



“The Big Chill” Warms Up

In 2017, Katie and John Tashjian, alongside renowned designer Steven Gambrel, embarked on a journey to rescue Tidalholm, a Lowcountry treasure built in 1853. Affectionately known as “*The Big Chill House*” for its role in the beloved motion picture, Tidalholm is a cherished gem in Beaufort’s collection of historic mansions. Throughout a three-year restoration, the dedicated team worked passionately to preserve Tidalholm’s rich heritage while crafting a design to ensure its grace and grandeur for future generations.

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The film “*The Big Chill*” premiered in 1983 and quickly became a cult classic. Featuring a star-studded cast—including Kevin Kline, Tom Berenger, Jeff Goldblum, Meg Tilly, William Hurt, and Glenn Close—the film captures the essence of a generation through a group of friends reconnecting at a funeral and grappling with a world that has only grown colder. A vibrant 60’s soundtrack lightens the film’s exploration of existential themes. While Tidalholm is best known as the setting for “*The Big Chill*”, it also played a significant role in the 1979 film “*The Great Santini*”, which is based on the novel by Beaufort native Pat Conroy. The historic home and guest house are set on nearly two acres and boast seven bedrooms, twelve bathrooms, and nine fireplaces on a grand scale of just under 10,000-square-feet.



Tidalholm's Tale

Tidalholm, named in the 1820s to reflect its setting as a "home by the river," was built in 1863 by the wealthy planter Edgar Frigg as his "town home" and summer residence. The Sea Island Hurricane of 1893 severely damaged the home's gables and cupola, and a second-story piazza was added as part of the home's repair. Also, in the 1920s, the house underwent a significant transformation: a single roof was constructed over the original twin-gabled roof and a central cupola, changing Tidalholm's style from Italianate to Colonial Revival, which is how it appears today. The original cupola and copper roof remain beneath the current roof.

Tidalholm's rich history includes serving as United States Army Hospital #7 during the Civil War in 1861, the same year the

Union Army occupied South Carolina's Sea Islands, freeing approximately 10,000 enslaved individuals in the region. Shortly thereafter, the house accommodated volunteer students involved in the Port Royal Experiment (1862-1866), a program to rebuild the South's political and economic systems.

In the early 20th century, Tidalholm found a new purpose as a seasonal guest house and retreat, welcoming guests such as former First Lady Barbara Bush and author E.B. White. When the home transitioned back to a residence in the 1970s, it found international fame as the backdrop for two Hollywood films and even a Mariah Carey music video.

Unfortunately, the home fell into disrepair in the early 2000s. A bank seized

ownership of Tidalholm in 2015 and failed to maintain the house, causing its plaster walls to deteriorate and its ceilings to cave. The bank listed the home for sale in "as is" condition, where it languished on the market for years waiting for someone to save it from demolition. While it attracted numerous inquiries, the required cosmetic, foundation, electrical, plumbing, heating, and air conditioning replacement proved too burdensome for prospective buyers. In 2017, Tidalholm was purchased by John Tashjian and his wife, Beaufort native Katie Tashjian (nee Cunningham), who were up for the challenge.

"John fell in love with Beaufort on his first visit and became enchanted with the Lowcountry's natural beauty, architecture, and history. When he learned Tidalholm was for sale, it was an opportunity he



couldn't pass up," Katie says. John adds, "The home is such an essential part of Beaufort's history, identity, and civic pride. As a real estate developer, I saw both an opportunity and a challenge to restore one of Beaufort's crown jewels to its original grandeur."

John and Katie take great pride in their brief role in Tidalholm's much longer story. "We are proud to serve as Tidalholm's 11th owner. We view our role as stewards for a short period of its rich history," he says. In 2017, their restoration efforts started locally, enlisting the expertise of architect and preservationist Robert Montgomery, along with historic renovation expert Bookman Webb, and construction management led by Chuck Ferguson of The Meridian Company.

Renowned designer Steven Gambrel of S.R. Gambrel, Inc. guided the design plan, adding a refined sensibility to the home's aesthetic.

"Katie's deep affection for her hometown inspired our commitment to restore Tidalholm," John says with a smile, adding, "In many ways, this restoration was my heartfelt love letter to Katie and the cherished town she holds so dear."

Originally meant to be a second home for their family, Tidalholm's three-year restoration was completed just in time for a spring break visit in March 2020, when Katie was only four weeks pregnant with their daughter. With the onset of the pandemic, their plans changed in ways they hadn't anticipated. "I had packed for a

week's trip to Beaufort but never left," Katie laughs, reminiscing. As fate would have it, they found a new purpose in Tidalholm during the pandemic, where their next chapter began amidst the whispers of its storied past.

Saving A Landmark

"To reassure the community that John and I were focused on a proper restoration, we gathered our neighbors and members of the Historic Beaufort Foundation (HBF) for a meeting to discuss our plans. John gave a presentation entitled "Saving Tidalholm", Katie shares. Together, they outlined the challenges and proposed solutions for restoring the home. The couple was comforted that their neighbors, HBF and Beaufort's Historic Review Board embraced



(below left) The butler's pantry is adjacent to the kitchen, with views of the picturesque Beaufort River. The glass panel, cerused oak cabinetry, displays an elegant glassware collection. (below right) Delicate details like the stone slab range wall and custom-fabricated zinc hood add to the modern allure of this updated space.



their plan. "We commenced construction in March 2017 and celebrated our first night in the house in December 2019," Katie says.

Before the project began, Katie remembered Tidalholm as "grand but empty, longing for love." Caroline McCoy of "The Bitter Southerner" blog writes about her visit to Tidalholm before the restoration. She recounts that she gazed through the boarded windows and saw, "A grand, enduring portrait of the Old South, poised between being lost or lovingly revived." The Tashjians infused that vision with life and love, breathing warmth and vitality back into the historic home.

While the home was not condemned at the time of sale, it was deemed unlivable.

John adds, "The fixtures were antiquated and decayed. The ceilings were caving in. It was unsafe." When asked if he had any advice for those interested in a historic renovation, John jokes, "My first advice is 'don't do it!' But if you are committed to the noble task, do it once and right."

Tidalholm's restoration was fraught with challenges from the onset. John recalls, "We started with a plan but quickly realized that the house had other plans, so we just went where the project took us. For example, we didn't anticipate lifting the home and redoing the foundation, but we had to do it right to make it last."

"The more time we spent with the home, the more it revealed itself to us...The longer we listened, the more it told us what it was

and what it wanted to be. We had so many conversations with Steven Gambrel where he would say, 'I feel like the house wants to be...' and he was right," recalls John. "We also took advantage of opportunities to create new moments to celebrate part of the home's history, such as adding a pub in a space where they used to serve breakfast when Tidalholm was an inn," he shares.

The renovation plan included reinforcing the house's structural integrity while restoring its original character. Tidalholm needed a complete remodel from the foundation to fixtures with new electrical, plumbing, and HVAC systems. "We took it down to the 1850s heart pine studs," recalls John. Despite the significant renovation, the home's original first-floor plan remains intact, with a grand foyer, spiral staircase,



(above left) The formal dining room, with its restored original molding, whispers of the grandeur of its historic past. (above right) The fireplaces are beautifully integrated into the design, highlighting their historic central role. With dark marble surrounds and mantels, they bring a timeless yet contemporary elegance to the space, masterfully designed by Steven Gambrel.

and formal sitting and dining rooms on each wing.

"One of the most important design goals during the planning stages was to create an architecturally significant eastern exposure that would serve as Tidaholm's second front door," John says. The kitchen, primary bathrooms, and dressing room now overlook the Beaufort River on three sides."

How has this renovation honored the home and its history while still planning for the future? John says, "It's a delicate balance. How do you work around nine fireplaces? You don't want to enclose them, but one no longer needs a working fireplace in their kitchen."

John jokes, "I'm not a preservationist; I prefer the term 'restorationist,' which I made up. I believe we should protect buildings of importance but still be mindful that we need not be incarcerated by our history. When we started to think about Tidaholm, I didn't want the home to be a museum or to feel caught in time...I wanted to think more about how a family would use it for the next 170 years rather than the previous."

Contemporary Distinction

The Tashjians chose nationally acclaimed designer Steven Gambrel to provide a vision for Tidaholm's next chapter. Known for his projects in New York and worldwide, Gambrel has been honored as one of today's most incredible talents

in architecture and design and is consistently named on the *Architectural Digest* "Top 100" list. When asked what it was about Tidaholm that convinced Steven Gambrel to come to Beaufort, he said that the project resonated with his passion for restorative yet relevant design. He wanted to be part of the project for its historical relevance. Though he currently resides in the northeast, Gambrel's Virginia roots and southern sensibilities are displayed throughout the home.

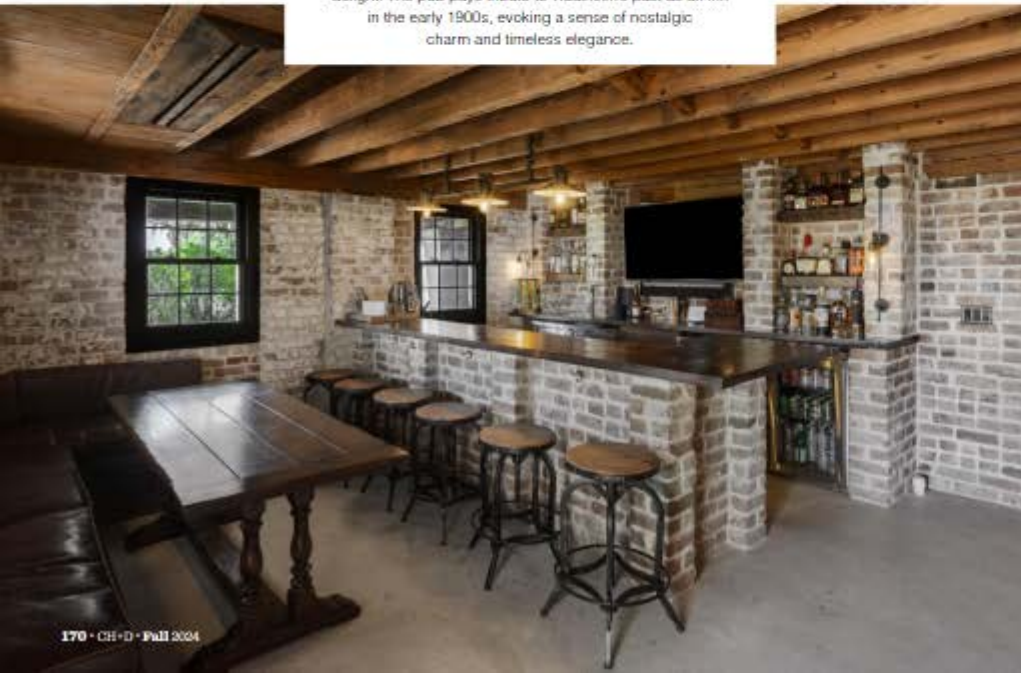
"I have always loved Steven's work and his ability to control color. He is brilliant at stacking derivations of color and making them play together," John says. Gambrel remarks, "The materials and color selections started with trays in the office





Contemporary Grandeur

The high-gloss lacquer dances with natural light, creating a visual delight. The pub pays tribute to Tidaholm's past as an inn in the early 1900s, evoking a sense of nostalgic charm and timeless elegance.



(above) View from the deck at low tide. Thanks to this vibrant and loving restoration, the exterior of Tidaholm, with its historic architectural details, will captivate and inspire admiration for generations to come.

based on what the architecture seemed to be asking for; the existing plasterwork wanted to be in the light, fresh whites, offset with the pale blues and silvers reflected off the water; the library was finished in a dark and rich, deep navy lacquer."

Gambrel's vision for the home was to stay true to the Lowcountry's architectural history. John admits, "I drew a lot of inspiration from Steven's previous work in New York and initially wanted to use many of the same design elements at Tidaholm. However, Steven reminded me that the house needed to speak its own native vernacular." Gambrel adds, "The interiors feel fresh, easy, and inviting, evoking memories of family and the warm climate of the environment."

Though Tidaholm is grand in scale, its interiors are anything but intimidating.

Instead, the house exudes warmth and charm, feeling like a welcoming home for a delightful American family. As you move from the foyer toward the center of the home, the sense of relaxed elegance envelops you with comfortable, tailored upholstery, contemporary furnishings, and beautiful fixtures. Beyond the foyer, in a modern addition to the original 1853 home, you'll find a cozy second living room ideal for family time. This space is thoughtfully connected to the kitchen and offers water views, blending seamlessly with the home's historic style.

Tidaholm's kitchen was designed by S.R. Gambrel's talented designer, Oscar Molina. "Oscar was working on our kitchen at the same time that he was designing a private yacht," John shares. "Every detail mattered to Oscar. He meticulously planned every inch of the kitchen, much like designing a space-

constrained yacht. When we couldn't find hardware that would complement the scale of the kitchen, Oscar had it custom-forged in Italy. All those little details came together to create something truly beautiful," John notes. Katie admits, "The kitchen looks quite different than during 'The Big Chill', but the fun, laughter, and friendship the room evokes live on."

The dining room showcases intricate plaster lace trim molding, likely added during the Victorian era. "Although much of the plasterwork had fallen off or been damaged over time, Katie and I felt it was essential to restore it," John recalls. They enlisted a specialized plaster team from Upstate New York to meticulously recreate the lacework piece by piece, using new plaster molds. Descending the black antique slate steps beneath the grand spiral staircase, you'll find



(above left) A "The Big Chill" poster signed by the cast and crew outside Tidalholm's pub.
(above right) Tidalholm's original cupola before the Sea Island Hurricane of 1893. Photo courtesy of Historic Beaufort Foundation.

the wine cellar, additional living spaces, a catering kitchen, and an English-style pub, each offering its own cozy retreat.

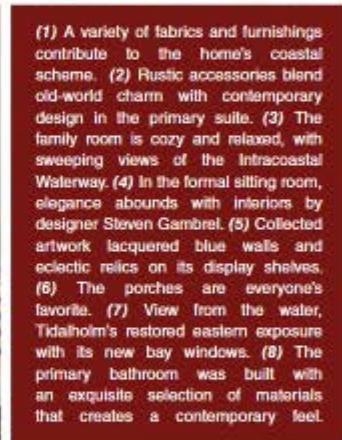
The couple also uncovered some of Tidalholm's hidden architectural features during the renovation. They installed windows in the enclosed third-floor cupola to showcase Tidalholm's original twin-gabled copper roof. Additionally, they exposed the beautiful original beams and their wooden peg joinery on the ground floor. Bricks from Tidalholm's deteriorating sea wall were repurposed to create garden paths and walkways designed by landscape architect Glen Gardner.

Though the Tashjians purchased the home 35 years after "The Big Chill" was filmed in Beaufort, artifacts from the original set remained. John recalls, "When we purchased the house, the set design for William Hurt's attic bedroom was still built into the third-floor cupola. Also, the library had been faux-painted by a set designer and still had the padded, sound-absorbing walls

necessary for filming." Katie and John still pay tribute to the home's Hollywood past: posters from "The Big Chill" and "The Great Santini" hang downstairs with nostalgic delight. "I always say that Tidalholm was the ninth character in "The Big Chill" as it was the house that brought those eight friends together," John says.

A New Era

We asked the couple, "If Tidalholm could speak, what would it say?" Their answer was swift and heartfelt: "We'd humbly hope it would say 'Thank You.' Thanks to the Tashjians' dedication to their community and painstaking restoration efforts, Tidalholm now stands as a beautiful testament to the passage of time and the importance of preserving historic treasures. With a storied past, Tidalholm has entered a "second act," blending modern comforts with a deep respect for its cherished place in the hearts of South Carolinians and, naturally, Glenn Close fans.



(1) A variety of fabrics and furnishings contribute to the home's coastal scheme. (2) Rustic accessories blend old-world charm with contemporary design in the primary suite. (3) The family room is cozy and relaxed, with sweeping views of the Intracoastal Waterway. (4) In the formal sitting room, elegance abounds with interiors by designer Steven Gambrel. (5) Collected artwork lacquered blue walls and eclectic relics on its display shelves. (6) The porches are everyone's favorite. (7) View from the water, Tidalholm's restored eastern exposure with its new bay windows. (8) The primary bathroom was built with an exquisite selection of materials that creates a contemporary feel.