In the Name of Liberty

The J.A. Jones Shipyard of Brunswick, Georgia, was one of 18 shipyards throughout the United States to produce Liberty ships during World War II. These massive cargo ships were designed to be constructed quickly and cheaply, providing continual replacements for the Merchant Marine fleet as ships were lost to German and Japanese attacks. The Liberty ships are credited with providing a vital lifeline of food and war material to the Allies' global war effort.

There were over 2,700 Liberty ships built between 1941 and 1945. And although it might seem a minor detail, one of the problems that the United States Maritime Commission faced in constructing such a large number of ships was deciding how to name them. At first, the ships were named for prominent Americans who made contributions to U.S. history and culture like the SS Patrick Henry, SS George Washington Carver, and SS Daniel Boone. After the first one hundred were produced, the task became more difficult. The Maritime Commission began naming ships after people from all walks of life, regardless of race, gender, or rank. There were ships named for artists, explorers, politicians, scientists, Merchant Marine heroes, and war correspondents killed on duty, even for the famous U.S.O. club, the Stage Door Canteen.

In the end, the only guideline truly followed in naming Liberty ships was that the person had to be deceased. Only one mistake was ever made, and it was a happy one: the SS Francis J. O’Gara was named for a man believed to have perished in a Japanese submarine attack, but who would return home after the war from a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.

This month’s images show the launching of the Liberty ship SS James B. Duke by his daughter, Doris Duke, at the J.A. Jones Shipyard. James Buchanan Duke was a founder of the American Tobacco Company and Duke Energy Company. He and his family were also major benefactors of Duke University. Doris Duke inherited the bulk of her father’s estate in 1925, and the press dubbed her “the richest girl in the world.” When America entered World War II, Doris took a particular interest in aiding the war effort. At the time she traveled to Brunswick to christen the James B. Duke, she was training in New Orleans for work in the United Seaman’s Service. She also donated books to be placed aboard the ship named for her father.

Since its founding in 1965, the Coastal Georgia Historical Society’s archival collection has grown to over 15,000 historically important artifacts, documents, and photographs.