

Student Resources for Jack Heaney & the Interior Design of the NS Savannah

Born on May 26, 1904, in Glasgow, Scotland, Jack Heaney studied naval architecture at the University of Glasgow, attended the Glasgow School of Art, and completed a seven-year apprenticeship at the Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Company, Ltd.



NS Savannah dining room. Photo courtesy of Terry Tilton.

In 1926, Heaney immigrated to New York City. He subsequently became a United States citizen in 1931. He worked a series of odd jobs before joining the naval architecture and marine design firm of George G. Sharp Inc in 1937. At Sharp's firm, Heaney worked on ship interior design and exterior styling for various steamships including the Robin Line (1937-1939 and 1946-1947) and the Delta Line (1945-1947).

In 1947, Heaney opened his own design firm on West 54th Street in Manhattan under the name John Heaney (the firm was later renamed Jack Heaney and Associates). In 1950, the firm moved to Beekman Place in New York City, and in 1954 to Wilton, Connecticut. Similar to his work under George G. Sharp, Heaney's new firm specialized in marine interior design and exterior styling, and their projects included a wide array of commissions from many of the notable cargo-passenger ship lines and companies. The firm also took on land-based planning and design projects including the design of an aluminum stacking chair for Treitel-Gratz Co. of New York. Heaney's aluminum-stacking chair, the "Aluma-Stack", was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art as part of its 1947 "Useful Objects" exhibition.



NS Savannah stateroom. Photo courtesy of Terry Tilton.

Heaney was married to Tui Anderson from 1927 until her death from illness in 1934. In 1950, Heaney married his George G. Sharp associate JoAnne (Joan) B. Steane.

Heaney's most noteworthy project was on the NS *Savannah*, the first nuclear powered cargo-passenger ship. The ship was built in the late 1950s following United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1955 proposal to construct a nuclear-powered merchant ship as a symbol of his "Atoms for Peace" program.



The actual interior of the Savannah lounge. Compare it to the renderings by Jack Heaney and George Sharp.



Painting illustrating a design for a lounge aboard a "nuclear powered passenger cargo ship" most likely the NS SAVANNAH. Sticker in lower right corner reads, "Ship designer: George G. Sharp Inc. Interiors by: Jack Heaney and Associates." George G. Sharp Collection, SSHSA Archives



Design of the interior of the ship needed to match it's sleek exterior. It was a sleek, modern Atomic Age styling. Since the reactor occupied the center of the ship and required clear overhead crane access during refueling, the superstructure was set far back on the hull. Jack Heaney and Associates designed the raked, teardrop-shaped superstructure for a futuristic appearance, decorated with stylized atom graphics on either side.

"B" Deck contains the ship's kitchen and the dining room. The dining room seats 75 and features a curved wall sculpture entitled "Fission" by Pierre Bourdelle. The overhead light fixtures are screened with brass bands representing stylized atoms. The lighted, sculptured wine rack behind the bar is meant to be a representation of the trilinear table of the elements.



Interior design of the NS Savannah lobby. Photo courtesy of Terry Tilton.

The construction of the NS *Savannah* was authorized in 1956 by the United States Congress as a joint project of the Atomic Energy Commission and the Maritime Administration of the Department of Commerce. The Maritime Administration awarded the design contract for the ship to the naval architectural firm George G. Sharp Inc. in April 1957. Later that year, Sharp subcontracted with Jack Heaney and Associates, first, to design the ship's exterior, and, in December 1957, Heaney signed a contract with Sharp for the interior design and decoration of the vessel.

The NS *Savannah* was built in 1958 and launched on July 21, 1959. The ship took her maiden voyage in August 1962 and made her first transatlantic voyage in June 1964, operated for the government by the American Export Isbrandtsen Lines. The Savannah sailed the globe for the next eight years, logging more than 450,000 miles — the equivalent of sailing around the world 21 times, without ever refueling. Experts said a regular ship at that time on the same trip would have burned 29 million gallons of fuel.



NS Savannah veranda. Photo courtesy of Terry Tilton.



The NS *Savannah* was deactivated in 1971 and became a National Historic Landmark in 1991. In 2008, the ship was docked in the Port of Baltimore, Maryland. The decommissioning — a ship's formal retirement — will remove the rest of the N.S. Savannah's nuclear systems and allow the U.S. Maritime Administration, also known as MARAD, to terminate the ship's license. The process is expected to take more than a year and be completed between October 2023 and September 2024. The ship's future remains unclear. Once all the nuclear components are removed, the Maritime Administration will donating it, use it for artificial reefing, or offer it for recycling.

Jack Heaney died in November 1972. In 2010, his wife gave his papers to the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. The bulk of the collection dates from the late 1930s to the 1960s and includes Heaney's design drawings and renderings, photographs of ship interiors, as well as some ephemera, miscellaneous business records, and personal papers. Notably, the collection includes drawings, photographs, clippings, and ephemera related to Heaney's work on the design of the NS *Savannah*, the first nuclear-powered cargo-passenger ship, built in the late 1950s.

Questions for Further Thought

1. What colors did Jack Heaney choose for the lobby? How did it differ from the veranda? Why do you think he chose those colors?
2. Explain the similarities and differences in the design of the lounge compared to the final product. Why do you think the colors changed?
3. What illusions did Jack Heaney create with color given the examples of this work?