

Historic Ships on a Lee Shore

Good news for Schooner *Ernestina!* The plight of this historic schooner launched “Historic Ships on a Lee Shore” as a recurring feature in *Sea History* (see No. 106, Winter 2004). Last fall, the state of Massachusetts cut her funding, which denied the resources for her annual haul-out and Coast Guard inspection—essentially mothballing the ship. This spring, when other ships were fitting out for the summer season, *Ernestina* sat at the dock, still under her winter cover. In May, the New Bedford Whaling Museum and the New Bedford Oceanarium announced the creation of a joint initiative to provide educational experiences to Massachusetts students and teachers. The *Sharing Cultures/Connecting Oceans: a New Bedford Collaboration* is commissioning the ship to run their “Ocean Learning” programs. Funding will come from the Education through Cultural and Historical Organizations (ECHO) program of the US Department of Education. The ship started the season late, as it did not get hauled out for maintenance and her USCG inspection until late May, but SHE IS SAILING this summer!

Other historic ships, however, are not faring as well. *Ernestina*'s neighbor, **SS *Nobska***, the last tall stack coastal steamship, is about to be evicted from dry dock in the Charlestown Navy Yard. She cannot be refloated in her current condition, so bids are being sent out to scrap her. Finally, **SS *United States***, one of the most famous liners of our time, has new owners once again. The SS United States Foundation is working to ensure that what's left of her original systems is preserved and that the ship is restored. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, she currently sits, neglected and rusting away, at a Philadelphia pier.



SS *Nobska*

by Deirdre O'Regan and Tom Carroll

The National Park Service has sent out requests for bids to scrap SS *Nobska*, America's last tall stack coastal steamship. The New England Steamship Foundation (NESF) has been working to make the steamship seaworthy again to sail the waters as a living museum. Right now, they desperately need to at least make her float to get her out of the dry dock she has been occupying for nine years.

More than \$3 million has already been spent restoring the ship—new frames and hull plating

the ship into dry dock at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston, home of the USS *Constitution*. While shipwrights began work on the hull, the Steamship Authority governors granted her a passenger route.

Despite growing support and interest in the ship and its foundation, NESF still fell short of the \$10 to \$20 million estimated to finish the job. Since 1997, *Nobska* has been hauled out at the Charlestown Navy Yard's dry dock, the same dock *Constitution* needs for her haul-out. NESF has plans to finish the welding in order to move the ship, estimating they can complete it in eight weeks—once they receive funding. They need \$500,000 before they can award the contract. The New England Steamship Foundation continues to scramble for funds to float the ship before the Navy and the National Park Service award a contract to have it scrapped. After having given NESF fair lead time, the National Park Service is now sending out requests for bids for her removal. NESF anticipates the Park Service awarding the contract to scrap or remove her in September.

Anyone interested in supporting this effort should contact the New England Steamship Foundation at: PO Box 1642, Edgartown, MA 02539; Ph. 508 999-1925 or 508 696-9500; e-mail: nobska@fastdial.net; web site: www.nobska.org. ⚓

Tom Carroll is a Trustee & Vice Chairman of NESF.

PHOTOS COURTESY NEW ENGLAND STEAMSHIP FDN.



have been replaced. Nonetheless, the hull cannot be refloated in its current condition. While the foundation is looking for a half million dollars to get the ship in the water, they will still need nearly \$20 million to make the ship seaworthy and USCG certified.

SS *Nobska* was built at Bath Iron Works in Maine and made her maiden voyage in 1925. *Nobska* had two Babcock and Wilcox watertube boilers generating steam at 200 lbs. pressure for her four-cylinder triple-expansion reciprocating steam engine. Fitted with an eight-foot-diameter four-bladed manganese bronze propeller, she cruised at 14 knots. Serving New England ports and islands (her name changed to *Nantucket* after 1928) for almost half a century, she was retired from service in 1973 by the Steamship Authority and sold for under \$70,000. SS *Nobska* spent the next two decades being moved around from Baltimore (where she was temporarily converted to a restaurant) to Providence to New Bedford, Massachusetts, and finally to Boston. In 1995, tugs maneuvered

SS Nobska (l to r) launched in 1925; at the helm; underway in the 1960s; and in dry dock at the Charlestown Navy Yard.

SS United States

by Robert H. Westover

S SS *United States* was designed by America's foremost naval architect, William Francis Gibbs. When the ship crossed the North Atlantic in 1952 in 3 days, 10 hours and 42 minutes, averaging 35.59 knots, she proved to be the fastest and most technically advanced ship the world had ever seen. With this feat she wrested the famed Blue Ribband from the *Queen Mary*, and still remains the last ocean liner of traditional design to hold that distinction. Her 241,000 horsepower engines allowed her to reach speeds in excess of 40 knots. At 990 feet in length, she



(LEFT) PHOTO COURTESY PAUL ROBINSON; (ABOVE) PHOTO COURTESY ANDREW MALMSEA



(left) SS *United States* underway in the the heyday of her transAtlantic runs. (above) At the dock in the 1960s, while she was still in service, ready to board passengers.

is the largest passenger vessel ever built in the United States. She could steam 10,000 miles without stopping for fuel or provisions. Throughout her brief 17-year career, SS *United States* held a near perfect schedule and never experienced an engineering failure. The ship was constructed so that within 24 hours she could be converted into a troop transport capable of carrying over 15,000 men. In exchange for this capability, her \$79 million construction cost was heavily underwritten by the federal government.

Toward the end of the 1960s, the jumbo jet invasion finally took its toll on the famous transAtlantic superliners. In 1969, faced with declining profits, SS *United States* was sent to Newport News, Virginia, for her annual overhaul. As fate would have it, her boilers were never fired again. As the years passed, she remained docked in Virginia with little hope of revival. Over the next 35 years, SS *United States* has, for the most part, been sitting idle at a dock with the occasional shift to another berth or port city when new buyers with lofty plans have taken possession of her. To date, no owner has succeeded in turning the ship into a viable business. Despite some interest from abroad, the US government denied transfer of ownership to foreign interests because of the ship's highly-secret design specifications.

In 1973 the Maritime Administration installed an extensive dehumidification system throughout the ship, leaving it virtually airtight. In 1992, the ship was towed to Istanbul, Turkey, where a new American owner had a business partner, a wealthy shipyard owner. They planned to restore the ship and return her to service as a running mate to Cunard's *Queen Elizabeth 2*. Shipyard workers in Turkey began the arduous process of stripping the ship's interior right down to her metal bulkheads to remove the asbestos used extensively in her original construction for fireproofing. Costs skyrocketed, and when Cunard backed out of the plan to operate the ship as part of its fleet, work ceased. Most assumed she would never see US waters again, but in 1996 SS *United States* returned to her homeland, but this time to Philadelphia, where the dormant Navy yard would reopen with the task of restoring the superliner to its former glory. As before, financing for

the enormous project failed to materialize. The ship remains idle, awaiting the final chapter of her story.

She was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1999. Norwegian Cruise Lines bought the ship at auction last year with plans to convert the gutted ship for modern cruising. Despite this recent change of ownership, as a historic preservation organization, our immediate task is to ensure that much of the ship's remaining engineering and architecture is preserved. We need to demonstrate, through feasibility studies and historic documentation, the cost effectiveness and relevance of preserving what can be saved. Of course, all of this takes commitment—commitment of time, energy, and most importantly, financial support. You can help by joining the foundation. **Save the *United States!*** Application requests should be sent to: PO Box 853, Washington DC, 20044 or via their web site at www.ssunitedstates.org. ⚓

Robert H. Westover is Chairman and CEO of the SS United States Foundation in Washington DC.

Moored in Philadelphia, 2002.



PHOTO BY MARY CLARKE LEDDY