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America's flagship issues SOS

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Captain Joe Weatherby sinks ships for a living, preserving impressive, hulking behemoths like the Vandenberg for use as artificial reefs and underwater classrooms.



Provided photo

The SS United States measures nearly 1,000 feet long and is currently docked in Philadelphia.

But the project that could be the biggest job of his career is one Weatherby doesn't want to do.

The SS United States, a 990-foot testament to American history and industry, sits rusting at its dock in Philadelphia, much like the Vandenberg sat in Virginia's James River before its final tour of duty at the bottom of the ocean off Key West.

But the SS United States is different. A nonprofit conservancy is working feverishly to save the ship and convert it to a "mixed-use development complex that could include a museum, hotel, retail space, tech space, event space and office space," said Susan Gibbs, executive director of the SS United States Conservancy and the granddaughter of the lauded ship's designer, the late William Francis Gibbs.

"We envision a preservation project much like what was done with the Queen Mary in Long Beach, California and the Rotterdam in the Netherlands," Susan Gibbs said Wednesday, adding that the conservancy will consider proposals from any waterfront municipality, state or county interested in the

ship's potential. "So far, plans for New York have advanced the furthest, but we're agnostic as to the location."

The basic description of the ship's length — 990 feet — does not begin to do it justice, or to accurately describe the vastness of this engineering marvel that broke — and still holds — the trans-Atlantic speed record on her maiden voyage in 1952. The SS United States is 100 feet longer than Titanic, and was able to travel nearly as fast in reverse as forward given its aluminum construction. The ship carried four U.S. residents and one particularly famous old woman with a priceless smile: Mona Lisa. The 460-year-old painting traveled aboard the SS United States en route to a special exhibit in America in 1963.

William Francis Gibbs spent 40 years designing "the perfect ship" and was interrupted in his obsessive pursuit by two world wars. He wanted the vessel to be fireproof and as such prohibited any wood from being used in its construction. The only wood found on board was in the Steinway grand pianos in her parlors, which were made with a rare, fire-resistant mahogany, and the butcher blocks in the ship's galleys, which turned out 9,000 individual meals per day.

The ship was also designed, in the post-World War II mindset, to be converted quickly into a troop transport vessel and could carry 15,000 troops 10,000 miles without refueling. That use was never needed, but the SS United States carried plenty of celebrities on every voyage, including Elizabeth Taylor, Marlon Brando, Walter Cronkite, Salvador Dali, Walt Disney, Marilyn Monroe, Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly, John Wayne, and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

Time and tide have literally worn away some of the old ship's former majesty and dulled her luster, but the vessel remains structurally sound and all asbestos has already been removed, Gibbs said. "There is so much space on the ship and so many things that can be done with it," Gibbs said. "I've taken architects on tours, and their eyes just widen at the amount of space and possibilities. It's honestly 500,000 square feet of prime, floating, waterfront real estate and we want to re-activate the ship's economic potential."

But such projects take time and money and both are in short supply for America's flagship, which retired from official service in 1969, then was passed to a handful of different owners before the Conservancy was able to purchase it outright in 2011, thanks to a transformative gift of \$5.8 million from philanthropist and businessman H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest. "We've resisted naming a specific dollar amount that we need, but we do need a significant and sustainable revenue stream," Gibbs said Wednesday. "We're hoping to raise enough money for six months' worth of carrying costs, so we're not in this same position in two months. Our board meets at the end of this month, and hopefully we'll stay afloat. We have issued the SOS, but have certainly not abandoned ship."

The contract with Weatherby's company for reefing emphasizes that "reefing" the ship would be done only as a last resort and as an alternative to scrapping.

"The conservancy is fighting the good fight," Weatherby said. "I'm only in position in case scrapping the ship becomes the only option. I don't want to see such a staggering piece of American history turned into razor blades. The folks at the conservancy don't either, and they liked what we've done with these former military ships in getting the veterans who served aboard them involved in the reefing project, paying trib

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