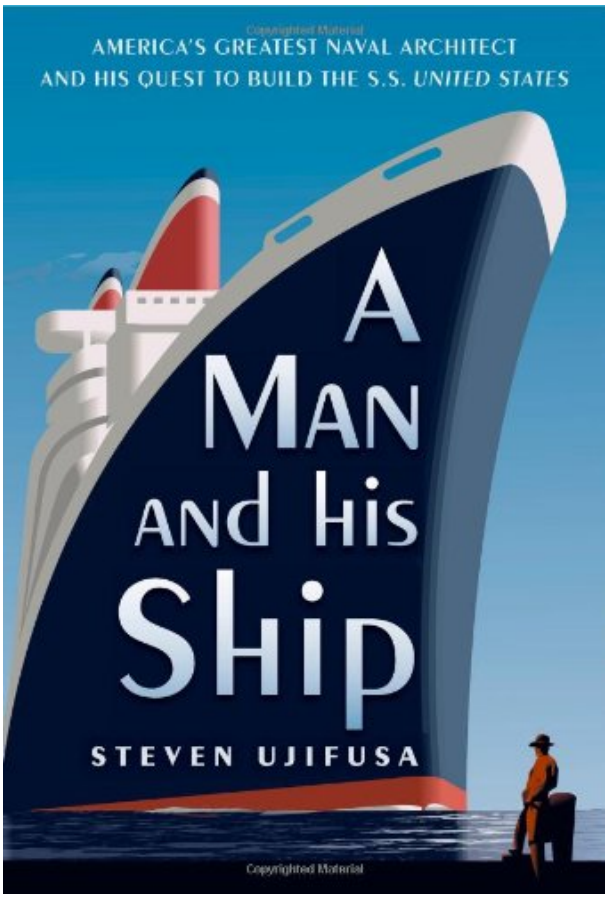
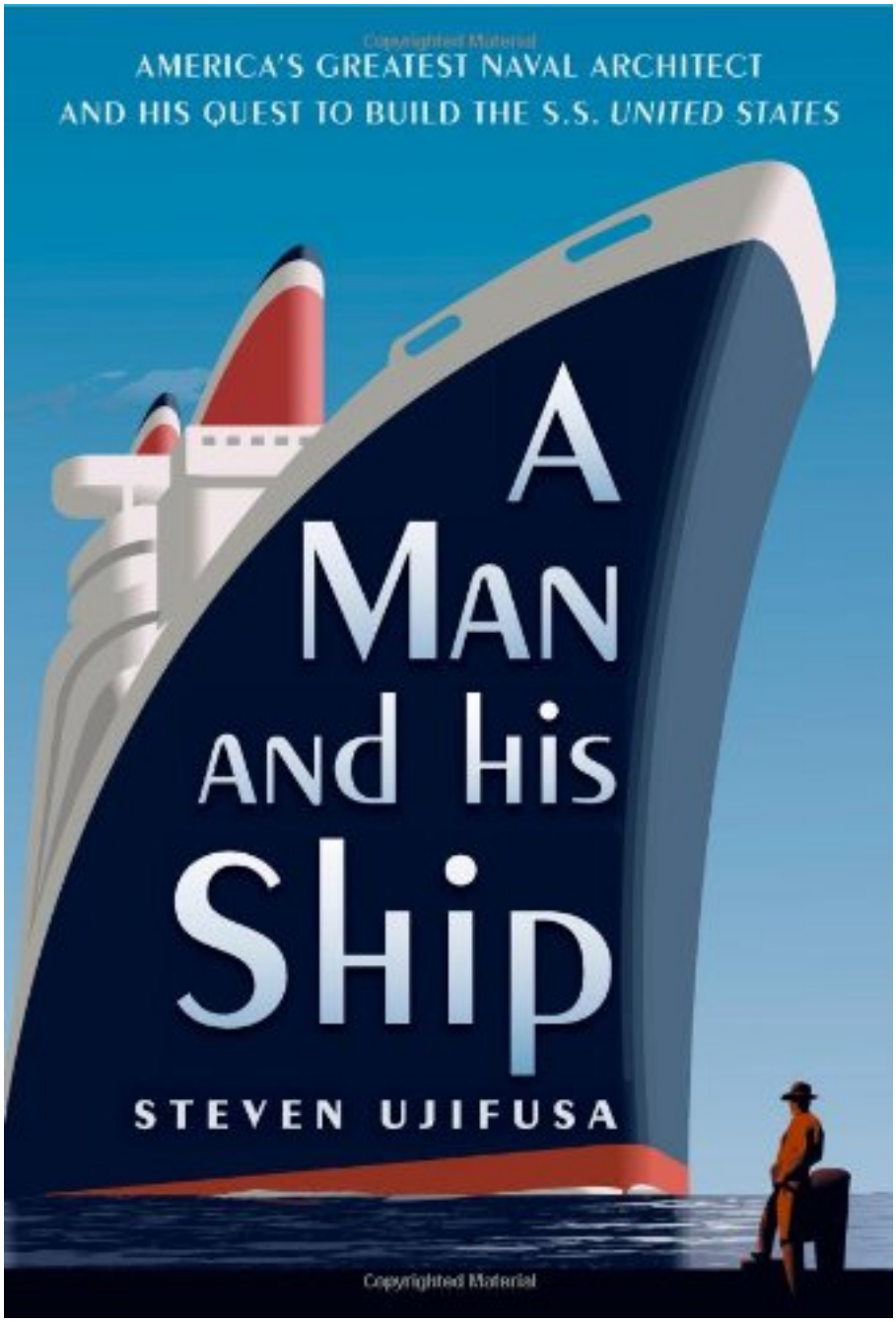
# A MAN AND HIS SHIP: AMERICA'S GREATEST NAVAL ARCHITECT AND HIS QUEST TO BUILD THE S.S. UNITED STATES BY STEVEN UJIFUSA





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Review

“A terrific book! By entertaining, informing and ultimately inspiring, A Man and His Ship transforms its readers into passengers traveling across an ocean and through time. A skilled verbal navigator, Steven Ujifusa has charted an efficient and yet immensely satisfying course through a sea of facts, images and stories.” (David Macaulay, best-selling author of Cathedral, Castle, and The Way Things Work)

Steven Ujifusa has done something remarkable in his book, A Man and His Ship: he has brought back an era of American dominance in shipbuilding through the life of one of its giants: William Francis Gibbs. In some ways, Gibbs was the Steve Jobs of his era – a perfectionist with few people skills who nevertheless was single-handedly able to change his industry by the power of his vision and overwhelming professional competence. We need more public historians like Ujifusa working in business history. Using the highest research standards, he has written a great book that tells great story. (G. Richard Shell, Thomas Gerrity Professor, The Wharton School of Business and author of Bargaining for Advantage)

“Few of man's creations possess even half the romance of the passenger ships that once steamed across the world's oceans, especially the North Atlantic. That is why Steven Ujifusa's A Man and His Ship is such a compelling work.” (John Steele Gordon The Wall Street Journal (best nonfiction of 2012))

Much of Ujifusa’s book is a portrait in determination, as Gibbs’s plans for his big ship are continually tossed about in political, economic and personal squalls. A less single-minded man may have given up at numerous times. (Stephen Heyman The New York Times Style Magazine)

"In his debut, Ujifusa harks back to a time when men were men, and transatlantic ships were serious business...Written with passion and thoroughness, this is a love letter to a bygone time and the ships that once ruled the seas." (Publishers Weekly starred review)

"Ujifusa describes the construction of the ship in engrossing detail and provides informative digressions on

the golden age of ocean travel, when liners carried millionaires, celebrities, and desperate refugees." (Booklist)

“The sea inspires obsessions in determined men, from Captain Ahab to Admiral Rickover. Steven Ujifusa introduces us to another – the naval architect William Francis Gibbs. His ingenious design of mass-producible Liberty ships helped win World War II, but Gibbs’ obsession was to build the world’s fastest, safest and most elegant Atlantic liner. He ultimately succeeded, but in a decade his masterpiece was obsolete and unprofitable. Ujifusa narrates this tragedy well, in all its technical, political and human dimensions.” (Admiral Dennis C. Blair, U.S. Navy (Ret.), Former Director of National Intelligence)

“Few of man's creations possess even half the romance of the passenger ships that once steamed across the world's oceans, especially the North Atlantic. That is why Steven Ujifusa's ‘A Man and His Ship’ is such a compelling work.” (The Wall Street Journal)

“A fascinating historical account…A snapshot of the American Dream culminating with this country's mid-century greatness.” (The Wall Street Journal)

“A marvelous narrative of America’s premier naval architect.”

—Barrett Tillman, author of Enterprise

“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 delightful account of the era of grand ocean liners and the brilliant, single-minded designer who yearned to build the greatest ocean liner of all."—Kirkus

"A fitting memorial to our greatest naval architect."—The National Review

“[An] absorbing, transporting new history…Ujifusa’s book is a portrait in determination, as Gibbs’s plans for his big ship are continually tossed about in political, economic and personal squalls.” (The New York Times (TMagazine))

About the Author
Steven Ujifusa serves on the Advisory Council of the S.S. 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.



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, 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 Willy 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 fires 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 1883. "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 of the record," boasted Philadelphia's Cramp Shipyard, "marks a triumph for the designer and builder, a 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).2 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 coastal 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, a 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 wünderkind 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 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.|PROLOGUE

## 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 if 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 adventures, 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 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, as 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.

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In the tradition of David McCullough’s grand histories, the sweeping story of one man’s quest to build the fastest, finest ocean liner in history—set against the politics, culture, and enterprise of twentieth century America.

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.

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Review
“A terrific book! By entertaining, informing and ultimately inspiring, A Man and His Ship transforms its readers into passengers traveling across an ocean and through time. A skilled verbal navigator, Steven Ujifusa has charted an efficient and yet immensely satisfying course through a sea of facts, images and stories.” (David Macaulay, best-selling author of Cathedral, Castle, and The Way Things Work)

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"In his debut, Ujifusa harks back to a time when men were men, and transatlantic ships were serious business...Written with passion and thoroughness, this is a love letter to a bygone time and the ships that once ruled the seas." (Publishers Weekly starred review)

"Ujifusa describes the construction of the ship in engrossing detail and provides informative digressions on the golden age of ocean travel, when liners carried millionaires, celebrities, and desperate refugees." (Booklist)

“The sea inspires obsessions in determined men, from Captain Ahab to Admiral Rickover. Steven Ujifusa introduces us to another – the naval architect William Francis Gibbs. His ingenious design of mass-producible Liberty ships helped win World War II, but Gibbs’ obsession was to build the world’s fastest, safest and most elegant Atlantic liner. He ultimately succeeded, but in a decade his masterpiece was obsolete and unprofitable. Ujifusa narrates this tragedy well, in all its technical, political and human dimensions.” (Admiral Dennis C. Blair, U.S. Navy (Ret.), Former Director of National Intelligence)

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“A fascinating historical account…A snapshot of the American Dream culminating with this country's mid-century greatness.” (The Wall Street Journal)

“A marvelous narrative of America’s premier naval architect.”

—Barrett Tillman, author of Enterprise

“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 delightful account of the era of grand ocean liners and the brilliant, single-minded designer who yearned

to build the greatest ocean liner of all."—Kirkus

"A fitting memorial to our greatest naval architect."—The National Review

“[An] absorbing, transporting new history…Ujifusa’s book is a portrait in determination, as Gibbs’s plans for his big ship are continually tossed about in political, economic and personal squalls.” (The New York Times (TMagazine))

About the Author
Steven Ujifusa serves on the Advisory Council of the S.S. 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.



## 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, 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 Willy 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 fires 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 1883. "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 of the record," boasted Philadelphia's Cramp Shipyard, "marks a triumph for the designer and builder, a 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).2 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 coastal 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, a 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 wünderkind 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 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.|PROLOGUE

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 if 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 adventures, 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 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, as 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.

Most helpful customer reviews

22 of 23 people found the following review helpful.
A Stunning Achievement
By Craig R. Whitney

"A Man and his Ship" takes us back to the days when it took five days to get from New York City to London (via Southampton) and tells the story of William Francis Gibbs, the American ship designer who was obsessed with the idea of building a ship that could do it even faster, faster than the British and French and German ocean liners that would be its rivals. His vision of a superliner built with top-secret technology was ultimately realized in 1953 in the construction of SS United States, whose nearly 248,000 horsepower could drive it through the waves at 38.32 knots, nearly 45 miles an hour. It was a stunning achievement - and so is "A Man and his Ship," which begins as Gibbs's dream began before World War I and ends with the great vessel, a stripped and gutted ruin, laid up in the river in Philadelphia awaiting its ultimate fate. Its admirers hope to make that something other than the wrecking yard.
Winning the "Blue Riband," the prize for the fastest Atlantic crossing, was not the only goal, though United States did that with a crossing in three and one-half days. For, as Ujifusa writes, United States was "designed for wartime use first and foremost" - as a troop transport that could outrun and outmaneuver enemy submarines. That meant that it was built with military-level technology: high-pressure turbines, and top-secret propellers (designed by a woman on Gibbs's staff), designs not declassified until after the Vietnam War. And it was built with money from the taxpayers - financial subsidies from the U.S. Government for its construction, which cost nearly $80 million, and for its annual operating costs as well.
Of course, all that - Blue Riband, troop transport duties, government subsidies, the luxury of transatlantic crossing - vanished into thin air, literally, when airplanes replaced ocean liners in the 1960s. It's all told, in rich detail evocative of an era not all that long past, in this wonderful book, which has pictures that will bring all that back for those who remember it, or bring it to life for those too young to remember. A great read.

7 of 9 people found the following review helpful.
So much more than just a story about a Man and his Ship
By Henry T. Dechert
A Man and His Ship: America's Greatest Naval Architect and His Quest to Build the S.S. United States
This book is so much more than just the story of a "Man and his Ship." Steven Ujufusa illuminates what life was like during first half of the 20th Century as he chronicles the victories and the tragedies of passenger liners of that time, and the enormous contributions of Gibbs and his team in ship design and construction during World War II. Gibbs's determination and his "outside the box" approach is shown to have been a critical contribution to the victory in that war. Ujifusa's breezy style takes the reader through these event and changes with just the right balance of facts for engineers, and personal stories that illuminate character and humanity of the participants. I read this book with the same zeal I usually only muster for a well written thriller.

For a thorough professional review of "A Man and His Ship" I recommend "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" at [...].

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.
Enjoyable bio of a naval designer and the era of the great liners.
By Stone Dog
Steven Ujifusa's "A Man and His Ship" is a fine biography of William Francis Gibbs, one of America's great naval engineers and designers and his proudest accomplishment - the SS United States.

Born the son of a gilded age tycoon, William Gibbs began life as a child of wealth. The author does a good job of revealing the introverted child of privilege that Gibbs was and his unconventional education. Gibbs was fortunate that, unlike his brother, he was able to complete his education at Harvard because soon thereafter his father was wiped out in a financial panic.

The book details Gibbs' lifelong fascination with the great passenger liners and does a good job of giving the reader a sense of the importance of the transatlantic passenger trade. Though the uninformed often think of

the luxury liners of Britain only, the author chronicles the fierce competition between the British, German and sometimes French and Italian liners as to which country has the fastest, the most luxurious and the most advanced liners. Names like Titanic and Lusitania as well as Vaterland and Normandie. The United States was noticeably absent from this competition to Gibbs' dismay.

Gibbs, however, was well known for smaller liners, for fast and advanced US Navy destroyers and most importantly the "Liberty" ships of WWII fame that helped win the war at sea. Still, passenger liners were his passion and after WWII he had the opportunity to design the fastest and most advanced liner ever. It would become the SS United States.

Because of the massive expense, the great liners were always subsidized by governments - with the exception of the US. Gibbs and others had to convince the post-war government of Harry Truman to support the project. Just when they thought the deal had been struck and work in an advanced state, the Truman administration decided to use the ship as a political ploy and almost succeeded in canceling the project.

In the end, the United States was built and became the fastest liner to that date...by a large margin! Unfortunately, Gibbs' great ship had the misfortune of being built on the eve of transatlantic jet aircraft that spelled doom for the great liners of the North Atlantic.

This is a fine biography and an enjoyable read. Steven Ujifusa has written an excellent book that is not only very informative but a really good read. Five stars.

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# A MAN AND HIS SHIP: AMERICA'S GREATEST NAVAL ARCHITECT AND HIS QUEST TO BUILD THE S.S. UNITED STATES BY STEVEN UJIFUSA PDF

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Review

“A terrific book! By entertaining, informing and ultimately inspiring, A Man and His Ship transforms its readers into passengers traveling across an ocean and through time. A skilled verbal navigator, Steven Ujifusa has charted an efficient and yet immensely satisfying course through a sea of facts, images and stories.” (David Macaulay, best-selling author of Cathedral, Castle, and The Way Things Work)

Steven Ujifusa has done something remarkable in his book, A Man and His Ship: he has brought back an era of American dominance in shipbuilding through the life of one of its giants: William Francis Gibbs. In some ways, Gibbs was the Steve Jobs of his era – a perfectionist with few people skills who nevertheless was single-handedly able to change his industry by the power of his vision and overwhelming professional competence. We need more public historians like Ujifusa working in business history. Using the highest research standards, he has written a great book that tells great story. (G. Richard Shell, Thomas Gerrity Professor, The Wharton School of Business and author of Bargaining for Advantage)

“Few of man's creations possess even half the romance of the passenger ships that once steamed across the world's oceans, especially the North Atlantic. That is why Steven Ujifusa's A Man and His Ship is such a compelling work.” (John Steele Gordon The Wall Street Journal (best nonfiction of 2012))

Much of Ujifusa’s book is a portrait in determination, as Gibbs’s plans for his big ship are continually tossed about in political, economic and personal squalls. A less single-minded man may have given up at numerous times. (Stephen Heyman The New York Times Style Magazine)

"In his debut, Ujifusa harks back to a time when men were men, and transatlantic ships were serious business...Written with passion and thoroughness, this is a love letter to a bygone time and the ships that once ruled the seas." (Publishers Weekly starred review)

"Ujifusa describes the construction of the ship in engrossing detail and provides informative digressions on the golden age of ocean travel, when liners carried millionaires, celebrities, and desperate refugees."

(Booklist)

“The sea inspires obsessions in determined men, from Captain Ahab to Admiral Rickover. Steven Ujifusa introduces us to another – the naval architect William Francis Gibbs. His ingenious design of mass-producible Liberty ships helped win World War II, but Gibbs’ obsession was to build the world’s fastest, safest and most elegant Atlantic liner. He ultimately succeeded, but in a decade his masterpiece was obsolete and unprofitable. Ujifusa narrates this tragedy well, in all its technical, political and human dimensions.” (Admiral Dennis C. Blair, U.S. Navy (Ret.), Former Director of National Intelligence)

“Few of man's creations possess even half the romance of the passenger ships that once steamed across the world's oceans, especially the North Atlantic. That is why Steven Ujifusa's ‘A Man and His Ship’ is such a compelling work.” (The Wall Street Journal)

“A fascinating historical account…A snapshot of the American Dream culminating with this country's mid-century greatness.” (The Wall Street Journal)

“A marvelous narrative of America’s premier naval architect.”

—Barrett Tillman, author of Enterprise

“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 delightful account of the era of grand ocean liners and the brilliant, single-minded designer who yearned to build the greatest ocean liner of all."—Kirkus

"A fitting memorial to our greatest naval architect."—The National Review

“[An] absorbing, transporting new history…Ujifusa’s book is a portrait in determination, as Gibbs’s plans for his big ship are continually tossed about in political, economic and personal squalls.” (The New York Times (TMagazine))

About the Author
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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, 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 Willy 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 fires 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 1883. "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 of the record," boasted Philadelphia's Cramp Shipyard, "marks a triumph for the designer and builder, a 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).2 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 coastal 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, a 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 wünderkind 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 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.|PROLOGUE

## 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 if 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 adventures, 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 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, as 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.