

haven

A guide to exploring the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island, North Carolina



meet the neighbors



EDITOR'S NOTE

Haven's inaugural issue featured the White family and their then-new Bald Head Island home: Cape Watch Cottage. We're checking in with them nearly two decades later to reflect on what the island in general, and this home in particular, have meant to them.

Many Homes Have Character. Cape Watch Cottage Is One.

In great fiction, the setting lives from the very first pages. Such places not only feel extremely real, they are dynamic. They change. They affect the characters in the story. They become metaphors, possibly even actors in the drama.

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By Odette Embert Arnold | Photography by Harry Taylor

Recreating a photo taken nearly 20 years ago, the Whites assemble for a family portrait on the porch of Cape Watch Cottage. Clockwise from left: Kelly, Holly, Bob, Meagan, Blair, Bryant and dog Duke (turn page to see original image).



When Bob and Holly White talk about their nearly 20-year history with their Bald Head Island home, they often refer to Cape Watch Cottage as she, not it. That's only fitting. After all, this stately home has a stunning presence, a distinct personality and a place of honor in the family's collective story.

From her perch overlooking Bald Head Island's stunning South Beach, Cape Watch Cottage stands like a devoted matriarch waiting to welcome her family home. Over her nearly two decades, she has borne witness to the four White children coming of age, including two who now bring their own children to the island.

She has been the venue for countless holiday gatherings, a bachelorette weekend and a surprise engagement party. Several new mothers have spent weeks of maternity leave in her nurturing environment, and for years a group of Holly's friends gathered every October to spend time with one of their own whose diagnosis made every minute exceedingly precious.

Setting The Scene

"Twenty years ago, we had relatively young children in their formative years," explained Bob. "We were looking for a place that felt safe, where we wouldn't have to be paranoid about letting them loose. We wanted them to be able to hop on bikes, go to the beach, get an ice cream, all the things you want kids to do. It was also important that it be a dog-friendly place. Bald Head Island meets that test, then and now."

Though she, too, was smitten with the island on her first visit, Holly wasn't sure building the house was the right decision. She was leery of the financial commitment and the logistics of traveling from their northern Virginia home.

"I still can't believe we pulled it off," she marveled, thinking back. "I really thought we couldn't do it, like it was way beyond us. But here we are. It has always been a priority for both of us to make it work."

"We set out to build a place to entertain family and friends," added Bob, "but we didn't realize how rich those relationships would become."

An Ode To Family

Custom designed by Chuck Dietsche, AIA, and finished in 2003, Cape Watch Cottage is an architectural blend of classically coastal and delightfully whimsical. Everything about her design points to devotion to family, friends and fun.

She was completely renovated in 2019, receiving a rejuvenating facelift as she prepares to enter her third decade on the island. "She's like brand new," said Bob.

One of the home's defining characteristics has always been an outdoor concrete Ping-Pong table that sits in a little courtyard on the street side of the property. "People often refer to Cape Watch

Cottage as 'the Ping-Pong table house,'" said Holly. "It has seen a lot of action, from endless table tennis matches to serving as an impromptu dance floor."

The porches, too, are popular gathering spaces, setting the stage for everything from dramatic interludes to comic relief. "Being on the island is rocking chair time," said Holly. "Anything goes on those porches. We have laughed uproariously, and we've had some of our hardest conversations there."

Holly said embracing extended family time at Cape Watch Cottage has always been the draw. It has become the norm for three generations to gather together, and for one special Thanksgiving, Holly's mother was also there, bringing the generational total to four.

All of the White children live in the Washington, D.C. area, as do Bob and Holly. However, because of busy schedules, it isn't easy to get the clan together. So once a year, the entire brood tries to make it down for family week.

"I've learned to say we will be on Bald Head during these times and would love to have you," said Holly. "It's easier than trying to coordinate so many schedules. Fortunately, they all try

When the family gathered for their first porch portrait in 2003 with dog Sophie (minus son Blair who was away at college), they couldn't have imagined the role Cape Watch Cottage would play in their collective history.





The extended White family sends greetings from "The Ping-Pong Table House," where it's all fun and games.

hard to get here."

In 2018, the family chose Memorial Weekend for their get-together, and Bob hatched a plan to make the trip easier, and much more memorable. "He rented a Sprinter van, which was quickly dubbed 'the party bus,' and he showed up at each house fully decked out in Bermuda shorts and a driver's cap," laughed Holly. "They crammed the entire family, all of their luggage and a bunch of baby gear into the van and drove down. It was hilarious."

A Role In Many Memoirs

The Whites have had Cape Watch Cottage on the rental program since she was built, a choice they have never regretted nor resented.

"It was a financial decision, to be sure," said Holly, "but it's also better for the property not to sit unused. We love to come in the shoulder seasons, so we are delighted for others to enjoy her during the summer."

To welcome their guests, Holly leaves a gift bag with Cape Watch branded items and includes a personal note. "We have had so many lovely comments about the house over the years, and one family has rented every year for the past 20," said Holly. "It makes us happy to know others are loving her and making their own memories here."

As longtime members of both the Bald Head Island Club and

the Shoals Club, the Whites also offer those privileges to their guests. Personally they tend to use the Bald Head Island Club more often, as Bob likes to play golf and Holly uses the gym when she isn't riding her bike or swimming in the ocean.

"We also enjoy taking the grandchildren to the new aquatics center at the BHI Club," said Holly. "They absolutely love it. It's a young parents' dream."

The Next Chapter

While what happens next isn't entirely mapped out, Holly said she began speaking her pipe dream out loud about five years ago.

"My hope is to spend summers in New Hampshire, and three months each in the spring and fall on Bald Head Island," said Holly. "We will maintain a small place in the D.C. area to see the children and grandchildren, and probably even escape to Bald Head some in the winter to enjoy the temperate climate when it's snowing in New Hampshire and D.C."

For now, as autumn approaches, they make their way back to Bald Head Island and Cape Watch Cottage to "reclaim her" as they say, after the rental season. While it may have been months since they've been in her company, they find it's just like reuniting with a family member or best friend. They simply pick up midstride, as if no time at all has passed. 