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Save the SS United States, before it's too late

Leaders should unite and save this irreplaceable national treasure, giving it the new life it deserves, here in the birthplace of America.



Susan Gibbs and Jorge Gonzalez look up at the SS United States ocean liner at Pier 82 in Philadelphia on Friday, July 23, 2021. Gibbs' grandfather, William Francis Gibbs, was the self-taught naval architect ... [Read more](#)
HEATHER KHALIFA / Staff Photographer

by Susan L. Gibbs, For The Inquirer
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Philadelphia is home to many symbols that represent the heart of our nation, from Independence Hall to the Liberty Bell. In 1996, the city welcomed yet another iconic symbol of America's unconquerable spirit. Rising above Pier 82 in South Philadelphia, "America's Flagship," the SS United States, has become a beacon of hope that gathers people together to appreciate its amazing story.

It is fitting that the city that birthed our nation is home to the only ship emblazoned with the name United States. But this historic Philly symbol is now in grave danger.

Without notice, the vessel's landlord doubled its rent during the coronavirus pandemic from \$850 per day to \$1,700 per day, placing extreme financial strain on the [nonprofit that owns the ship](#). It is now under threat of being evicted or scrapped. With a legal fight underway, our elected officials need to step up.

If this truly is a state that wants to "[GSD \(Get Stuff Done\)](#)," and we are committed to creating jobs and revitalizing communities, we must act quickly to save the SS United States.

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For decades now, America's Flagship has been awaiting a rebirth, holding enormous potential to take its place among this city's premier landmarks. Recently, a transformative [design and financial plan](#) was announced that reimagines the iconic ship as an exciting multiuse complex and world-class destination. The commercially viable plan would repurpose the ocean liner with a 1,000-key hotel, numerous food and beverage destinations, multiple event venues, acres of public green space, galleries, and a world-class museum.

The epitome of “Made in America,” the SS United States smashed the transatlantic speed record on its maiden voyage in 1952 using only two-thirds of its power. It made [its maiden eastbound crossing](#), a distance of 2,942 miles, in three days, 10 hours, and 40 minutes. It beat the previous record held by the Queen Mary over approximately the same course by 10 hours and 2 minutes. On its maiden westbound crossing, it again bested the Queen Mary, thus making it the first American ship in 100 years to capture the coveted Blue Riband, awarded to the fastest transatlantic ocean liner. Amazingly, it still holds the record today. The SS United States has crossed the ocean with four U.S. presidents and countless world leaders, famous figures, servicemen and women, tourists, and immigrants.

At a time when all eyes will be on Philadelphia as it celebrates our country’s 250th birthday and draws people from all over the globe for the FIFA World Cup in 2026, the loss of the SS United States is unimaginable.

The redevelopment project would create thousands of new jobs, attract visitors from across the country and around the globe, and potentially generate millions in annual tax revenue through real estate, payroll, sales, and lodging taxes.

Gov. Josh Shapiro, Pennsylvania's General Assembly, Mayor Cherelle L. Parker, PhilaPort leadership, and other officials have an opportunity to seize the moment and realize the enormous economic potential associated with saving this symbol of America.

At its core, the SS United States has always been a Philadelphian. It was the lifelong dream of Philly native William Francis Gibbs, my grandfather, who aimed to build the world's fastest and safest ocean liner. He succeeded with support from the U.S. Navy and a public-private partnership with the U.S. government that ensured the engineering marvel could also serve as a top-secret troopship.

It took vision to create our country. It took vision to create the SS United States. We need another visionary to make America's Flagship a renewed source of pride and economic vitality for the people of Pennsylvania.

The late broadcast journalist Walter Cronkite, a former passenger himself, was right when he believed that the ship's rehabilitation would restore American pride and that [neglecting the ship would be a "crime against history."](#)

The SS United States' connection to Philadelphia was solidified further in 2010, at a time when the ship would have been doomed without the generosity of the late Philadelphia philanthropist Gerry Lenfest, who helped ensure It would stay afloat.

It has waited at its Philadelphia pier long enough. In the “get stuff done” spirit, leaders should unite and save this irreplaceable national treasure, giving it the new life it deserves, here in the birthplace of America.

Susan L. Gibbs is the SS United States Conservancy’s president and a founding board member. She is the granddaughter of William Francis Gibbs, the SS United States’ designer, who directed plans for more than 60% of the nation’s wartime fleet during World War II and designed over 6,000 ships during the course of his career.

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