

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Rules

BILL: SB 1656

INTRODUCER: Senator Burgess

SUBJECT: Designation of the Official State Flagship

DATE: February 23, 2026

REVISED: _____

| | ANALYST | STAFF DIRECTOR | REFERENCE | ACTION |
|----|----------------|----------------|-----------|--------------------|
| 1. | <u>Bellamy</u> | <u>Proctor</u> | <u>MS</u> | Favorable |
| 2. | <u>White</u> | <u>McVaney</u> | <u>GO</u> | Favorable |
| 3. | <u>Bellamy</u> | <u>Kruse</u> | <u>RC</u> | Pre-meeting |

I. Summary:

SB 1656 amends 15.0465, F.S., to redesignate the state flagship. Instead of the current state flagship, the schooner Western Union, the bill designates the S.S. American Victory, as the official state flagship.

The bill is not expected to impact state or local government revenues and expenditures.

The bill provides an effective date of July 1, 2026.

II. Present Situation:

Florida State Symbols

Chapter 15, F.S., designates official state symbols. State symbols represent the state's heritage and natural treasures. To date there are over 30 designations, including numerous animals and plants; an anthem, song, and motto; several cultural events; and a flagship—the schooner Western Union.¹

The Western Union Schooner

In 2012, the Florida Legislature designated the schooner Western Union as the state's official flagship.² When designated as the official state flagship, the Western Union was one of the oldest working wooden schooners in the United States.

The Western Union is a 130-foot historic sailing vessel of the tall ship class. Construction of the ship began in Grand Cayman, but it was completed in Key West and first launched on April 7,

¹ Section 15.0465, F.S.

² Chapter 2012-158, Laws of Fla.

1939. The schooner is made of yellow pine and mahogany. For 35 years the schooner served as a cable vessel for the Western Union Telegraph Company, repairing underwater cables throughout the Keys, Cuba, and the Caribbean. Since retiring, the schooner was used as a charter boat in various events.³

After 1973, the schooner was bought, sold, and finally donated to a not-for-profit called the Schooner Western Union Preservation Society, Inc. (SWUPS). Their mission was “to restore and maintain the historic vessel to benefit the local community and for education and outreach programs.” SWUPS has faced numerous challenges, however. In 2011, the 130-foot schooner underwent a million-dollar restoration project; the vessel’s ability to sail, however, was short-lived and the ship soon fell into disrepair.⁴ SWUPS is facing an estimated \$5 million restoration costs as the historic vessel currently is dry-docked in a boyard, “being eaten away by the elements.” The riggings and masts have been removed and many of the planks on the side of the vessel are gone as well.⁵

The ship remains the official flagship of Key West and it is on the National Register of Historic Places.⁶

S.S. American Victory

The S.S. American Victory is a merchant marine vessel used to deliver cargo and troops around the world in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.⁷ After serving three wars, the ship went through a \$2.5 million restoration in June 1985. In October of 1996, Captain John C. Timmel learned the S.S. American Victory was earmarked for scrap if not acquired for memorial purposes and saved the ship. The ship now sits by the Florida Aquarium in Tampa, Florida; where it has been for over 20 years.⁸ Out of the 534 Victory ships made between 1944 and 1946, the S.S. American Victory is one of only three left, with the other two on the West Coast of the United States.⁹ The S.S. American Victory is on the National Register of Historic Places and now cared for by the American Victory Ship and Museum, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization.¹⁰

³ Analysis of HB 395 (2012), Comm. on State Affairs, The Florida House of Representatives, available at <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2012/395/Analyses/h0395c.SAC.PDF>.

⁴ Brad Bertelli, KeysWeekly, *Keys History: Historic Schooner Dry Docked on Stock Island Has Seen Better Days* (May 3, 2024), <https://keysweekly.com/42/keys-history-historic-schooner-dry-docked-on-stock-island-has-seen-better-days/> (last visited Jan 20, 2026).

⁵ Timothy O’Hara, Keysnews.com, *Faded Glory: Schooner Western Union is far from its glory days* (Feb. 3, 2021), https://www.keysnews.com/news/local/schooner-western-union-is-far-from-its-glory-days/article_b447e974-64b8-11eb-b286-8ff5a3dd85c6.html (last visited Jan. 20, 2026).

⁶ *Id.*; National Register of Historic Places, National Parks Service, *National Register Database and Research*, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/database-research.htm> (last visited Jan. 20, 2026).

⁷ Charles M. Fuss Jr., United States Naval Institute, *SS American Victory, Tampa, Florida*, 15 NAVAL HISTORY NO. 3 (June 2001), available at <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2001/june/ss-american-victory-tampa-florida> (last visited Jan. 20, 2026).

⁸ *Mission and History*, American Victory Ship and Museum, <https://www.americanyictory.org/about/mission-and-history/> (last visited Jan. 20, 2026).

⁹ FOX 13 News Tampa Bay, *At 76 years of age, the SS American Victory lives on in Tampa* (Aug. 31, 2001), <https://www.fox13news.com/news/at-76-years-of-age-the-ss-american-ship-lives-on-in-tampa> (last visited Jan. 20, 2026); Charles M. Fuss Jr., *supra* note 8.

¹⁰ National Register of Historic Places, National Parks Service, *National Register Database and Research*, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/database-research.htm> (last visited Jan 20, 2026); *Home*, <https://www.americanyictory.org/> (last visited Jan 20, 2026).

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill's preamble recognizes the historical significance of the S.S. American Victory, highlighting the ship's service in American war efforts during World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam War, as well as the ship's contributions to the Tampa and state-wide community and its support of community, charitable, and educational groups and causes.

Section 1 amends s. 15.0465, F.S., to designate the S.S. American Victory, instead of the schooner Western Union, as the official state flagship.

Section 2 provides an effective date of July 1, 2026.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

Not applicable. The bill does not require counties or municipalities to take an action requiring the expenditure of funds, reduce the authority that counties or municipalities have to raise revenue in the aggregate, nor reduce the percentage of state tax shared with counties or municipalities.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None identified.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None identified.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None identified.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None identified.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None identified.

B. Private Sector Impact:

Obtaining the status of state flagship could increase the marketability of S.S. American Victory Museum, thereby generating additional revenue that may be used for the purpose of maintaining the vessel.

C. **Government Sector Impact:**

The schooner Western Union is not currently open to the public and would require significant investment to be restored to the condition required for public tours or seafaring.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None identified.

VII. Related Issues:

None identified.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends section 15.0465 of the Florida Statutes.

IX. Additional Information:

A. **Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:**

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. **Amendments:**

None.