liner, will leave older readers nostalgic, younger readers envious, and all of them engrossed in the drama of William Francis Gibbs as he fights to build the greatest ship of them all, the S.S. United States. The Cunard Line once boasted that 'getting there is half the fun.' Now Steven Ujifusa has given us the other half."

—A. J. LANGGUTH,
author of *Driven West*

"A marvelous narrative of America's premier naval architect."

—BARRETT TILLMAN,
author of *Enterprise*

THE STORY OF A GREAT AMERICAN BUILDER

At the peak of his power, in the 1940s and 1950s, William Francis Gibbs was considered America's best naval architect. His quest to build the finest, fastest, most beautiful ocean liner of his time, the S.S. *United States*, was a topic of national fascination. When completed in 1952, the ship was hailed as a technological masterpiece at a time when "made in America" meant the best.

Gibbs was an American original, on par with John Roebling of the Brooklyn Bridge and Frank Lloyd Wright of Fallingwater. Forced to drop out of Harvard following his family's sudden financial ruin, he overcame debilitating shyness and lack of formal training to become the visionary creator of some of the finest ships in history. He spent forty years dreaming of the ship that became the S.S. *United States*.

William Francis Gibbs was driven, relentless, and committed to excellence. He loved his ship, the idea of it, and the realization of it, and he devoted himself to making it the epitome of luxury travel during the triumphant post-World War II era. Biographer Steven Ujifusa brilliantly describes the way Gibbs worked and how his vision transformed an industry. *A Man and His Ship* is a tale of ingenuity and enterprise, a truly remarkable journey on land and sea.



STEVEN UJIFUSA

STEVEN UJIFUSA is a historian living in Philadelphia and he serves on the Advisory Council of the SS United States Conservancy. He received his master's degree in historic preservation and real estate from the University of Pennsylvania and his B.A. in history from Harvard University.

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Rigging

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-S.S. UNITED STATES-
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 Draft 17 ft. 6 in. Gross Tonnage 35,319
 Speed 24 knots. Annual Speed 100,000 Miles
 Fuel Consumption 70,000 Tons
 Annual 200 Passengers, 1,000 Crew
 Newport News Shipbuilding & Drydock Company
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Hull Section



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HIS QUEST TO BUILD THE SS *UNITED STATES*



STEVEN UJIFUSA



A
MAN
AND HIS
SHIP

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*To my grandmother Judith Follmann,
world traveler, woman of culture,
and the inspiration for this book*

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The Way It Was

The transatlantic ocean liner possessed a mystique now lost to the world. For the first half of the twentieth century, ships named *Mauretania*, *Bremen*, *Normandie*, and *Queen Mary* were known and loved by tens of millions of people on both sides of the Atlantic. When a big liner arrived in New York City for the first time, thousands lined the Hudson to watch a man-made object—one that seemed to have life and soul—move serenely upriver. Their eyes were following something simply massive—she could be up to five city blocks long and twelve stories high, her deep-throated whistles bellowing in response to a cheering crowd. Sculpted hull, gleaming paint, and raked-back smokestacks conveyed beauty, power, and speed.

In the New York newspapers, the shipping news doubled as society news, as readers learned that Greta Garbo, Cary Grant, Margaret Truman, Vincent and Brooke Astor, or the Duke and Duchess of Windsor were aboard one of the ocean liners arriving or leaving that day. When a great ship left for Europe, it was an occasion awash in champagne and laughter. On board, first-class passengers enjoyed public rooms and private quarters that were decorative showplaces for the world's most talented designers, men and women who created some of the most stunning interiors ever built on land or sea. En route, high standards of service for the ship's most privileged passengers meant money for its owners and prestige for the nation whose flag she flew. Ships connected businessmen to transatlantic partners, diplomats to their posts, jazz artists to European audiences, students to adventure, immigrants to American jobs, and refugees to freedom. During two devastating world wars, liners converted to troopships carried millions of GIs to the front, and then brought them home again in triumph.

To the public, the ocean liner—once the only way to get across the Atlantic—was the epitome of glamorous travel. She also represented the pinnacle of technology—the most complex and powerful machine on earth. Deep inside her hull were engines capable of propelling a thousand-foot-long mass of steel through the giant waves of the North Atlantic at nearly 40 miles per hour. The liner that first crossed the Atlantic the fastest captured a prize called the Blue Riband. A winner became the most famous ship in the world—until a faster rival bested her.

From the 1860s to the 1950s, all of the liners that captured the Blue Riband flew European flags, and a passive America seemed to accept the superiority of foreign engineering, manufacturing, and managerial prowess. One American did not, and this is the story of his quest to build the fastest, most beautiful, and safest ocean liner ever—the ship that was to become one of the greatest engineering triumphs in American history.

**THE MAN AND
THE VISION**



SIZE, LUXURY, AND SPEED

The first time he saw an ocean liner, little Willy Gibbs knew what he wanted to do with his life.

On a rainy November 13, 1894, twenty-five thousand people waited outside the gates of Philadelphia's Cramp Shipyard on the banks of the Delaware River. They were there to see a marvel of the age: the steamship *St. Louis*, one of the largest ocean liners in the world and America's brand-new entry into the transatlantic passenger trade. When the gates opened, people surged toward the ship. She was 550 feet long and decorated from stem to stern with flags of the world, with the American Stars and Stripes flying high above the bow.¹

The owner of the new ship, Philadelphia businessman Clement Griscom, was on his way to the shipyard with the christening party, headed by the bulky U.S. president, Grover Cleveland and the elegant, much younger first lady, Frances Cleveland. A chuffing Pennsylvania Railroad locomotive pulled the presidential train right up to the Cramp Shipyard gates. Stepping out, the first lady took Griscom's arm, and the group of dignitaries walked to the launching platform, joined along the way by shipyard owner Charles H. Cramp.

Among those watching the scene was the forty-eight-year-old William Warren Gibbs, a crafty and aggressive financier who was said to sit on more boards of directors than any other man in America. On this blustery fall day, he had brought his two young sons—eight-year-old William Francis and six-year-old Frederic—to watch the launch of the great liner.

Self-made William Warren Gibbs was one of Philadelphia's most daring entrepreneurs. His physical appearance matched his temperament: he was lean, with fierce, defiant eyes, and a dark, pointed beard. A farm boy from the small town of Hope, New Jersey, he had arrived in the city thirty years before with little more than a skill for persuasion, but went on to become a multimillionaire laying gas lines and selling electric batteries. The United Gas Improvement and Electric Storage Battery companies had also enriched many of the city's leading citizens. When he brought his sons to see the launch of *St. Louis*, he was rumored to be worth \$15 million, a stupendous pile of money in 1894.¹ His sometime partner in the gas business was a well-connected member of an old Philadelphia family: *St. Louis*'s owner Clement Griscom, president of the International Navigation Company, a shipping firm he founded with the help of the mighty Pennsylvania Railroad.

William Warren Gibbs might have looked at ships with an eye for profit. But for his eight-year-old son William Francis, seeing a great ship was pure poetry. During summer days at the family's summer home on the New Jersey shore, the boy scanned the horizon for funnels, masts, and black smudges of coal smoke, and then sketched what he saw. He knew that as he looked north, ocean liners, growing

bigger and faster every year, were sailing in and out of the great port city of New York. Little William yearned for a closer look at one of these ocean greyhounds.

And now, at his father's side, he had his chance—*St. Louis* was a liner of vigorous beauty, her graceful hull draped with red, white, and blue bunting.

The shipyard was also a marvel to behold. William Cramp & Sons had been building cargo ships, passenger liners, and warships for over sixty years. The proud standard bearer for Philadelphia's industrial might, Cramps employed more than five thousand workers, many of them immigrants from Ireland and Italy.² In the yard was a towering crane, perched atop a floating barge, that could pick up a seventy-ton boiler and deftly swing it into the hull of a ship over three hundred feet away. Muscular riveters put hulls together by hammering red-hot rivets into steel and iron plates. Roaring orange fire glowed from forges where men shaped mammoth pistons, propellers, and funnels with the precision of watchmakers.

As the music from the band faded into silence, the little boy and the crowd around him awaited the launching of the great ship. Mounting the platform, Cramp handed the first lady a bottle of champagne. The hydraulic rams then hit the ship a bit too early, and the hull started to creep down the ways. Startled, the first lady called out, "I christen thee *St. Louis*!" and smacked the bottle across the prow before it slid out of reach.³ Picking up speed, the ship roared down the tallow-greased slipway toward the Delaware River, kicking up billows of acrid smoke and, upon hitting the water, sending waves smashing against the banks. Once fully in the river, heavy chains slowed her to a stop. Tugboat crews secured their lines, and she was towed to the fitting-out basin. Her sister ship, *St. Paul*, remained on an adjacent slipway, to be christened in April of the following year.

At a luncheon after the launch, frock-coated dignitaries toasted the glory of the new American flagship and the presumed rebirth of the nation's preeminence on the North Atlantic. The American merchant marine—before the Civil War a vast fleet of clippers, whaling ships, and sailing packets—had been in steady decline for decades. An American steamship had not held the transatlantic speed record for half a century. The culprits were lack of government support, a shortage of private capital, and cheaper, subsidized foreign competition.

But to President Cleveland and Clement Griscom, *St. Louis* represented the dawn of a new era of American maritime might. "We may well be proud because we have launched the largest and most powerful steamship in the Western hemisphere," the president declared, "built on American plans, by American mechanics, and of American materials." The two ships would "furnish the revival and development of American commerce and the renewed appearance of the American flag in foreign ports."⁴

To little William Francis Gibbs, the launching of the new ship on that drizzly November day marked the start of a lifelong love affair. He would grow up to build a ship much bigger, faster, and grander than the magnificent *St. Louis*.

"That was my first view of a great ship and from that day forward I dedicated my life to ships," William Francis Gibbs later recalled. "I have never regretted it."⁵

The size, beauty, and luxury of the nineteenth-century ocean liner captivated the public, but even more alluring was speed. "Speed is the only thing which they talk, think, or dream of anywhere between Sandy Hook and Roche's Point," the *New York Times* said about American passengers in 1880. "Whenever their vessel distances some other steamship which is bound in the same direction, they are thrown into ecstasies."⁶ Shipbuilders were just as obsessed with speed. "Each successive lowering

the record,” boasted Philadelphia’s Cramp Shipyard, “marks a triumph for the designer and builder, fame world-wide, and substantial benefits to mankind.”⁷

This speed record was known as the “Blue Riband of the Atlantic,” a mythic-sounding prize developed in the middle of the nineteenth century and awarded to the fastest steamship sailing between the old and new worlds. Because actual miles traveled varied from voyage to voyage, the unspoken rule was to award the Blue Riband not to the ship making the quickest trip, but to the one achieving the highest average speed in nautical miles per hour, or knots (1.15 land miles per hour). Prevailing winds and currents made the westbound crossing, from Europe to America, more difficult than the one eastbound. So the Blue Riband was divided into two prizes: one for the westbound record and another for the eastbound; the former, more arduous crossing, carrying more prestige. There was no set course, but the generally accepted rule was that the clock started when the ship left its last port of call and achieved full cruising speed—usually off the southwest tip of England—and ended at the entrance to New York harbor, either at Sandy Hook or Ambrose Lightship, when she had to slow down. What started as an advertising ploy quickly grew into an international contest into which steamship companies, engineers, and governments poured talent and money.

It was the advent of steam that allowed oceangoing passenger ships to keep regular schedules, and the first commercially successful steamship was an America creation. In 1807 Robert Fulton’s steamboat *Clermont*, plying the Hudson River, cut the travel time from New York to Albany from three days down to thirty-two hours, and could make regularly scheduled departures regardless of wind and currents. Twelve years later, an enterprising group of businessmen from Savannah, Georgia, outfitted a small sailing ship with a crude steam engine and paddle wheels and sent her across the Atlantic. *Savannah’s* epic voyage, even if only made partially under steam, was a landmark in maritime history, but American businessmen decided that steamships were best used on inland and coast routes. The ocean remained the domain of the sailing ships, most notably the clippers, which journeyed around Cape Horn to the gold fields of California and the tea and spice hubs of East Asia.

It was a different story for the British, whose fortunes were tied to the overseas wealth generated by its far-flung colonies. For the British government, supporting this new transportation technology—steamships that could carry passengers, mail, and cargo on a regular schedule—was a matter of imperial necessity. Not only that, but there were fortunes to be made carrying immigrants in steerage to the United States and Canada. In 1839, Samuel Cunard, an enterprising colonial who moved to England from Nova Scotia, finagled a British government subsidy of £60,000 a year to start a transatlantic steamer line that would carry the mails.⁸ Cunard’s first ship, *Britannia*—a two-hundred-foot-long, wooden paddle-wheel steamer with a top speed of 8.5 knots (about 10 land miles per hour)—made its first voyage between Liverpool, Halifax, and Boston in July 1840. Service to New York began in 1857. Cunard’s ships cut a typical Atlantic crossing time down from two months under sail to a mere two weeks under steam. For Samuel Cunard, safety and reliability trumped luxury. Cabins were cramped, furnishings plain, and cuisine bland at best. As his partner Charles MacIver once made clear to an unhappy passenger, “Going to sea is a hardship.”⁹

The transition from sail to steam made crossings faster, but not necessarily more pleasant; the North Atlantic was still arguably the most treacherous body of water on the planet. Except for a brief sunny summer interlude, passengers boarding a liner in Liverpool bound for New York expected gray skies, heaving seas, and blustery winds during most of the voyage. During the depths of winter, spitting rain, howling gales, and monster waves would punish the steamship, send furniture and clothing flying

through the air, and make everyone on board seasick. And then when the ship reached the Grand Banks, off the Canadian coast, thick fog would often roll in, making visibility close to zero. Most passengers were more than happy to stumble ashore after enduring two weeks of cramped quarters and nausea aboard a Cunard steamer.

After a decade of Cunard supremacy on the North Atlantic, one American tried to outdo the British in speed and luxury. During the 1850s, a New Englander named Edward Knight Collins was on the receiving end of a mail subsidy from Washington for steamship service between New York and Liverpool: a princely \$385,000 a year. Three of his luxurious ships took the new Blue Riband, making 13 knots and beating the British ships by an average of seven hours.¹⁰ But after two of his money-losing ships sank and drowned hundreds of passengers, Congress killed the line's subsidy. Urging the move was Collin's unsubsidized rival in the transatlantic steamship business, a brash New Yorker named Cornelius Vanderbilt, known by the public as "the Commodore." The Collins Line collapsed without the subsidy, but Vanderbilt's transatlantic line also failed—he sold his ships and purchased the New York Central Railroad. While Washington gave away millions of acres of land out West to the railroads, the American merchant marine got little support.

After the Civil War, European companies dominated the transatlantic route. Supported by state mail contracts and construction subsidies, Cunard and its competitors made spectacular profits from carrying immigrants in cramped squalor and wealthy travelers in opulence. In 1871, Thomas Ismay, cantankerous but shrewd Liverpool businessman, founded the White Star Line in a partnership with the Irish shipbuilder Harland & Wolff. Ismay's company showcased British white-glove service to wealthy Americans, pleasing even the finicky historian Henry Adams, who marveled at how the transatlantic liner represented human progress.¹¹ Another was a haughty, Hartford-born banker named John Pierpont Morgan. The young man was so impressed with the White Star Line that he dreamed of one day buying it.

Across the North Sea, two German companies, Norddeutscher Lloyd, based in Bremen, and the Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-Actien-Gesellschaft, known as HAPAG, captured the lion's share of the immigrant trade. HAPAG in particular profited immensely from transporting "huddled masses," many of them Jewish pogrom refugees, from Eastern Europe to America. Packing immigrants into steerage bunks at twenty-five dollars a head translated to spectacular profits. The wunderkind of the German shipping business was a brilliant, diminutive Jew named Albert Ballin. Appointed HAPAG's managing director in 1899, Ballin was a self-made man who strove to make his ships perfect. When ships like his *Kaiserin Auguste Victoria* or *Amerika* were in port, he prowled all over them, making note of the slightest deficiencies in service or appearances. He even hired the Ritz-Carlton company to operate specialty first class restaurants on board.¹²

The heated competition between Great Britain, Germany, and eventually France during the late nineteenth century spurred great technological advances, as lines plowed their vast profits into building bigger and faster ships. Progress was astounding. Liners grew from 3,000 gross tons to 10,000 gross tons, and lengths doubled from 300 feet to nearly 600.³

Ship construction moved from wood to iron, auxiliary sails were dropped, and paddle wheels were abandoned for the screw propeller. By the 1880s, first-class passengers could dine and read in public rooms lit by electricity, and enjoy hot and cold running water in their cabins. Engine technology also advanced rapidly. By the 1870s, British engineers had perfected the so-called compound engine. Here steam would pass through a series of three or four cylinders before being ejected into the condenser. So-called triple and quadruple expansion engines allowed for more steam pressure, which meant more

speed.¹³ As a result, travel time between Liverpool and New York was cut from two weeks to just over six days, and top speeds approached 20 knots, double the speed of the first paddle-wheel liners. Ships were now boasting two screw propellers rather than just one.

Following the Civil War, a lone American steamship company was left to brave Atlantic waters. Philadelphia's Clement Griscom had attracted the backing of the Pennsylvania Railroad and John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company, which saw a transatlantic service as a means to pick up where railroads ended, at the water's edge. In 1871, Griscom's American Steamship Company commissioned the William Cramp Shipyard to build four liners to carry passengers, oil, and bulk cargo between Philadelphia and Liverpool. Griscom, a bewhiskered, florid-faced Quaker, belonged to all the right Philadelphia clubs and had married a member of the famous Biddle family, but he also socialized with nouveau riche entrepreneurs like Peter Widener and drank a pint of champagne during the workday. Bored with the "proper Philadelphian" professions of medicine and law, Griscom intended to make a big splash on the world stage with his ships. To do it, he needed vast quantities of capital, as well as political support from Washington.

At first, Griscom faced near failure. His American Steamship Company lost so much money that the Pennsylvania Railroad refused to provide the additional cash Griscom needed to stay in business. An appeal to the federal government also failed. To keep going, the Philadelphia shipper negotiated a \$100,000-a-year mail subsidy from the Belgian government for a new venture: the International Navigation Company, also known as the Red Star Line.¹⁴ Still somehow in business, Griscom then purchased the moribund British Inman Line in 1886 and ordered two new ships, *City of Paris* and *City of New York*, from a Scottish yard. At 10,000 gross tons each and with service speeds of over 20 knots, they were the largest and fastest ships of the day. Both captured the Blue Riband with ease, but they did so as "British ships," thanks to American navigation laws that protected American industry. In a maneuver meant to protect American shipbuilders from cheaper foreign competition, Congress forbade foreign-built ships from flying the Stars and Stripes. The law backfired, however, as American ship owners either sold out their shipping interests (like Vanderbilt) or operated foreign-built fleets under foreign flags (like Griscom). When it came to building and operating ships, America remained at a major competitive disadvantage—European governments subsidized their passenger fleets, while the United States did not.

Griscom was undeterred and decided to use his now-famous ships to leverage a mail subsidy out of Washington. He told Congress that if his liners were granted American registry, he would kill the Inman Line, make the two vessels part of the fleet of a renewed American Line, and then build two new ships in an American yard. Congress agreed and passed a bill in 1892 that gave Griscom a mail subsidy of \$12,400 per crossing.¹⁵ The following year, the crews of the renamed *New York* and *Paris* raised the American flag on their sternposts, and at the William Cramp & Sons Ship and Engine Building Company in Philadelphia, workers laid the keel plates for two new ships—*St. Louis* and *St. Paul*.

The American public hoped that their new transatlantic liners would take the Blue Riband from the current holder, the Cunard liner *Lucania*, whose best time was 5 days, 7 hours, and 23 minutes—just 5 hours and 46 minutes faster than Griscom's 1892 winner, *Paris*.¹⁶ But neither *St. Louis* nor *St. Paul* could match *Lucania's* pace. The British ship kept the prize until 1897, when a great four-funneled beast from imperial Germany, *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, snatched it away. The Norddeutscher Lloyd ship had managed an average speed of 22.5 knots, nearly three knots faster than the American ships and more than a half a knot faster than *Lucania*. There was consternation in the British public as the Germans humbled the nation's best engineers.

But the German triumph did not deter Clement Griscom. Teaming up with financier J. P. Morgan, the Philadelphian hoped to buy every single transatlantic shipping line, European and American, and merge them into a gigantic shipping trust based in New York. The two men made a perfect team. Like Griscom, Morgan was from an old-line family that had been wealthy for generations. His huge physique reflected a gargantuan appetite for food, rare books, art, and mistresses. A hideous outbreak of rhinophyma left his nose bloated and purple, a condition that made him avoid photographers. But Morgan possessed a genius for deal making. The financial mastermind of the American industrial trusts, Morgan believed that consolidation was the future of American business. To him, investing in steamships was a good deal more interesting than steel, sugar, and oil—they awakened a lust in him equal to his passion for art and women. The transatlantic liner was the era's ultimate status symbol, and Morgan vowed to own as many of them as he could. And to get his hands on them, he needed Griscom's shipping savvy.

To break the European grip on the transatlantic trade, Griscom and Morgan would use the House of Morgan's financial muscle to force all parties, American and foreign, into the trust. It would be called the International Mercantile Marine, a company that under another name would grow to become the largest and greatest American shipping firm, one that would be closely identified with the career of the young boy so awed by the christening of *St. Louis*.



ESCAPING THE RICH BOYS

After the launch of the great *St. Louis* in November 1894, the bookish, sickly William Francis Gibbs began thinking and reading of nothing but ships. Back at his father's mansion on North Broad Street his bedroom was cluttered with technical publications that he quietly read into the night. Most he had borrowed from his father's study.

A reclusive, high-strung child, little Willy Gibbs was tongue-tied and unnerved by the parade of business and social callers to his parents' home. Once when an engineer who worked for his father came by, he found the Gibbs boy engrossed in a periodical.

"What are you reading, Francis?" the engineer asked.

The boy silently handed over an issue of *Cassier's*, a sophisticated engineering trade journal.

"Good Lord!" the visitor exclaimed.

William Francis snatched the issue back and resumed his reading.¹

Born on August 24, 1886, Willy grew up in the "let-the-poor-child-alone system of education," a journalist wrote later, probably based on the child's own adult recollections. His mother seemed to spoil him. "A sneeze was always good for a week at home. A slight cough was good for a month. A pronounced bark enabled him to stay away from school for an entire year."² He also forged a close bond with his younger brother, Frederic, born when William Francis Gibbs was still a twenty-month-old toddler. Both were fascinated not just with ships, but also firefighting equipment. They found a fellow enthusiast in the family's coachman, a former Philadelphia fireman. If he heard about a fire somewhere in the city, he would rouse the boys from their sleep, hitch up the horses, and gallop with them into the dark corners of the industrial city. "Lumberyard fires are almost always terrific!" Gibbs later recalled.³

His parents, on the other hand, were not interested in showing Little Willy the rougher side of Philadelphia. They made sure their six children—William Francis had four older sisters in addition to his younger brother—grew up in Gilded Age opulence. Father William Warren Gibbs was also an avid reader of engineering journals, but he scanned them looking for ideas to back. He was not an inventor but a promoter, a wheeler-dealer who had a knack for associating with other men of wealth and ambition. With his cronies, the entrepreneurs Peter Widener and William Elkins, Gibbs shrewdly chose some "respectable" men to sit on the board of the United Gas Improvement Company, which by the 1890s had enriched many of Philadelphia's oldest families and earned an infamous reputation for political corruption.⁴ He also possessed a smooth tongue and legendary powers of persuasion. The former provost of the University of Pennsylvania, the patrician Dr. William Pepper Jr., once tried to

solicit a donation to his Ivy League institution from William Warren Gibbs. A fifty-thousand-dollar contribution would help Gibbs's social standing, the distinguished physician hinted. But the middle school dropout deftly turned the tables on Pepper, convincing him to purchase stock in a new venture, Marsden Cellulose, which sold ground-up coconut shells to insulate battleships.⁵ The *New York Times* reported that the smelly material was "unhealthful and breeds vermin."⁶

Mother Frances used her husband's vast wealth to throw lavish parties. At one of her fêtes, the ballroom of a Philadelphia hotel became a "magnificent apartment of the period of Louis XIV . . . enhanced by profuse decorations of palms, ferns, and American beauty roses."⁷ To cap off a season at their summer home in Spring Lake on the New Jersey shore, the Gibbs family hosted a "bal poudre"—the guests wore powdered wigs and hair.⁸ When the Gibbs's eldest daughter, Augusta May, married sportsman William Hamilton Tevis Huhn in 1899, a reporter marveled at the wedding gifts on display at the Gibbs home, noting that "one large room could not hold the great amount of cut glass, silver, plate and in service, rare china, ornaments and bric-a-brac."⁹

But their efforts at social acceptance were in vain: Philadelphia snobbery held that the Gibbs family mansion on rich and opulent North Broad Street was on the wrong side of Market Street, the demarcation line separating "fashionable society" from the nouveaux riche.

For the Philadelphia elite, family pedigree was all that mattered, and lack of it sometimes drove turn-of-the-century strivers out of the city altogether. One poor but supremely talented Harvard Law School graduate, raised "north of Market" by his widowed mother, was warned by an Old Philadelphia lawyer: "They'll never take you seriously in this town—in New York your grades will count for something."¹⁰ Young John J. McCloy took the advice, got a job with New York corporate lawyer Paul Cravath, and rose to become "the Chairman of the Establishment" under the aegis of the Rockefeller family.

William Warren and Frances Gibbs, however, were determined to stay in Philadelphia and launch their children into proper society. With that in mind, in 1899 the Gibbs family acquired an address above all social reproach: a mansion fronting Rittenhouse Square, the most prestigious neighborhood in Philadelphia. Behind the doors of its high-stooped town houses, a visitor could hear the sounds of privilege: clocks ticking on marble mantelpieces, the clink of crystal, and the quick, soft steps of Irish maids.

The three-story, yellow brick mansion at 1733 Walnut Street, commanding the northeast corner of the square, was sold to William Warren Gibbs by banker Anthony Joseph Drexel Jr. ¹¹ A prominent Rittenhouse Square address announced that after eighteen years in Philadelphia, the Gibbs family had finally arrived. That same year, they were listed in the Philadelphia *Social Register* for the first time.

The socially awkward young William Francis Gibbs took to the big yellow house immediately; its vast size offered him privacy and seclusion. For twelve hours a day he would read, doodle, and tinker. Since William Francis avoided social contact with schoolmates, his closest companion continued to be his younger brother, Frederic, who, like his father, had a talent for mathematics and finance. At the family's summer home on the New Jersey shore, he sat for hours on the veranda watching ships sail in and out of New York harbor. He and Frederic also traveled to Philadelphia's leafy suburbs to play tennis on the grass courts of the Germantown and Merion cricket clubs. When they were older, they would play against a talented boy named Bill Tilden.

"We played against Tilden, and sometimes we won!" William Francis would recall about his matches against the future Wimbledon champion.¹²

By the time they were teenagers, the tennis trophies cluttered the upstairs bedrooms of the

Rittenhouse Square mansion. Frustrated, their mother Frances scolded her sons, insisting it was little vulgar to display them all.”¹³ No matter. A good lawn tennis player—someone who played by the rules without losing his cool—was synonymous with being a true gentleman, a perception that must have pleased the Gibbs parents.

The boys also got the chance to travel abroad. When he was twelve, his parents packed little Willy off to Europe with an older cousin. But what stood out in his mind were not the cathedrals and museums, but a library in Switzerland packed full of engineering publications. On a later trip home aboard the White Star Line’s new liner *Celtic*, then the biggest ship in the world, William Francis and Frederic Gibbs constructed a house out of blocks in their first-class stateroom. The slow but plucky British liner was so steady that the block house remained standing for the entire eight-day trip.¹⁴ The young Gibbs was fully aware that smaller, more powerful ships than *Celtic* were making headlines by crossing the Atlantic in less than six days, and that newer European ships had far eclipsed the American Line’s *St. Louis* in size, speed, and luxury.

Because of his poor health, Gibbs was not sent to one of the Episcopal boarding schools that served the children of the northeastern elite. Instead he was enrolled at the De Lancey School, an easy walk from the family home. De Lancey advertised itself as providing the rigors of a Groton education while allowing the children to live at home.¹⁵ And for reclusive Willy, this was a good thing. In addition, it appears that De Lancey was a more intellectual place than its New England counterparts, which had been modeled after the muscular Eton and its playing fields.

Illness continued to dog Gibbs. He did not graduate from De Lancey until he was nearly twenty. In his class of seniors, nearly half went to Harvard, most of the rest to the University of Pennsylvania. He applied to Harvard most likely at his father’s insistence; it was, of course, a place better known for cultivating gentlemen than naval architects.

By today’s standards, Gibbs’s college application was abysmally unimpressive. His high school transcript was peppered with C’s and D’s. He flunked Latin, French, and oddly enough, advanced algebra. Nevertheless, a member of the selection committee of Harvard’s Lawrence Scientific School stamped “Admitted” on his application card, on condition that he get a passing grade in a foreign language after enrollment.¹⁷ That the boy came from a very rich family must have been decisive. But the Lawrence Scientific School, later Harvard’s Graduate School of Engineering, might also have known something of his powerful, self-driven interest in engineering and ships.

In September 1906, the twenty-year-old William Francis Gibbs, now a gangly six feet, two inches tall, boarded a train for Boston. His father did not want his son to study engineering, because William Warren Gibbs believed engineers were impractical and inarticulate—qualities that would not recommend a man to the people who mattered. He wanted a different life for his eldest son: an elite university education, a respectable legal profession, and the social status the law would guarantee. In short, the life that entrepreneurial, risk-taking William Warren Gibbs had never had.

Strangely, William Francis’s younger brother, Frederic, did not immediately continue on to college at eighteen. One possibility is that like William Francis, he was a late bloomer as a student. Or maybe their seemingly high-flying parents had their own reasons to conserve cash by the time William Francis left for Cambridge. In the end, Frederic never got a college education.

Gibbs was passionate about ocean liners, but did not seem to possess the technical aptitude, financial savvy, and force of will that was needed to build giant machines for hard-nosed shipping magnates like Samuel Cunard, Albert Ballin, Clement Griscom, and J. P. Morgan.

His parents also must have worried that their reclusive son would have a tough time at Harvard

with its demanding academics and conformist social scene.

Freshman William Francis Gibbs entered Harvard when the famed William James was still chairman of its philosophy department. The great pragmatist crowed about the college, “Our undisciplinables are our proudest product!”¹⁸

But one new undergraduate was miserable in Cambridge.

It was the waning tenure of university president Charles Eliot, and Harvard had yet to complete its transition from a finishing school for rich boys from Boston, New York, and Philadelphia into a world-class teaching and research university. Many undergraduates coasted through classes, and spent hours drinking in the private “Gold Coast” dormitories and the elite social clubs lining Mount Auburn Street.

The young Philadelphian with an immensely wealthy father was immediately accepted as a respectable “Gold Coaster.” Gibbs took up residence in Claverly Hall, a Georgian brick pile that boasted wood-paneled walls, a sweeping grand staircase, and a small electric elevator. But unlike most students in Claverly, Gibbs showed no interest in the hijinks and hilarity typical of the turn-of-the-century “Harvard Man.” William Francis continued to spend his free hours much as he had in his family’s Walnut Street mansion. He read technical journals, pored over blueprints of British battleships, and drew. The budding designer approached the plans of these ships with “great deference.” But that could not stop him from carefully rearranging their engine spaces, or adding more watertight bulkheads, imagining what might be done to increase speed or keep a ship afloat if it were struck by enemy shells or torpedoes. “What’s the next step?” he would ask himself as he examined each engineering masterpiece.¹⁹

The boy’s growing understanding of design came at a time when naval ideas were in ferment. The rout of Russia’s navy in the Russo-Japanese War, which had occurred just a year before Gibbs left for college, showed what could happen to an outmoded and unprepared fleet. Britain was steaming ahead with new technologies and strategies, but many American naval officers—certainly, some of the naval thinkers in the journals Gibbs was reading—felt the United States was not keeping up. They pointed to the Navy’s failure to implement British naval advances to modernize its own fleet, and the serious lack of coordination between progressive Navy engineers and hidebound line officers. Studying the latest articles and ship blueprints in his dorm room, the intensely patriotic Gibbs began to see a role for himself in rebuilding the American Navy.

To many of his classmates, the preoccupied student from Philadelphia was a strange one. He was painfully shy, and later recalled that some of the loud-mouthed, arrogant scions of privilege “filled him with alarm.”²⁰ Terrified of being bullied, he kept the door to his room locked to protect his blueprints and ship photographs from mockery and practical jokes.²¹

Photos of Gibbs taken during his time at Harvard show a young man in a long dressing gown with a sash and striped lapels, looking profoundly lonely. In one picture he stands against his dresser, his right arm draped over a pile of books. In another he sits in a chair next to his room’s fireplace, his hands clasped over his lap. Instead of college pennants, the walls are covered with photographs and prints: warships with smoking funnels and fine automobiles. A basket with rolled-up blueprints sits by his desk at the window.²²

In fact, Gibbs was not alone in rejecting conventional collegiate life. Classmate John Reed, who would play a role in the Russian Revolution of 1917, remembered students who “criticized the faculty for not educating them, attacked the sacred institution of intercollegiate athletics, sneered at the undergraduate clubs so holy that no one dared mention their names.”²³ Other members of the famous

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