

## Ships Named for Presidents

An occasional series by David A. Kent

### SS President Polk/Taylor

The histories of ocean liners named for presidents can become very tangled, because the shipping lines that owned them were constantly building new ships which they wanted to be named for the most popular presidents. That often meant renaming older ships for less important residents of the White House.



One of the many ships built for the U.S. merchant marine in the wake of World War I was *SS Granite State*, constructed at New York Shipbuilding in Camden, New Jersey in 1920. Like many ocean liners of the era, she offered mixed passenger and cargo service, with rooms for 128 passengers and nearly 440,000 cubic feet of space in her holds. Upon completion she was assigned to the United States Lines and operated in the North Atlantic. In 1922 she was sold to the Dollar Steamship Lines and transferred to the Pacific. As was its custom, the Dollar lines changed her name to that of a president, James K. Polk. *SS President Polk* operated in round-the-world service for nearly two decades, although making her voyages primarily in the Pacific. In 1938 the Dollar Steamship Lines failed, and its ships were sold to the newly-created American President Lines, which, as its name implies, kept the presidential names of the ships. In 1940 the American President Lines decided to build a new liner which it wanted to name *SS President Polk*, so our vessel was renamed *SS President Taylor*, for the nation's twelfth president, who died in office in 1850 without having achieved much.

Her commercial service came to a quick halt when World War II was declared. The Army, however, needed ships to fortify islands in the Pacific, and it soon chartered the ship, loaded it with troops, and she set sail with the civilian crew. Their destination was Canton Island in the central Pacific. Canton is named for an American whaling ship that ran aground there in the 19th Century, but was still uninhabited well into the 20th Century. Both Britain and the U.S. claimed the island in the 1930s, and soon agreed to share it. When Pan-American World Airways pioneered passenger flights across the Pacific in the late 1930s, it built a refueling base on Canton Island. Its business, too, stopped quickly when the war began, but the Army recognized the value of an aviation refueling base in the middle of the vast ocean, and also knew that it must keep Japan from using the island. *SS President Taylor* left San Francisco on Jan. 27, 1942 with 1,124 officers and men to establish a garrison there.

The ship arrived off Canton on Feb. 14 and began unloading her passengers and equipment. Escorting destroyers thought they detected submarines in the area, and warned the ship to move closer to the shore. "Closer" proved too close, and rough Pacific waves soon pushed her onto a coral reef at the edge of the island. With no salvage equipment available at that remote spot, they were unable to save the ship, whose remains are still visible just off the shore of the island.