

SS *President Taft* (1920)

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SS President Taft was launched as one of the "state" ships, *Buckeye State*, completed by the United States Shipping Board as cargo passenger ships after originally being laid down as troop transports. *Buckeye State* had been laid down as *Bertrice* but was converted and renamed before launching. Originally assigned to the Matson Navigation Company as the Shipping Board's agent, the ship was later renamed *President Taft* and assigned to Pacific Mail Steamship Company for operation. In 1925 the Shipping Board sold the ship to Dollar Steamship Company. *President Taft* was operated by Dollar and then its successor American President Lines until requisitioned by the War Department on 17 June 1941.

President Taft was renamed and operated as **USAT *Willard A. Holbrook*** throughout World War II. In the closing days of the war the ship was undergoing conversion to an Army hospital ship with the proposed name of *Armin W. Leuschner* but the conversion was suspended in August 1945 and the name *Willard A. Holbrook* maintained. The reconversion into a troop transport was modified to one suitable for transporting dependents with the ship then transporting dependents from Europe post war.

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History

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| Name: | <i>Buckeye State</i> (1920–1922) <i>President Taft</i> (1922–1941) <i>Willard A. Holbrook</i> (1941–1947) ^[1] |
| Owner: | United States Shipping Board (1921–1922) Pacific Mail Steamship Company (1922–1925) Dollar Steamship (1925–1938) American President Lines (1938–1941) War Department (Army) (1941–1947) ^[1] |
| Operator: | Matson (1921–1922) Pacific Mail Steamship Company (1922–1925) Dollar Steamship (1925–1938) American President Lines (1938–1941) United States Army (1941–1947) ^[1] |
| Builder: | Bethlehem Steel Company, Sparrows Point ^[1] |
| Yard number: | 4181 ^[1] |
| Laid down: | as <i>Bertrice</i> ^[1] |
| Launched: | 24 July 1920 ^[2] |
| Sponsored by: | Mrs. H. B. Miller ^[3] |
| Completed: | April 1921 as <i>Buckeye State</i> ^[1] |
| Identification: | U. S. Official Number: 221233 ^[1] |
| General characteristics | |
| Class and type: | USSB Design 1029, "535" ^[1] |

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|-----------|---|
| Tonnage: | 14,123 GRT ^[4] |
| | 13,000 DWT ^[1] |
| Length: | 535 ft (163.1 m) LOA ^{[1][2]} |
| | 517 ft (157.6 m) BP ^{[1][4]} |
| Beam: | 72 ft (21.9 m) ^[2] |
| | 72 ft 2 in (22.0 m) ^[4] |
| Depth: | 27 ft 8 in (8.4 m) ^[4] |
| Decks: | 4 ^[4] |
| Speed: | 17.5 knots (20.1 mph; 32.4 km/h) ^[3] |
| Capacity: | 256 first and 320 third class passengers ^[5] |
| Crew: | 209 ^[3] |

Construction and design

The ship was laid down as a Design 1029, later known in the trade as 535's for their overall length, troop ship at Bethlehem Steel Company's Sparrows Point, Maryland yard with the prospective name *Bertrice* for the United States

Shipping Board (USSB).^{[1][6]} In 1919 the ship was renamed *Buckeye State* and, due to peace and the fact construction had not progressed too far for change, converted while under construction to a passenger liner.^{[1][7]} *Buckeye State* was launched on 24 July 1920, sponsored by Mrs. H. B. Miller, wife of Assistant Manager of Construction, Emergency Fleet Corporation, Philadelphia.^{[2][3]}

By May 1926 Dollar was acquiring, over opposition, ten 535s from the USSB.^[8] Opponents cited the low price paid for the ships, as well as opposition based on a single company controlling so much Pacific shipping, but the price was the result of the ships being of a design not being the best for commercial operation.^[9]

USSB/Matson liner *Buckeye State*

Buckeye State, with sister ship *Hawkeye State*, was assigned to Matson Navigation Company for operation on a rental basis of \$140,000 per month.^{[2][10]} The ships were to be engaged in a route from Baltimore via Havana and the Panama Canal to San Francisco taking fourteen to fifteen days and then on the regular six day Matson route to Honolulu.^[6] The entire round trip cycle for each ship was to be seventy days with the two ships maintaining a thirty-five day sailing schedule.^[6] *Buckeye State* was severely damaged by fire in June 1921 with a repair contract let to Standard Shipbuilding, Shooters Island, New York for \$19,000.^{[11][12][13]}

President Taft

The Shipping Board renamed its "state" liners for United States presidents with a revised listing in May 1922, changing a number of names that had just been issued so that several ships had three names within as many months, with *Buckeye State* being renamed *President Taft*.^{[14][15]} Considerable confusion was caused due to an initial list with different names; for example, with *Lone Star State* being first renamed *President Taft* and then within weeks changed again to *President Harding*.^{[15][note 1]}

Pacific Mail Steamship Company operation

President Taft was allocated to the Pacific Mail Steamship Company in August 1922 to begin operation in September out of San Francisco.^[16] The USSB, citing "faulty construction," undertook refurbishment of twenty-three of the 535s including *President Taft* which was to have a boiler and engine overhaul at Moore Drydock Company, Oakland, California.^[17] The ship's interior decor, including furniture, draperies and upholstery was refurbished or replaced.^[18] Along with a number of other 535s the ship's refrigerated cargo space was increased by approximately 17,000 cubic feet (481.4 m³) to 21,000 cubic feet (594.7 m³).^[19] In addition to refurbishment *President Taft* was "fitted with the maximum of oriental steerage."^[19]

President Taft and four sister ships, *President Cleveland*, *President Lincoln*, *President Pierce* and *President Wilson*, began service from San Francisco to Honolulu, then Yokohama and Kobe, Japan, Shanghai and Hong Kong, China and Manila, Philippines with sailings every two weeks under the slogan "Sunshine Belt To The Orient".^{[20][21]} From 6 March to 8 July 1924 the ship was overhauled at the Mare Island Navy Yard at a cost of about \$400,000.^[22] After reconditioning with Coen burners for the boilers the ship reduced fuel consumption on the San Francisco—Honolulu run from an average of about 5,000 barrels (794.9 m³) to 3,272 barrels (520.2 m³).^[23] In 1924, off the coast of Japan, *President Taft* rescued forty from the British tramp steamer *Mary Harlock* of which twenty reached safety in their own boat and another twenty, too weak to make that trip, were rescued by crew from the *President Taft*.^[24]

By January 1925 ten "President" liners were being operated by two companies as agents for USSB with five by the Admiral Oriental Line operating as the American Oriental Mail Line and the five, including *President Taft*, being operated by Pacific Mail under the name of California Orient Line.^[25]

Dollar Steamship Company & American President Lines ownership

By May the five Pacific Mail ships were being sold by the USSB to the Dollar Steamship Line for a total of \$5,625,000 with each ship selling for \$1,125,000.^{[26][27]} In a meeting following the sale of the five trans Pacific ships Pacific Mail Steamship Company stockholders voted to accept the offer of the W. R. Grace and Company for its remaining ships and goodwill.^[28] Dollar acquired all ten of the "President" liners operated by the two companies by mid 1926.^[8]

Dollar placed *President Taft* on its trans Pacific service and added Los Angeles to the ports visited on return voyages before arrival back at San Francisco in 1927.^[29] Captain M. C. Cochrane, 35, died aboard on 9 September 1927 after a sudden and short illness and was buried at sea by his request before the ship reached Seattle.^[30]

The Dollar Steamship Company, along with other Dollar companies and the ships were acquired by the United States Maritime Commission in an Adjustment Agreement on 15 August 1938 in which stock in the line was transferred to release \$7,500,000 of the line's debt.^[31] *President Taft* was among those transferred to the new American President Lines in which the Commission had invested \$4,500,000.^[31]

The new line would restore the Dollar line's "Round the World" service with refurbished ships meeting new safety regulations with *President Taft* getting approximately \$75,000 of below water line work and \$100,000 for other work that included refurbishing crew quarters and boiler work.^[32] *President Taft* was assigned to the New York-Pacific Coast-Asiatic service.^[33]

Army Transport *Willard A. Holbrook*

President Taft was requisitioned from American President Lines in San Francisco by the War Department on 17 June 1941, for compensation of \$1,057,002.^[34] The ship, as USAT *President Taft*, made two trips to Manila by way of Honolulu and Guam and other voyages to Hawaii and Alaska until September when converted for additional troop capacity and renamed *Willard A. Holbrook* in honor of Major General Willard Ames Holbrook.^[35] On 4 October 1941 *Holbrook* departed San Francisco with elements of the 19th Bombardment Group, 30th Bombardment Squadron of the 7th Bombardment Group and 93rd Bombardment Squadron for Manila arriving on 23 October.^[36]

Pensacola Convoy

Holbrook embarked the 147th Field Artillery Regiment and 148th Field Artillery Regiment, less one of its battalions, for a total of 2,000 troops at the San Francisco Port of Embarkation and departed 22 November 1941 escorted by the heavy cruiser USS *Pensacola* for Hawaii due to arrive in the Philippines 4 January 1942.^[37]^[note 2] On 30 November the transport left Honolulu for her third Army trip to Manila joining an enlarged convoy still escorted by the *Pensacola*, officially designated Task Group 15.5, but known commonly as the *Pensacola* Convoy.^[35]^[38]^[39]^[note 3] The convoy departing Hawaii consisted of four transports and three freighters with the escort augmented by the sub-chaser USS *Niagara*:^[40]



USAT *Willard A. Holbrook* in Australia.

Transports:

- USAT *Holbrook* transporting troops
- USS *Republic* transporting troops
- USS *Chaumont* transporting aircraft, munitions and general supplies
- USAT *Meigs* transporting aircraft, munitions and general supplies

Freighters:

- SS *Admiral Halstead* general cargo, some peacetime commercial goods
- MS *Bloemfontein* Dutch flag with passengers and cargo, some destined for Java and China
- SS *Coast Farmer* general cargo, some peacetime commercial goods

The convoy was taking a southern route, avoiding the Japanese Mandated Islands in the central Pacific, due to approach the Philippines via Port Moresby, New Guinea.^[40] The convoy crossed the Equator on 6 December, holding the largest Army Shellback initiation to that time, and got news of the Pearl Harbor attack at 1100, 7

December, convoy time.^[40] The convoy improvised defenses, including painting the ships gray while underway, with reports of Japanese activity in the Ellice Islands only some 300 miles away and the Navy ordered a stop at Suva, Fiji Islands while the convoy's destination was reconsidered.^[40] At Suva additional weapons were extracted from ship's cargo with *Holbrook's* Army Ordnance men finding their 75-mm ammunition and improvising sights and mounts for use of their artillery as deck guns.^[41] They also improvised pipe mounts for .50-caliber aircraft guns found in cargo for use as defense.^[42]

Meanwhile, the convoy's fate was under discussion at the highest levels with an initial decision by the Army and Navy to bring the convoy back to reinforce Hawaii questioned by President Roosevelt with the result the convoy was ordered to proceed to Brisbane, Australia on 12 December arriving safely on 22 December.^[38] Resupply of the Philippines was still being considered and the two fastest transports of the convoy, *Holbrook* and *Bloemfontein* were selected to attempt the run to the Philippines.^[43] However; almost all cargoes had to be unloaded and redistributed, including troops had their organic weapons and supplies and then reloaded.^[43] *Holbrook* was reloaded with the two field artillery units.^{[44][45]} *Chaumont* was again carrying naval supplies.^[43] There was initial difficulty with *Bloemfontein* as the master noted the ship's obligation was completed with discharge of cargo in Australia but the Netherlands government arranged for the ship to continue as far as Soerabaja, Java with the 26th Field Artillery Brigade and Headquarters Battery and 1st Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery.^[43] The ships assigned the task of taking the convoy's redistributed cargoes, including assembled aircraft, north on 28 December.^{[45][46]} Japanese advances in the Netherlands Indies isolated the Philippines and pushed the defending forces into Bataan and plans were changed.^{[46][47]} *Holbrook* was ordered to put into Darwin, being built up as an advanced air base and port, where on arrival 5 January 1942 the troops debarked and supplies were unloaded.^{[46][47][note 4]}

Remainder of wartime service

The Army command arriving with the *Pensacola* Convoy formed the core of what became the Southwest Pacific Area command (SWPA), initially as United States Army Forces in Australia (USAFIA), with that command quickly requisitioning ships that included those from the convoy for local Army fleet service.^{[48][note 5]} The commanding general, USAFIA, notified superiors he was retaining *Holbrook* in Australia along with a number of other large vessels.^[49] The ship was temporarily retained until other suitable shipping, particularly acquisition of twenty-one Dutch vessels, allowed release of several of the large ships, including *Holbrook* which did not become a part of the Army's permanent SWPA fleet.^[50]

Holbrook was operating between Brisbane, Melbourne and Fremantle in February thus escaping the air attack on Darwin 19 February 1942 that sunk convoy mates *Meigs* and *Admiral Halstead*.^{[35][47]} The ship departed Fremantle on 22 February in convoy MS.5 escorted by USS *Phoenix* that was bound for Colombo, Ceylon with troops and supplies eventually destined for India and Burma.^[51] The convoy was composed of *Holbrook*, the Australian transports *Katoomba* and *Duntroon* with two ships attempting to deliver fighters to Java—MS *Sea Witch*, carrying twenty-seven crated P-40 fighters, and USS *Langley* with assembled fighters.^{[51][52]} *Sea Witch* and *Langley* broke from the convoy in an unsuccessful attempt, during which *Langley* was sunk, to deliver the aircraft to Java during the Japanese invasion.^[53] *Phoenix* was relieved as escort by HMS *Enterprise* and the convoy safely made port.^[54]

Holbrook and *Duntroon* were to return to Australia in convoy SU-4 under escort by HMS *Cornwall*; however, a Japanese fleet was sighted and *Cornwall* was instead ordered to join Admiral Sir James Somerville's fleet.^[55] Instead the convoy left Bombay on 4 April and arrived at Colombo, Ceylon on 8 April 1942 during which time the Japanese attack on Ceylon known as the Easter Sunday Raid had taken place and *Cornwall* had been sunk at sea.^{[55][56]} The convoy onward to Australia, now composed of *Holbrook*, *Félix Roussel* and *Duntroon* escorted by the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Chitral*, now had to pass through dangerous waters in which Japanese fleets might be in the Indian Ocean and submarines were being sighted in Australian waters and even the German auxiliary cruiser *Thor* was in the area.^[57] During the voyage *Félix Roussel* had picked up the distress signal of SS *Nankin* reporting a raider and aircraft, then "abandoning ship" with silence thereafter.^{[58][note 6]} The convoy arrived safely at Fremantle on 14 May 1942.^[58]

In June 1942, with stops at Adelaide, Sydney and Wellington, the ship returned to Los Angeles and then San Francisco.^[35] In San Francisco *Holbrook* underwent repairs lasting until November 1942 after which the ship returned to the South Pacific.^[35] The ship's next voyage was to Hawaii, Nouméa, Fiji, Guadalcanal (where the Guadalcanal Campaign was in its final stages) and then Efate before returning to the United States in February 1943.^[35] After three trips to Australia in 1943 with return to San Francisco for major repairs in January 1944 before returning to the South Pacific for stops at Guadalcanal and Auckland. Departing from Seattle in April 1944 the ship transited by way of Honolulu and Funafuti to the Southwest Pacific theater supporting transport operations at Townsville, Australia and Finschhafen, Milne Bay, and Hollandia, New Guinea with a return to the United States in November before once more heading to the Southwest Pacific.^{[35][note 7]}

Holbrook was selected for conversion to become the hospital ship tentatively named *Armin W. Leuschner* and transited to Mobile, Alabama arriving in March 1945 at the Alabama Drydock Company.^[35] The end of the war resulted in that conversion being halted August 1945 and the ship being completed as a troopship in January 1946, with the name *Willard A. Holbrook* restored.^{[35][59]} On arrival at New York another conversion to a transport suitable for carrying 763 dependents at Todd Shipbuilding Company.^[35] *Holbrook* began voyages to Europe for that purpose in March 1946.^[35]

Layup and scrapping

The War Department delivered the ship on 8 March 1948 for layup in the Hudson River and on 28 July 1948 the ship was moved to the James River Reserve Fleet where on 12 December 1949 the ship was declared surplus.^[34] On 21 October 1957 the ship was sold for \$265,780 to Bethlehem Steel and withdrawn from the reserve fleet for scrapping 29 October.^[34]

Footnotes

1. Previous lists had shown *Buckeye State* becoming *President Roosevelt*. There is some indication in journals, including earlier issues of the cited *Nautical Gazette* (May 13, 1922, page 591), that during the period between original and revised lists ships were reported operating under names that were revised.
2. USS *Republic* had also embarked troops at SFPOE: 2,630 men and equipment of 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery Regiment, the 7th Bombardment Group and 48 Army Air Corps officers.
3. Seen in some Army sources as the *Republic* convoy for the senior vessel in convoy, USS *Republic*, as Army tended to