



"How can there be such a dismal ending for such a great ship?" Zachary Fisher asked of the USS Intrepid, which

Supporting Our Ships

Gerry Lenfest's critical support of the SS *United States* belongs to a long and uniquely American tradition: private, voluntary support for museum ships. To be sure, many other nations maintain seagoing vessels as public museums. Typically, though, these museum ships are historic naval vessels that are preserved with government funding. The United States is exceptional in the breadth and variety of nonprofit efforts to acquire, preserve, and showcase historic vessels.

Private donors have preserved, restored, and put on display whalers, steamers, schooners, and sloops; paddle boats, fire boats, tugboats, and ferry boats; icebreakers and bathyscaphes, brigs, yachts, and barques. Of course, Americans also fund the preservation of a wide range of historic fighting ships. Battleships, cruisers, destroyers, frigates, PT boats, and scores of submarines: in cities from coast to coast, private citizens take it upon themselves to preserve and promote their country's naval vessels.

Consider aircraft carriers. In the United States, private, voluntary efforts support five

nonprofit carrier museum ships: two on the Atlantic, two on the Pacific, and one in the Gulf of Mexico. (In contrast, there are only two carrier museum ships outside the United States; the Indian Navy maintains the INS *Vikrant* in Mumbai, while a Chinese company runs an amusement park and casino on the former Soviet carrier *Minsk* in Shenzhen.) Every year, millions of Americans tour the USS *Hornet* in Alameda, California; the USS *Intrepid* in Manhattan; the USS *Lexington* in Corpus Christi; the USS *Midway* in San Diego; and the USS *Yorktown* in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina.

As Cold War-era carriers are decommissioned, private donors have stepped forward to preserve them. Most recently, in May, the Rhode Island Aviation Hall of Fame—a nonprofit working to bring the USS *John F. Kennedy* to port in Narragansett Bay—reported a 1:1 challenge grant of \$100,000 aimed at jumpstarting their fundraising efforts. A local businessman (who wishes to remain anonymous) put up the money to turn the carrier into a family attraction and education center.



thanks to his efforts, is now a sea, air, and space museum—and New York City's second-most-popular museum.

In all of these efforts, the motivation is similar. Take the late Zachary Fisher. In 1976, Fisher was shocked to learn that the Navy was planning to scrap the *Intrepid*. He knew that the *Intrepid* had fought in the Marshall and the Caroline Islands, in the Battle of Leyte Gulf, and at Okinawa. She was credited with sinking or damaging nearly 300 Japanese ships—including 2 of the Imperial Navy's largest battleships—as well as the destruction of over 600 enemy aircraft. She went on to serve three combat tours off the coast of Vietnam, and twice served as the NASA recovery ship for the Mercury and Gemini space programs.

“He was told [the *Intrepid*] was going to be decommissioned and sold as scrap metal,” recalls Kenneth Fisher, a great nephew of Zachary. (Please see *Philanthropy's* interview with Ken and Tammy Fisher on pages 47–54.) “That infuriated him because this was a ship that was part of history. He said, ‘That’s ridiculous. That can’t be allowed to happen.’” So Zachary Fisher intervened. He was a builder, a partner at Fisher Brothers, one of New York City’s premier real estate

developers. After touring the ship in Philadelphia, he vowed to save the ship—and rebuild her.

It proved tough sailing. First, Fisher had to convince the Navy to sell the carrier to a private foundation. (It was the first such sale and required an act of Congress.) Then, he had to convince the city of New York to rewrite its building codes. (Inspectors originally treated the ship as a seven-story building laid flat on its side.) He opened the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum to the public in August 1982, making the *Intrepid* its centerpiece. During the museum’s first few years, Fisher poured millions more into the museum, struggling to keep the ship’s finances afloat.

Today, with more than 915,000 visitors annually, the *Intrepid* is the second-most-visited museum in New York City. Its future looks secure, but only because of questions that bothered one person. “Zach used to ask, ‘How can there be such a dismal ending for such a great ship?’” says Ken Fisher. “He wanted to know, ‘How can we cut up our own history for razor blades?’”