

Background Information

Throughout WWII, ship imagery was printed on mass produced postcards in order to celebrate American naval power. These postcards provide strong historical insight into past cultural values, however they also display trends of skewed naval importance and biased historical memory. While postcards are often analyzed as reflections of cultural values, little research has explored the connection between these cultural trends and archival history.

This research project poses the question: **Do dominant depictions of WWII ships in postcards correlate to their prominence in historical memory and archival documents?** This question is explored in an online exhibit created for Florida State University's Postcard Archive, a digital platform developed to preserve and study historic postcards. My Exhibit explores the visual differences in depictions, printing styles, and naming practices of two broad categories of WWII ships — warships and cargo ships.

This project stemmed from a postcard already located within the archive, C-2 Cargo Vessel (figure 2). The postcard's caption provides limited identifying information about the cargo ship it depicts, referring to it only as one of 47 ships in its fleet. Further efforts to identify the ship's name and naval history yielded limited and difficult to access information buried in government archives and maritime reports.

Methods

- A convenience **sample of six WWII-era postcards** was selected for this exhibit (4 warships and 2 cargo ships). One cargo ship postcard was already in the archive, while the remaining postcards were acquired and digitized.
- Digitizing the new cards involved **digitally scanning, transcribing printed and handwritten text, and creating Dublin Core metadata entries.**
- To add the postcards to the archive, each card was digitally scanned, handwritten or printed text was transcribed, and descriptive Dublin Core metadata entries were created.
- Research on these postcards was conducted using an inductive coding scheme, an exploratory research method in which patterns and themes emerge from raw data. Visual analysis of the naval postcards revealed distinct, recurring visual and textual features that display consistent **patterns of dominance amongst warships.**
- These patterns were then cross-compared to archival records for each ship's documented history. In most cases, cargo ship postcards required extensive searches through government and maritime archives to first identify the ship's name.

Warship Postcards

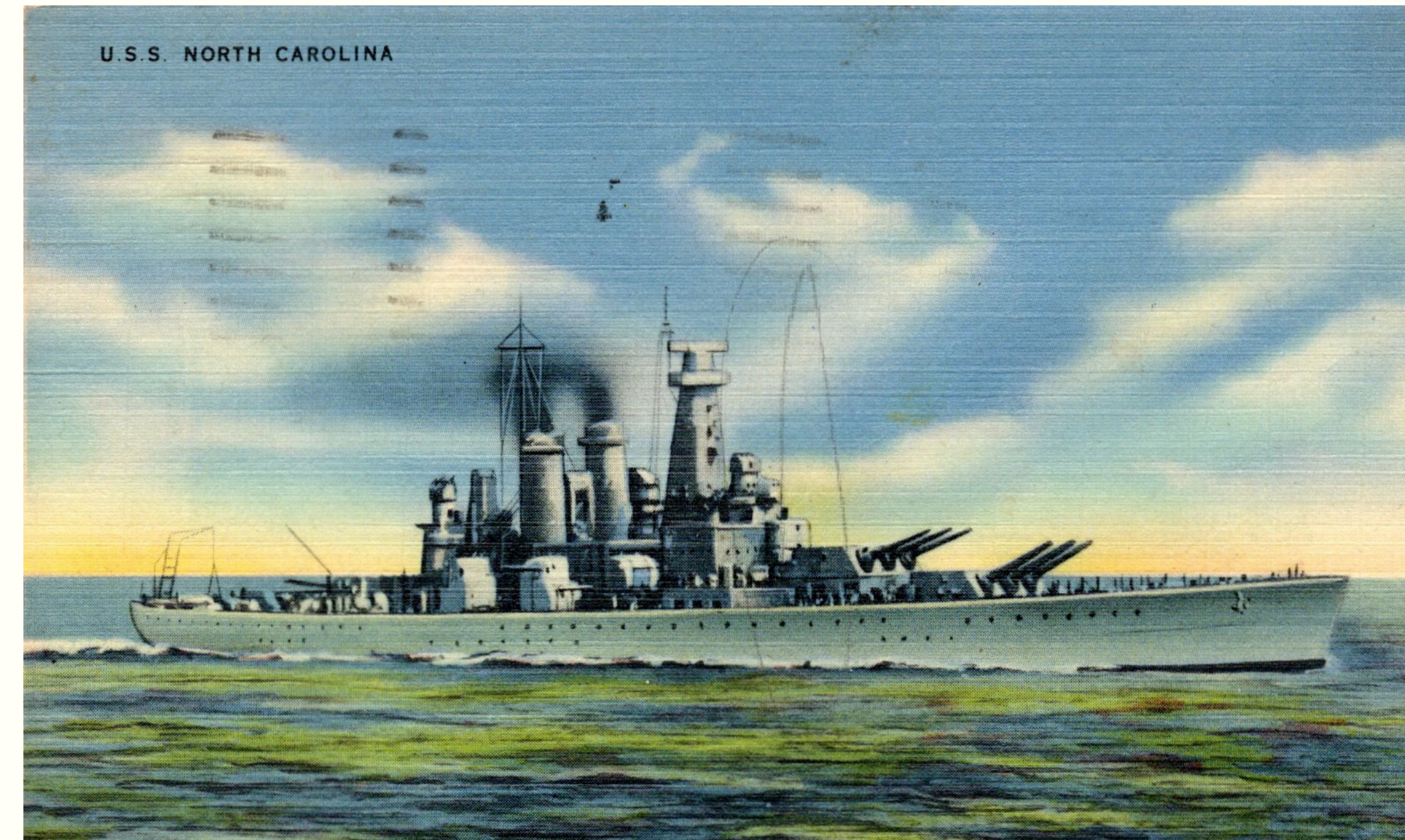


Fig. 1 USS North Carolina postcard front

Name: USS North Carolina

Type: C2-S-AJ5 General Cargo - Break bulk

Fate: Restored as a National Historic Landmark

The U.S.S. North Carolina is preserved in government archives and cemented in popular culture. The warship has its own website, Wikipedia page, and extensive coverage in government archives and historical reports. It was **preserved as a floating museum** due to its popularity in North Carolina, which shows how historical values can shape naval memory. After the war, **schoolchildren launched a "Save Our Ship" campaign to prevent the warship from being scrapped.** These funds were used to purchase it, and eventually turn it into a World War II memorial in 1962.

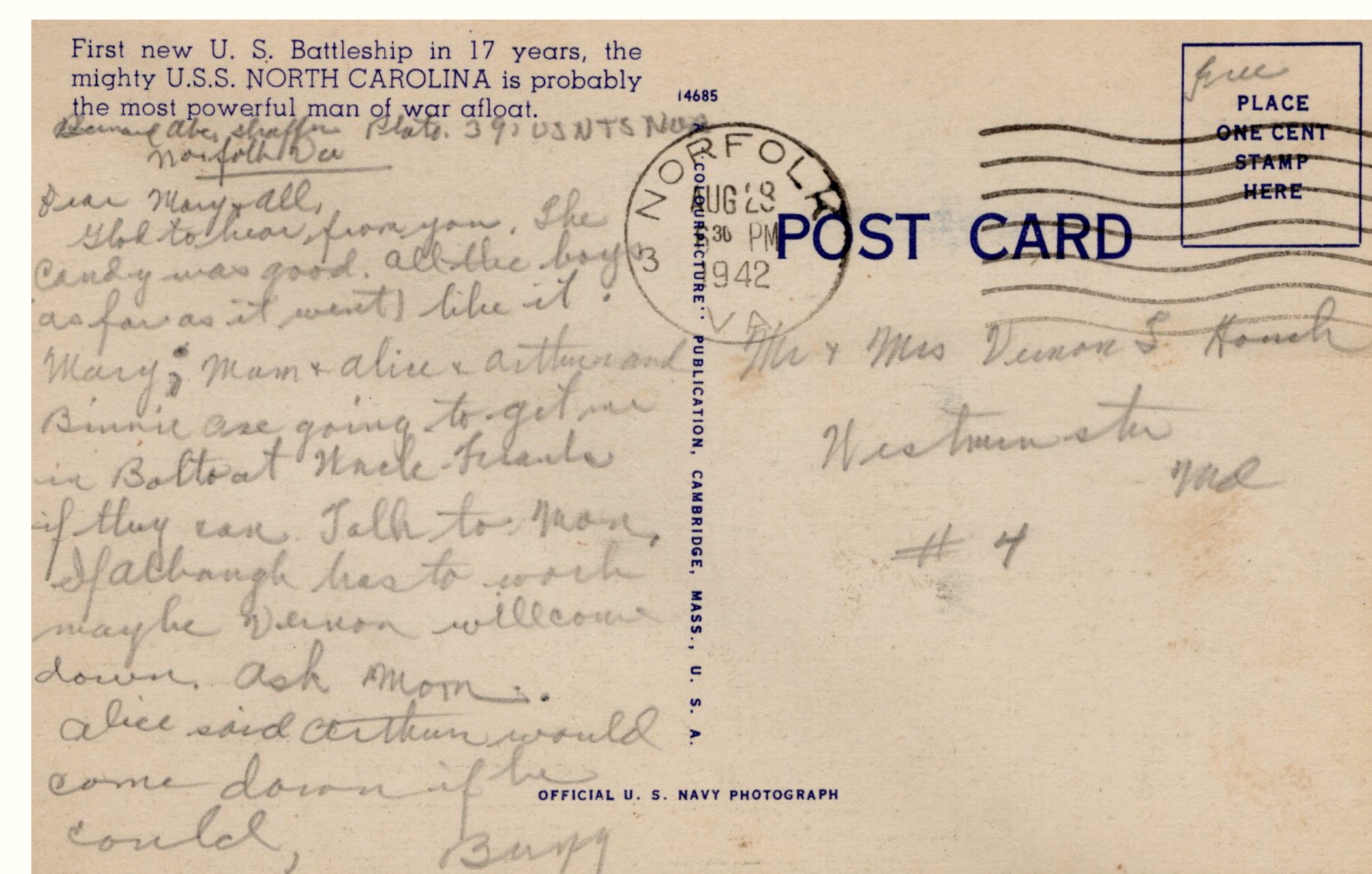


Fig. 3 USS North Carolina postcard back

Printed text :

- **Individualizes and specifically names** the "mighty U.S.S. NORTH CAROLINA."
- Uses **dramatic language that highlights the ship's power:** "most powerful man of war afloat."

Handwritten text :

- "free" written in place of a stamp shows that this letter is soldier mail, dated to August 28th, 1942.
- During WWII, postage was free for troop members in order to promote morale.

Cargoship Postcards



Fig. 2 C-2 Cargo Vessel front

Name: American Shipper

Type: C2-S-AJ5 General Cargo - Break bulk

Fate: 21/12/74 sank 50nm north of Luzon, 21 dead.

MARAD vessel database — the most comprehensive registry for retired support vessels — **lists her fate simply as "Transferred - Foreign,"** which ignores the latter half of this ship's history, including her 1974 sinking. Additionally, the entry for American Shipper lacks images, even though images are readily available. Furthermore, it lists **"There is no historical narrative for this vessel at this time."** While not inherently problematic, this website provides one of the few "detailed," public government entries on the American Shipper.

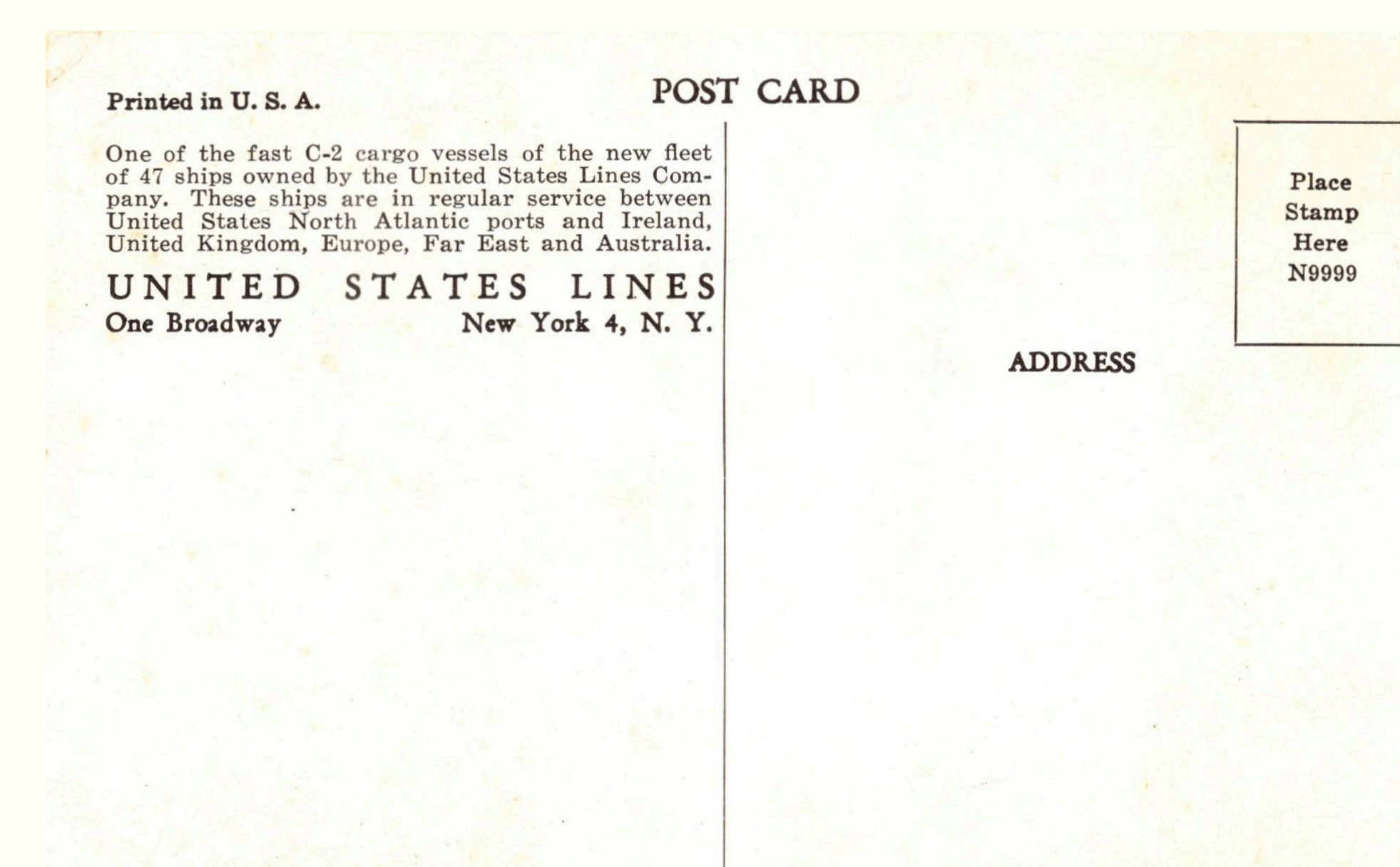


Fig. 4 C-2 Cargo Vessel back

Printed Text :

- The printed text **generalizes this cargo ship to its fleet** by only referring to it as one of 47 new ships owned by the United States Lines Company
- The postcard doesn't list the ship's name; it's referred to as a C-2 cargo vessel -- showing prioritization of technical displays over identity and narrative.

Results

- **Depiction styles:** 4/4 warship postcards were illustrated, while 2/2 of the cargoships postcards were photographed.
- **Naming practices:** 4/4 warship postcards visibly displayed the ship's individual name. While 0/2 cargo ship postcards featured a printed name.
- **Archival records:** 4/4 warships had widely available historic records from government agencies and historical societies. Meanwhile, 0/2 of the cargo ships had a detailed historical narrative in government and maritime archives.
- **Physical preservation:** 1 out of the 4 warships was preserved as a historic museum (USS North Carolina), while 0 out of 2 cargo ships were preserved. Notably, the **preservation of historic ships is uncommon;** only 58 Navy ships have been converted into museums.

Conclusion & Discussion

Ideally, this research would have included a larger sample of cargo ship postcards; however, these images are uncommon compared to warship postcards. This disparity in production reflects the period's cultural values, which emphasized the power of warships over the support of cargo ships. While this sample is limited in scale, the **postcards display a pattern in which battleships are elevated above cargo ships.** This pattern of dominance is evident in the greater recognition given to warships in **historical records, postcard circulation, and naming patterns.** Although cargo ships also held a valuable, and oftentimes dangerous role in the war, they are not afforded these same recognitions. Instead, they are rarely named, preserved, or otherwise remembered in public historical records. Beyond archival value, these postcards also reveal the biases in historical remembrance by showing how **cultural values and popular media — like postcards — can shape what we know about naval history.**

References

- United States Lines, "[C-2 Cargo Vessel]," Postcard Archive @ Florida State University. <https://fsucardarchive.create.fsu.edu/admin/items/show/14291>.
- U.S. Navy, "U.S.S NORTH CAROLINA," Postcard Archive @ Florida State University. <https://fsucardarchive.create.fsu.edu/admin/items/show/19123>.
- Winkler, David F. 2013. "Bring Historic Ships Back into the Fleet." Proceedings 139 (2): 1,320.