

SS AMERICA

Saga of a great American steamship — from ocean liner, to troopship, back to ocean liner, and finally coming to a tragic end

BY ROBERT J. CRESSMAN

The SS *America* was laid down on 22 August 1938 under a Maritime Commission contract (MC Hull No. 1) at Newport News, Virginia, by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company and was launched on 31 August 1939, one day before

Pristine SS *America* in 1940 — note the neutrality markings on the sides of her hull.



the outbreak of war in Europe. Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, wife of the President of the United States, christened the ship and the liner entered service as the flagship for the United States Lines in the summer of 1940.

Initially slated for the trans-Atlantic trade, *America* deployed instead on the New York to West Indies cruise routes because the war in

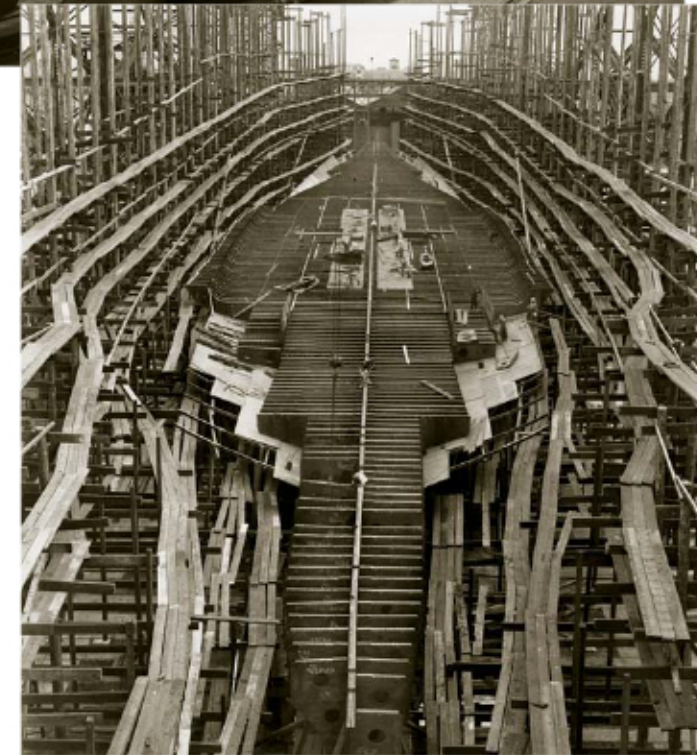
Workers assembling of SS *America*'s 32-ton propeller shafts to its 22-ton propeller by ramming it into place with a 4800-pound battering ram. Despite the immensity of the physical forces involved, the work resulted in fits as exact as 1/1000th of an inch.



Europe had resulted in the invocation of the Neutrality Act banning American ships in the war zones. She thus made several voyages to the West Indies and two to California before the spring of 1941.

Hurriedly recalled from a pleasure cruise in late May of 1941, *America* docked at Norfolk and was acquired by the Navy on 1 June 1941 for conversion to a troop transport. Renamed *West Point* and designated AP-23, the erstwhile cruise ship which had once been the "last word" in luxurious ocean travel, entered her builder's yard on 6 June for conversion. *West Point* commissioned on 15 June 1941 "in a brief and simple ceremony on the after sun deck," according to a period account, with Capt. H. Kelley, Jr., in command. It is interesting to note that this was the second ship to bear the name *West Point* in the service of the US Navy. The first *West Point* was a steel-hulled, single-screw freighter built for the US Shipping Board in World War I. Commissioned on 5 August 1918, *West Point* (ID Number 3254) operated with the Naval Overseas Transportation Service (NOTS) until decommissioned and struck from the Navy list on 24 April 1919.

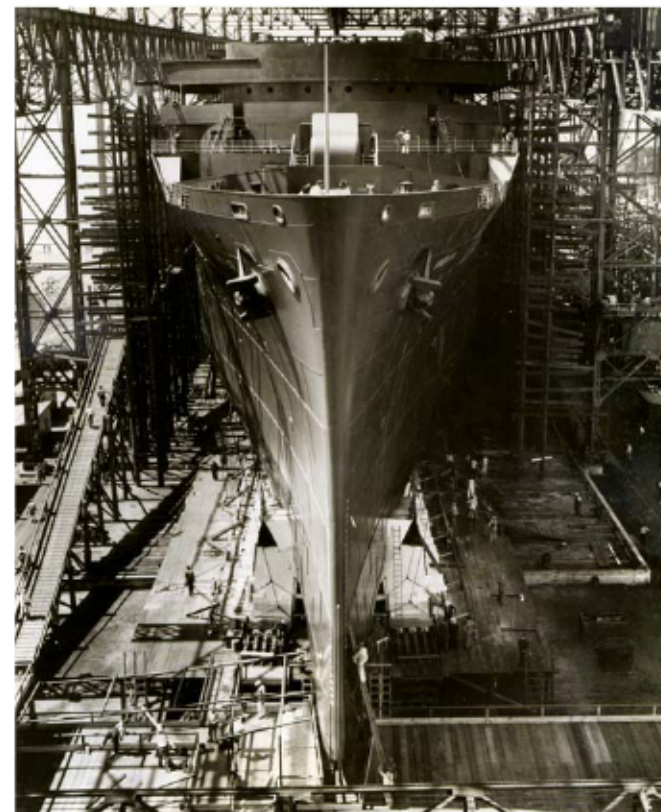
Her conversion completed, the second *West Point*



The hull of SS *America* begins to take shape on 1 September 1938.

SS *America* nears her launching date at Newport News Shipbuilding during August 1939. The start of World War Two was only days away.

sailed for New York as an element of Transport Division 5 and, on 16 July, anchored off the Staten Island quarantine station where she loaded aboard 137 Italian citizens and 327 Germans, former members of those nations' closed consulates in the United States. Bound for Portugal, *West Point* got underway at 3:00 pm on the afternoon of the 16th and arrived, after an uneventful voyage, in Lisbon on the 23rd. While there, the ship was visited by Portuguese naval and diplomatic dignitaries and transferred supplies to USCG *Ingham* (WPG-34), a Coast Guard Cutter on Lisbon station. Maintaining a "strict gangway watch," *West Point* debarked her passengers, the last passenger leaving the ship on the 24th. The



Smashed ashore on the Canary Islands, SS *American Star* was being ripped apart by the relentless pounding of the Atlantic Ocean.