

JOHN TASHJIAN AND KATIE CUNNINGHAM TASHJIAN

Saving Tidolholm



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Beaufort's most iconic residence Tidolholm, located at 1 Laurens Street and anchoring one edge of the Old Point downtown, is full of wonder and intrigue. The beautiful home is set on 1.38 acres and surrounded by the Beaufort River and majestic, moss-draped oak trees. We sat down with current owner Katie Cunningham-Tashjian to hear about her and her husband John's journey to save Tidolholm and preserve Beaufort's history.

Do you have fond memories of growing up in Beaufort?

Most certainly! I was born and raised on Lady's Island. Although, I'm sure that I didn't fully appreciate living among Beaufort's natural beauty until I returned home as an adult. I feel so blessed to have been raised by my parents, Mary and Jack, and with my brother Patrick, among Beaufort's tight-knit community. After college, I moved to larger cities such as New York and Nashville, but I always carried Beaufort's "small-town" perspective and values with me.

I have such fond memories of growing up in Beaufort, such as attending Beaufort High School football games at the old Beaufort High, playing for their Varsity Tennis Team, and watching at Upper Crust with my friends.

Returning to Beaufort has been such a dream and having the opportunity to raise our daughter, Alexandra, in the same town and amongst the people whom I love and respect is such a gift. I only wish Boomers Toy Store was still here so that I could share the wonders that I experienced in that store with her! John's older children, Jack [14] and Lily [17], love spending time in Beaufort and will have made such amazing friends.

Has John fallen in love with Beaufort?

He has. John is a born-and-raised Northerner who called New York City his home for over 25 years, but he is a Southerner at heart. As much as I love our town, he's actually the reason we have



returned to Beaufort. He fell in love with the town on his first visit and became enchanted with the architecture, history, and the natural beauty of the Lowcountry.

When we heard Tidolholm was "for sale," it was an opportunity that he just couldn't pass up. The home's setting and long-storied history was so majestic, yet the house had fallen into a sad state of disrepair. The home is such an important part of Beaufort's history, identity, and civic pride that, as a real estate developer, he saw it as an opportunity (and a challenge) to restore one of Beaufort's "crown jewels" back to its original grandeur.

Tidolholm is John's sanctuary, a relaxing respite from the years of busy city living. Every morning he remarks on how beautiful the sunrise is over the river and how fortunate we are to call Beaufort our home. I know that he finds it relaxing to be part of such a friendly community where he has quickly become so integrated.

Do you remember the first time you walked into Tidolholm?

The first time that John and I saw Tidolholm was actually on his first visit to Beaufort. We were dining, and John came to town to meet my parents. We were on a walk in the Old Point neighborhood when we came across Tidolholm. He said, "Wow! What is that!" and I said something along the lines of, "This is the house from the movie *The Big Chill*... It's everyone's dream home."

There had been a "for sale" sign out front for years, and he said, "What a fun project. Let's see it!" I was dumbfounded. My brother Patrick set up a tour with Edward Dukas, and considering this was our chance to see the inside of this famous house, my entire family came along!

I recall that standing on the porch for the first time was like being transported back in time... I could sense what it felt like to have lived there during prior centuries. I also remember the home feeling very grand but also empty and unloved, as a bank had owned it for several years, and they had let it fall into severe disrepair. The ceilings were caving in, and the fixtures were antiquated and decaying after years of use. It was a home waiting to be filled with life and love.

When did you decide to buy Tidolholm?

Honestly, it never crossed my mind. John became unfilled with the idea of saving the home, and unbeknownst to me, John and Edward negotiated with the bank that owned the home. The deal fell apart multiple times, but John fell down to the house and pursued it until they reached an agreement.

Over a year later, on Thanksgiving weekend, John casually told me that there was a meeting that we needed to attend. Confused, I said, "For what?" He said, "I'd like for us to buy Tidolholm." To say I was stunned is an understatement. We bought the house in early 2017, and a few months later, John pulled off an elaborate



Show here with twin-gabled roofs



engagement on the second-floor porch surrounded by our families. A year later, on the same day, we were married on the first-floor porch. Sharing Tidaholm and my hometown of Beaufort with my closest family and friends will always be one of my most cherished memories.

How did you know that renovating and preserving Tidaholm was important to you and your husband?

We've always viewed our involvement with Tidaholm as a momentary period of stewardship in the home's history. In purchasing Tidaholm, we felt an obligation to restore this very special landmark back to its original grandeur. The work that we embarked upon was not just to make it livable for our family, but to preserve the home so that it could be shared with the community for generations to come. Our hope is that, like all of the Antebellum homes in town, Tidaholm will inspire others to visit Beaufort and to learn about our town's important contributions to American history.

As a Beaufort native, I knew that there would be plenty of questions and concerns about Tidaholm's future, especially with a "thank" purchasing the home! To reassure the community that John and I were focused on a proper restoration, we gathered at the house for a meeting with members of the Historic Beaufort Foundation (HBF), and Old Point neighborhood residents, where John did a presentation called "Saving Tidaholm." During that discussion, we outlined the challenges and our proposed solutions for restoring the home. We were both pleased and comforted to find that our plan was well embraced by our neighbors, HBF, and Historic Review Board. We commenced construction in March 2017 and celebrat-

ed our first night in the house in December 2019!

Restoring Tidaholm was a true "labor of love." It was a process that was difficult and frustrating with many challenges. Throughout the three-year restoration process, we were fortunate to be guided by local knowledge and skilled contractors. Rob Montgomery developed the architectural plans, Beek Webb guided the home's historic rehabilitation process, and Chuck Ferguson managed the enormous construction project to its completion. We were also fortunate to involve Steven Gambrel, one of the most celebrated designers in the country, to direct Tidaholm's interior design plan. We are so grateful to our team for turning our aspirations into reality!

What are a couple interesting tidbits



about Tidaholm that you've learned along the way?

First, while predominantly known as the setting for *The Great Santini* and *The Big Chill*, Tidaholm has such a rich history beyond its famed movie past. It was built as the summer home for Edger Fripp, a wealthy cotton planter on St. Helena, served as US Army Hospital #7 during the Civil War, housed volunteer students during the Port Royal Experiment, and was a bed and breakfast during the 20th century. Reviewing Tidaholm's guest books, HBF Director Cynthia Jenkins learned that author EB White (*Charlotte's Web*) and Barbara Bush both visited Tidaholm as guests.

I love that there are so many stories and anecdotes about Tidaholm. The most interesting to me is that the house originally looked nothing like what we see today. It was built in 1853 in the Greek Revival style that was prominent at the time, with twin-gabled roofs and a center cupola on the third floor. In 1893, the Sea Island hurricane damaged the upper part of the home, and the owners decided to enclose the twin-gabled roofs and damaged cupola under a single roof. They also added the second-floor porch, creating the Colonial-style architecture we see today. If you go up to the third floor, you can stand in the original cupola and see the original copper roof under the newer roof beams.

One of John's favorite historical anecdotes is that the packmarks on the gate columns were made by soldiers who used

columns for target practice. Reinforcing the story a few years ago, a friend of ours found a button to a US Army Civil War-era uniform next to one of the gates! Larry Rowland, Beaufort's foremost historian, has been a treasure trove of information on Tidaholm as he lived here as a child and his parents operated the home as an inn. Our favorite stories are those told to us by longtime Beaufort residents, who remember visiting Tidaholm as an inn, or recall attending a party or an event at the house.

What's your favorite room in the house?

The kitchen. Not only is it the heart of our home, but it also has the best view of the river. One of the only changes we made to Tidaholm's original façade was extending the kitchen by a few feet to include a bay window. The kitchen looks quite different than it did during *The Big Chill*, but the fun, laughter, and friendship that the room evokes live on!

I also love thinking about all the history and changes that room has seen.

Originally, the kitchen would have been outside, so the room would have been a parlor or bedroom (which explains the fireplace). I think about the soldiers that may have stayed here, the inn guests spending their vacations, the writers that found solace here, and, of course, the two movies that were filmed in the room.

What's your favorite movie scene featuring Tidaholm?

Like most people, I love the kitchen scene in *The Big Chill*, but honestly, my favorite scene is with Kevin Kline and William Hurt walking along Bay Street. It shows how much Beaufort has both changed and stayed the same. My mom was pregnant with me the same year the movie was filmed, so it's a special "time-capsule moment" for me.

I always say that Tidaholm was the ninth character in *The Big Chill* as it was the house that brought those eight friends together. Not only was the home featured in almost every scene of the movie but the production crew also used every part of the house in the movie's filming. When we purchased the house, there were still sets built into the third-floor cupola, and the library had been faux painted by a set designer and had padded, sound-absorbing walls necessary for filming.

How do you support the community through ownership and stewardship of a local treasure?

We purchased and restored Tidaholm to serve as our home and be shared with community charities close to our hearts. Before moving in, we hosted the annual Historic Beaufort Foundation's Lafayette Soiree and Beaufort Memorial Hospital's "Fate on Blinn" fundraiser to raise money for its new surgical pavilion.

We completed our restoration right as the pandemic hit and the world changed. We look forward to a time when we can gather once again, and share Tidaholm and its history with our community.

