

AMERICA's Model



Numerous models of the SS AMERICA – in a wide range of scales and degrees of accuracy - have been created over the past 65+ years. But the biggest, most accurate and imposing model of the vessel was constructed at the Mariners' Museum model shop while the ship was being constructed just a scant few miles away.

Like the famous ship itself, AMERICA's Model has experienced a long and interesting history, involving a surprising amount of travel and several renovations; the last of which was by far the most extensive and the most interesting. This is the story of **AMERICA's Model** and of **Paris Aiken**, a skilled model maker who was entrusted in 1981 to restore the model; but in a decidedly unusual venue.

The story of the model's beginnings is intimately entwined with Newport News Shipbuilding, the Mariners' Museum and the Great Depression. In 1929, NNS President Homer L. Ferguson learned that the then-principal owner of the Newport News shipyard (Archer M. Huntington, son of the yard's founder – who, unlike his father, was a philanthropist, rather than an industrial baron) was giving away a sizable part of his fortune to create museums. Ferguson, long infatuated with the sea, proposed that Mr. Huntington found and endow a nautical museum in the Newport News area.

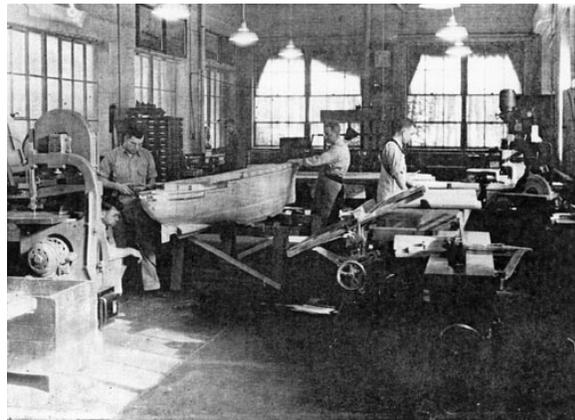
Ferguson, most likely, was also thinking of yet another way to help the local economy; already reeling from the dearth in shipbuilding activities after World War One. The shipyard had been reduced to a bare minimum of employees during the 1920's; less than 5,000, most of who toiled on industrial work largely unrelated to shipbuilding. And, of course, the dominantly blue-collar, industrial town that Newport News Shipbuilding dominated then – and still does – was in great need of additional cultural and recreational resources.

In 1930, such a museum was chartered: "Devoted to Culture of the Sea and its Tributaries, its Conquest by Man, and its Influence on Civilization". Mr. Huntington poured considerable funds into this project, located in the rural countryside of what was then Warwick County; several miles northwest of the shipyard. Eight hundred and eighty acres were acquired, a 167-acre lake was created, and an imposing museum structure (much expanded over the ensuing years) was constructed. Archer Huntington also wisely insisted that Mr. Ferguson serve as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the now world-famous Mariners' Museum.

In 1932, even before the museum was unceremoniously opened to the public in October 1933, a well-equipped model shop was installed in a service building adjacent to the museum's Main Exhibition Hall to facilitate the creation of unusually large and highly detailed ship models for display. The staff for this model shop was largely drawn from the craftsmen ranks of the shipyard. A number of highly detailed models were built there during the 1930's. Understandably, many were large-scale replicas of ships (and even working models of machinery) previously built by Newport News Shipbuilding.

After NNS was awarded a contract in 1937 for what was then the largest passenger liner ever built in the United States, a model of that vessel was undertaken in late 1938. The statistics associated with that project, even by today's standards (and particularly in light of the fact that all drawings were laboriously created by hand), are impressive. This model of what once was known simply as NNS Hull Number 369 (by late 1938 the name AMERICA had been selected) was built to the unusually large scale of ¼ inch per foot (the ship's 723 foot overall length resulted in a model slightly longer than fifteen feet).

Because the ship's actual construction plans were made completely available to the museum's model builders, an extremely accurate – and splendid – replica resulted. Five of the museum's most experienced modelmakers toiled for five and one-half months, expending over 5,000 hours of loving labor.



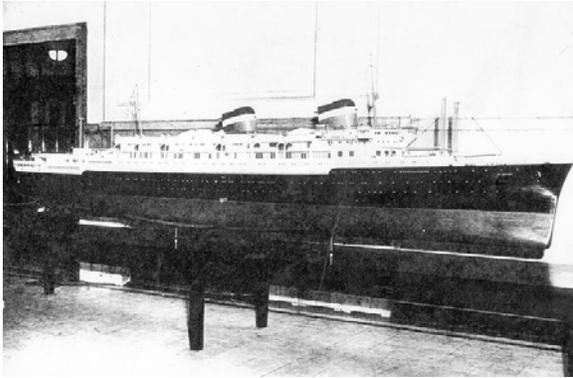
The hull of the model was made of white pine, laminated in one-inch thick 'lifts' (i.e., horizontal layers) and then hollowed out to reduce weight. Even so, the model weighted over 600 pounds when completed. Wood also was utilized to form the superstructure, smokestacks, rudder and lifeboats. The miniature deck planks were made of the same Oregon pine with teak margins as was used in the ship itself. Metal was used for many of the small fittings, such as blocks, king posts, railing stanchions and cargo booms.

The twin propellers were made of polished brass. The museum's modelmakers developed their own patterns, dies and jigs for every component of the model. Items such as anchors, lifeboat davits and deck machinery were cast from metal in the model shop's own foundry. The level of detail they created was – and is – simply exquisite. For example, the wheelhouse windows are made of glass, and the interior of that space was fitted with navigating equipment, steering wheel and engine order telegraphs; mirroring in miniature the AMERICA's bridge. And all carefully crafted by hand.

It is not clear if the model was originally intended to just be a museum exhibit. What is known is that agreement was reached to display the model at the New York World's Fair in 1939 for an unknown period of time. In order to complete the model by the end of April of that year, all other work in the museum's model shop was set aside temporarily.

By April 25th, the model was completed and shipped to New York. There is no record that US Lines paid for the model or if it was a gift, or just a long-term loan. But it is known that the shipyard compensated the museum in the amount of \$6,386.66 for the model in June of 1939. In today's dollars, that would equate to approximately \$90,000.

But, as indicated in this photograph, the model did not accurately reflect the ship in its 1940 'as-built' condition. Faithfully built to the shipyard plans available in 1939, it featured those 'squat stacks' that had to be raised fifteen feet on the ship itself for



operational reasons. Less noticeable, the paint scheme applied to the ship (between the black hull and the white superstructure) was slightly different and less 'art deco' than the original paint scheme envisioned – as shown on the model. Obviously, returning the model to the Mariners' Museum for such modifications would not have been cost-effective. Or even possible, for on May 1, 1939, the museum's model shop was closed forever.

The model of the SS AMERICA was the last of fifteen very accurate and skillfully made replicas that were constructed there. By that time, the United States Navy was rebuilding, after two decades of neglect following World War One, partly funded by depression recovery funding, and Newport News Shipbuilding became a large part of that effort. The craftsmen-turned-model builders returned to the waterfront to participate, and to provide both inspiration and instruction to thousands of fledging shipbuilders.

The model was shipped in a specially built pine box on a dedicated shipyard truck to New York City, where it initially was placed on exhibit in New York's Pennsylvania Station. It was then moved to the American Express exhibit space at the World's Fair on June 19, 1940. At the conclusion of the Fair's second season, the intricately detailed model was exhibited for a brief period of time in Chicago's Union Station. One can only assume these several venues were selected in support of US Lines' considerable promotional efforts on behalf of the grand addition to their fleet in mid-1940.

The model then was moved to US Lines' headquarters at One Broadway, just blocks away from the pier that served AMERICA as her home base. It remained there until November of 1942, when it was moved to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, NY. Although not recorded, it is fairly easy to surmise that the model was relocated to help inspire the hundreds of cadets who passed through that institution during World War Two; perhaps at the suggestion of the Superintendent of the USMMA. That position was held by none other than Captain Giles Stedman, the AMERICA's first Master! Stedman also served briefly as Executive Officer on the ship after her hurried conversion to become a troop transport (the USS WEST POINT) in June of 1941.

In February of 1946, arrangements were made for the model to be returned for exhibit at the museum, which – coincidentally – is the same month that the USS WEST POINT was decommissioned and returned to NNS for conversion back to a luxury liner. But the model didn't languish very long at the museum. Between October 13th and 18th of that year, the model was displayed in the corner showroom of the Newport News Furniture Company in what was then the center of downtown activity. The City of Newport News was celebrating the 50th anniversary of its incorporation, and – at that time – the AMERICA was the latest and greatest example of the nation's commercial shipbuilding expertise.



While the model was on display that October, NNS craftsmen were working overtime just two blocks away, putting the final touches on the brilliantly restored AMERICA prior to her triumphant return to her home port of New York in November and entry into transatlantic passenger service shortly thereafter. Again, in apparent support of their post-war promotional efforts, US Lines again asked to display the model at their One Broadway headquarters office.

Before granting that request, the museum staff arranged for the model's smokestacks to be raised at the NNS model shop. Apparently, the incorrect paint scheme was not changed at that time, based on photos of the model at that time with the taller smokestacks. For a number of years, the model resided at One Broadway in a museum-like setting while the AMERICA enjoyed the pinnacle of her peacetime success.

But, in 1964, the AMERICA, which was at NNS for annual voyage repairs, was taken out of service and sold foreign. Having no further apparent use for it, US Lines arranged for her scaled replica to be returned to the museum; arriving there on October 30, 1964. That was the last time the model and the ship were in close proximity, for two weeks later, the AMERICA (renamed AUSTRALIS) sailed for the last time from her birthplace.

In April of 1965, AMERICA's Model received general refurbishing (including the much belated change to the paint scheme and some other, minor details) at the shipyard's model shop before being returned to its 'birthplace' – the Mariners' Museum. Just before the model was moved to the museum, it was photographed at NNS with – one must assume deliberately – the shipway where the ship itself was constructed in the background. After all, shipbuilders are a sentimental lot.

After years of residing in numerous other venues, AMERICA's Model was placed on public display at its birthplace, along with one of the ship's nameboards, removed in 1964 when she was sold foreign and presented to the museum by US Lines. At this time, an appraisal indicated the model's tangible worth as \$10,000. But, of course, it was (and is) irreplaceable at almost any price today.



By 1981, the model was in need of repairs. The paint was ‘checked’ and peeling in numerous places on the hull, superstructure and stacks. The rigging had deteriorated, and separation and warping of numerous wooden items had occurred. But the shipyard’s model shop, due to its workload, was unable to assist, and the museum’s model shop had been closed for decades. The only active model making underway at the museum was in a demonstration booth, manned by volunteers.

Exactly what transpired next is not recorded, but one of those volunteers answered the museum’s urgent call; a man who was still working at the time for a marine engineering firm in the Newport News area. In addition to an avocation of model making, he had been a master model maker for 13 years in the NNS model shop (plus several additional years elsewhere). Further, he was one of the seven charter members of the Hampton Roads Ship Model Society. In due course, after what must have been some very interesting discussions amongst museum staff members, a contract was signed between The Mariners’ Museum (*the Museum*) and **Paris R. Aiken** (*Conservator*) in late 1981.

The contract, all of one and one-half pages long, specified – in very general terms – a complete restoration of the model (identified as museum artifact MD-69) over a one-year period, at a cost not exceed \$4,200. The contract further indicated that the museum’s ‘wall to wall’ insurance would apply to both transport risks and the time the model would reside in the conservator’s model shop. Apparently, no high official at the museum or the insurance carrier worried, or perhaps even knew, that the ‘conservator’s model shop’ so grandly referred to in that contract was Paris Aiken’s garage!

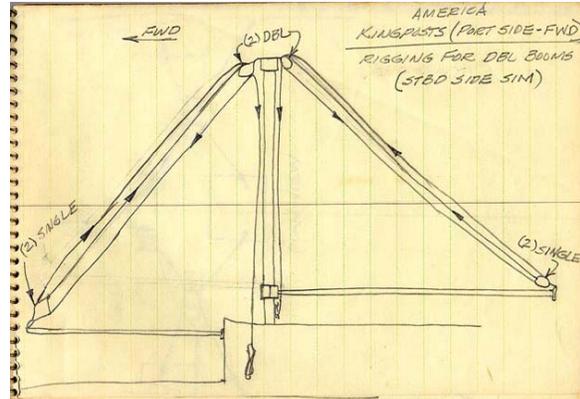
Which looks, today, much like it did in 1981.

On December 24, 1981, the model was carefully moved from the museum to Paris’ home and installed in this garage, bow first. What an unusual Christmas that must have been. One can easily imagine a neighboring child showing off his new bike to his chums, and being told: “That’s nothing, you ought to see what Mr. Aiken got!”

At that time, only the two youngest of the Aiken’s six children - both teenage girls - lived at home, so Paris was spared the torment and trouble of curious little fingers being attracted to his project. According to his wife, Helen, the children always took their father’s model work in stride, and didn’t see anything so very strange about having a huge model in their garage.



Actual work on the model commenced on January 11, 1982. But before dismantling any portions of the model, Paris and his good friend and fellow model enthusiast, Marvin Bryant, took a number of photos and made sketches of the rigging. Sketches such as this one, along with a detailed, step-by-step description of the work fill the pages of a standard, spiral-bound stenographer's notepad; all in Paris' neat, all capitals' printing style.



Model builders are all pretty meticulous by nature, and by necessity. Bill Clarke, long-time HRSMS member, says he never saw Paris angry, and of all the meticulous model builders that Bill ever knew, Paris (and his co-worker on this project, Marvin Bryant) were the most meticulous of all. But being so precise, in this case, had its price. The work took 26 months instead of the originally projected twelve. This extended time period probably was due, in part, to the fact that all the work on the model took place at nights and on weekends. All in all, they expended 1,000+ hours on the task.

Faithful to their project, Paris and Marvin did not change any details – except one. The original lifeboat covers were originally only represented by painting. They felt it would improve the model if the covers were made more like actual lifeboat covers. So they painstakingly created real canvas covers for the eight-inch long lifeboats; all hand-stitched.

From the detailed description he left behind, Paris apparently found more work needed to be done than originally envisioned. His notes indicate that the entire hull had to be stripped down to bare wood; something probably not envisioned originally.

A number of other difficulties were also recorded, for they found that not only were major parts of the model's superstructure firmly glued in place, they were also secured with countersunk screws. These fasteners, most of which were puttied and painted over, were therefore extremely hard to locate.



In this 'progress' photo (one of about two dozen taken), the overhead garage door is behind the model, and the home's fuel oil furnace is to the starboard side of the model, amidships. Some of the model's normally hidden construction details (and materials) are apparent in this image.

This next view shows, for the first time since the model was painted in 1939, the model's hull 'lifts' exposed. In this view, the model has been turned (in a garage far narrower than the model is long). The photo is date-stamped on the back as "January 1983". Unfortunately, how they accomplished what must have been a difficult - and nervous - feat with what was obviously a top-heavy and irreplaceable artifact is not recorded.



Paris' description of conditions found, and techniques used and developed in the course of restoring AMERICA's Model is quite literally a master's thesis for model restoration work. But it will not make any best seller list, being very matter-of-fact and without embellishment or humor. Except for one passage, near the end of the write-up:

"Reassembly is where we could have used more photos; because no matter how many were taken there were some items that couldn't be clearly seen. We used our memory and common sense and had no parts left over."



Certainly, no one could fault him for being a little euphoric and inserting a little dry humor in his otherwise very bland report at the conclusion of the project in March of 1984. On the 22nd of that month, the model was 'redelivered' to the museum, without ceremony, apparently, where it resides today. Carefully blocked up, cushioned and braced, the model was put into the middle of an otherwise empty moving van. It must have been one of the more unusual moves ever for Virginia Transfer & Storage, but their bill only indicates a charge of \$75.00 for three hours of labor @ \$25.00 per hour.

What kind of man would undertake such a project? Much less, who would be entrusted with such a valuable artifact by a museum dedicated to preserving its precious treasures?

Paris Aiken was born in 1920 on the Virginia Peninsula, and lived most of his life there. After graduating from Newport News High School in 1939, he went to work in the local shipyard. Feeling the threat of a draft (the army's), he volunteered for the navy. While a member of the ship's company of the USS BRECKINRIDGE (DD 148), he returned briefly to Newport News in 1943 to marry. After the war, he and Helen settled in a comfortable neighborhood a few miles from the shipyard and raised their six children. His family fondly remembers him as being quiet, reserved, and, in Helen's words:

"Just a good man".

A large part of his working life was spent at NNS; over half of that time in the yard's model shop. Paris also worked on models for two other companies, and ended his career by working most of a decade for a marine engineering firm. It was during the time of this last employment that his avocation and widely acknowledged skill for working on models resulted in his undertaking the job of restoring AMERICA's Model. Paris passed away unexpectedly in 1990, only four years after retiring. Fittingly, just prior to being suddenly taken ill, Paris and some of his model-building cronies had sailed up the Chesapeake Bay to attend a model society meeting.

His model-making peers remember him as outgoing, friendly and helpful to all. John Cheevers, shipbuilder by profession and model maker by avocation, recalls making several 'pilgrimages' to Paris' garage to check on progress. John vividly remembers how astonished he was when he learned that Paris was determined to retain the brass finish on the tiny rims of the model's hundreds of portholes. Paris painstakingly masked each one, even inventing a way to make it a little easier, before repainting the model.

In this final illustration, Paris is seen putting the finishing touches on a 1/32 inch per foot model of the SS UNITED STATES in 1952. Charlie Wingfield, who worked in the shipyard's model shop with Paris then, remembers how patient his lifetime friend and associate was, even when it came time to produce several duplicate models such as this. Bill Fox, naval architect and maritime historian, recently and succinctly summed up his association with Paris Aiken thus: "Paris was a great guy and friend, and someone whose modeling ability I greatly admired."



And so, thanks to **Paris Aiken** and his friend Marvin Bryant, an exquisitely restored replica of what once was America's biggest and best luxury liner now resides in the Mariners' Museum's Great Hall of Steam. Along with other replicas of famous ships from a bygone era – AMERICA's Model materially helps fulfill the museum's original charter. But that's what such museums are for, after all, to allow us to visit, remember, reflect on and celebrate our past. And on the kind of craftsmanship that Paris embodied.

Bill Lee
March 2005

Postscript

In the words of S. B. Besse, supervisor of the Mariners' Museum model shop when AMERICA's Model was created: "There is probably no inanimate object that provides more fascination than the model. This is true of almost any model, if reasonably well built. It is simply the appeal of small scale reproduction, the exquisite workmanship, and the fact that the entire object can be viewed from any angle which can seldom be done with the real subject."