

OPINION

Saving an icon of the American century

By [Dan McSweeney](#)

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The SS United States will be transformed into a waterfront entertainment center & museum.

Photo: AP

Earlier this month, some fellow preservationists and I became the owners and stewards of a unique American artifact — the legendary ocean liner SS United States. Now comes the hard part.

We've got 20 months to establish a public-private partnership to redevelop the vessel to serve as a multipurpose stationary attraction, featuring hospitality, dining, entertainment amenities and a world-class museum on an urban waterfront. Thus far, New York, Philadelphia and Miami have expressed interest. We have launched an initial capital campaign of \$1 million to meet critical pre-development costs and have created some great giving opportunities, including our "Plank Owner" program.

In spite of her groundbreaking design and innovative engineering, in my mind the real importance of the ship is symbolic. Launched in 1952 — the middle of the “American Century” — this vessel took on legendary status almost immediately.

She broke the transatlantic speed record in both directions on her maiden voyage from New York to Europe by the greatest margin in history. (That record still stands, 59 years later.) The top political, military and entertainment figures of the day regularly sailed aboard her, along with everyday Americans and immigrants to our shores. She became the living embodiment of America’s post-World War II industrial might.

For these reasons and more, the ship looms large in the minds of many supporters across the country and world. We’ve recently heard from almost every state in the union, as well as well-wishers in Europe, New Zealand, Australia, Korea and many other foreign ports. (It was a generous donation by philanthropist Gerry Lenfest that let us take the dramatic step of buying the ship outright.)

On the day we took title of the vessel, a European journalist asked me some basic but pointed questions: Why am I involved? Is this a patriotic effort? Why is the ship so important?

In answering, I was reinforced in my belief that we must never abandon the effort to successfully preserve this irreplaceable American icon.

As we walked the ship’s stripped decks and climbed her grand staircase (now bare), there was a palpable sense of wonder in the hardboiled reporters I escorted. They intuitively understood the symbolic power they were observing.

Yes, this is an American thing, but it’s so much more. It’s a way for Americans to honor our past and to learn lessons from it that have global implications in the Information Age.

The question is not “Why would we want to save this old ship?” The question is, “How could we not?”

Dan McSweeney, a former active-duty Marine officer and native New Yorker, is a co-founder and executive director of the SS United States Conservancy. His father im migrated from Scotland to work as a crew member aboard the SS United States.