



William Francis Gibbs

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1886-1967

By Walter C. Bachman

William Francis Gibbs was born August 24, 1886, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, son of a successful financier, William Warren Gibbs, and of Frances Ayres (Johnson) Gibbs. Active, almost to the end, he died on September 6, 1967, at the age of eighty-one. An early interest in ships was undoubtedly stimulated when, as a boy, he had the opportunity to witness a ship launching at the Cramp shipyard in Philadelphia. This interest was confirmed and strengthened by a number of transatlantic crossings he made with his younger brother, Frederic, starting in 1901 with a trip on the White Star Liner *Oceanic*, the largest transatlantic passenger ship at that time. Later crossings were made on the *Celtic* and the *Lusitania*, outstanding ships of their day, and in 1907 on the maiden voyage of the *Mauretania*, which held the transatlantic speed record for over twenty years.

W. F. Gibbs received his primary and secondary education in the DeLancey School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, graduating in 1905. In 1906 he entered Harvard, where with characteristic individualism he did not pursue a formal curriculum leading to a degree, but selected a combination of courses, largely scientific, in his range of interest. His leisure was devoted to reading technical publications dealing with ship design and construction. During this period, he made an extensive study of all available information on the newest warships of the British Navy, which was prominent at that time.

His studies at Harvard were completed in 1910. Even though no degree was conferred, the Harvard Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa made him an Honorary Member in 1945.

On the advice of his father, who considered engineers poor businessmen, he entered the Columbia University Law School in 1911 and received a Bachelor of Law degree in 1913. At the same time, he did graduate work in economics, for which he received the degree of Master of Arts, also in 1913.

During this period, his father suffered financial reverses and William Francis took a position in the law office of William Osgood Morgan in New York. His vision of great ships remained, however. For the next two years, while working at law in New York during the week, he journeyed each weekend to the family home in Haverford, Pennsylvania. There, he spent all of his spare time together with his brother, Frederic Herbert Gibbs, investigating the possibility of designing a high-speed transatlantic passenger liner, 1,000 feet long. By May 1915, he was so encouraged by the results of this study that he gave up all other work so that he could devote full time to this project.

By January 1916, this design had progressed sufficiently so that the brothers presented it to Adm. David W. Taylor, then Chief Constructor of the U.S. Navy, and to the Honorable Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy.

Encouraged by these men, they continued their efforts and, in June 1916, presented their design to Mr. P. A. S. Franklin, President of the International Mercantile Marine Company. Their proposal at this time included the development of a new port at Montauk, Long Island, with fast beat trains running to New York in order to reduce the total travel time to a minimum.

Mr. Franklin introduced the Gibbs brothers to Mr. J. P. Morgan, who was so impressed that he undertook the financing of further development of the design, including the necessary model testing.

Work on this project was interrupted by the entry of the United States into World War I in April 1917. W. F. Gibbs was appointed Assistant to the Chairman of the Shipping Control Committee of the General Staff of the U.S. Army and after the war was Assistant to the Chairman, U.S. Shipping Board on the American Commis

sion to Negotiate Peace, in which capacity he attended the Peace Conference at Versailles.

In 1919, he was appointed Chief of Construction of the International Mercantile Marine Company, for whom he planned and supervised the conversion of the S. S. *Minnekahda* from a wartime transport to a third-class passenger and cargo ship for the New York to Hamburg service.

The great new German passenger liner *Vaterland*, which made her maiden voyage to New York in May 1914, was trapped there by the opening of World War I and seized by the United States Government for use as a troop ship in 1917, when it was renamed the *Leviathan*.

At the end of the war, the United States Shipping board decided to convert the *Leviathan* for passenger service, and the Gibbs brothers were asked to organize an independent firm to supervise this work. Accordingly, in February 1922, Gibbs Brothers, Inc., was organized, with William Francis Gibbs as President.

The *Leviathan* had been built by the German shipyard, Blohm & Voss, which held the detailed plans needed for the conversion and maintenance of the ship. The shipyard demanded \$1 million for a set of these plans—an exorbitant price at that time. Never one to submit to pressure, W. F. Gibbs immediately assembled a team of experienced men who completely measured the ship, including the internals of the main machinery, and drew their own plans at a considerable saving of money. The ship was converted for luxury passenger service by the Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Co., under W. F. Gibbs' supervision, with the care and attention to detail for which he soon became famous. The maiden voyage, on July 4, 1923, and several voyages thereafter were made under the supervision of Gibbs Brothers, Inc., acting as operating agents for the Shipping Board. With the successful completion of this great project, the reputation of the new firm was established.

Other commissions followed, and the firm supervised the conversion of a number of ships released from their wartime service to suit commercial requirements.

In 1929, the firm of Gibbs Brothers, Inc., was succeeded by Gibbs & Cox, Inc., a new firm organized to include Daniel H. Cox,

an outstanding yacht designer of that period. This association permitted the Gibbs talent to be applied to several outstanding yachts, including the *Savarona*, the largest steam yacht ever built and the first to include the highest safety standards for merchant ships; and the great sailing yacht, *Sea Cloud*, 316 feet overall length, with the number and arrangement of sails of a full-rigged ship.

The Gibbs' outstanding knowledge of passenger ships was then devoted to the design and supervision of the construction of the S.S. *America*. This was the largest merchant ship built in this country up to that time and had safety features, including fire resistant construction, to a degree unequalled by any other passenger ship of the period. Completed in 1940 by the Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Co., she could not be used by the United States Lines in her intended service because of the war in Europe. After a luxury cruise to California, she returned to Newport News, where her luxurious furnishings were removed and she was re-outfitted as the troop transport U.S.S. *West Point*. Refurbished at the end of World War II, she became a popular ship in the transatlantic service for which she was designed.

In 1933, the U.S. Navy, which had built almost no new ships since World War I, started a new construction program. Three shipyards, United Dry Docks, Inc., Federal Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Co., and the Bath Iron Works Corporation undertook to build destroyers to a single design developed by W. F. Gibbs.

This program was particularly significant in two ways. It represented the first step in the development of modern, rugged, and more efficient steam propulsion machinery for naval ships. This type of machinery, further developed through a series of destroyer types, also of Gibbs design, was used to power practically all steam driven combatant ships in the U.S. Navy built during World War II, including destroyers, cruisers, battleships, and aircraft carriers.

In 1940, the British Government sent a purchasing mission to survey the busy American shipyards and order some cargo ships. The head of the mission approached W. F. Gibbs and said that his government wanted twenty ships. The reply was, "You don't need them." He then explained that if Britain was within twenty ships of

winning the war she had won already. If not, she needed many more. The British then placed an order for sixty Ocean Class ships to be built in two new shipyards. From these ships was evolved the design of the great fleet of Liberty ships that carried so much of our military cargo during the war years.

As the United States mobilized for the war effort, the War Production Board was established and Charles E. Wilson, Vice-Chairman for Production, requested W. F. Gibbs to become Controller of Shipbuilding to coordinate the ship construction programs of the Navy, Army, and Maritime Commission. This appointment was made with an arrangement that permitted Gibbs to control U.S. shipbuilding policies, while at the same time he was freed of administrative detail so that he could continue to supervise the very important activities of his own company.

During this period, he served as Chairman of the Combined Shipbuilding Committee (Standardization of Design) of the Combined Chiefs of Staff. He was also Special Assistant to Director, Office of War Mobilization, and representative of the Office of War Mobilization on the Procurement Review Board of the Navy.

The key position occupied by the Gibbs organization in large government shipbuilding programs naturally invited several investigations by congressional committees. These committees, sometimes hostile at the outset, invariably ended with praise for the firm's contribution to the national effort. At the end of one such investigation, Gibbs remarked, "Nothing educates a man like being forced to look up the answer to every possible question that can be asked about his business." The care with which he replied to every question raised by the investigators undoubtedly was an important factor in the outcome of these hearings.

The dream of William Francis and Frederic H. Gibbs had been to see a great ocean liner built to their design. The *America*, which was completed just prior to our entry into World War II, was the largest passenger vessel built in the United States up to that time, and a fine and popular ship, but not a true competitor with the fast superliners, the *Queen Mary*, *Normandie*, and *Queen Elizabeth*.

At the end of World War II, preliminary studies for a new ocean

liner were begun, and in 1946 the United States Lines Company commissioned Gibbs & Cox, Inc., to develop contract plans and specifications for the S.S. *United States*.

This superb ship resulted from the synthesis of all the experience gained from passenger ships such as the *Leviathan*, *Malolo*, *America*, as well as ships held by the Grace Company, combined with the technical advances made in machinery, structure, materials, and methods developed in work for the U.S. Navy.

That the combination of these many qualities in a single ship was actually accomplished has been amply demonstrated by the remarkable record of performance of the ship over the many years it has been in service.

When the Gibbs brothers were boys in Philadelphia, their father often permitted the family coachman, a former member of the city Fire Department, to drive the boys to fires, taking them from school, if necessary. This developed in W. F. Gibbs a fascination with fire fighting that lasted all of his life.

Because of his interest in the subject, the New York City Fire Department retained him as a consultant, and, in 1937, he designed and supervised the construction of the New York City fire boat *Fire Fighter*. Still the most powerful fire boat in the world, the *Fire Fighter* has demonstrated its great value many times at waterfront fires that were unapproachable by other means or even by ordinary fire boats.

The office of the President of Gibbs & Cox, Inc., was famed for its simplicity and austere appearance. For many years, W. F. Gibbs had no desk, but perched on a stool at a drawing board. These he retained even after he moved to a chair and a simple table. He worked surrounded by activity, and several secretaries were constantly kept busy supplying him with information and transmitting his numerous instructions and messages.

Devotion to ships, fire engines, and business appeared to many to be an all-consuming passion that took W. F. Gibbs to his office for long hours seven days a week. He was usually the first to arrive and often the last to leave.

Francis Gibbs, as he was widely known by family and friends, had many other interests as well. He frequently attended the theater,

symphony, and opera and had many friends in the artistic world, for he appreciated quality and superb performance in any field of endeavor. He maintained a box at the Yankee Stadium for many years. He was a vestryman and active supporter of St. Thomas' Church on Fifth Avenue.

A keen sense of humor and a delight in surprising his listeners made him a most effective extemporaneous speaker before an audience of any size. He believed strongly that a sense of humor is vital in any field of endeavor.

Great engineering projects require the coordinated efforts of many people. William Francis Gibbs was a natural leader, who inspired great loyalty in his staff and confidence and cooperation in those with whom he did business. His extraordinary enthusiasm for his work set the example that drove all who worked with him to greater efforts to maintain the high standards of performance that he demanded. He took a close personal interest in his employees and quietly, often anonymously, assisted those in need.

Few men have so wholeheartedly dedicated a lifetime to a single objective as William Francis Gibbs or derived so much enjoyment from the great effort devoted to achieving his goals.