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# Captivating Cottage



**IMAGINE** YOU'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ATLANTIC—  
SHIP-WRECKED—MORE SPECIFICALLY 26 MILES OUT TO SEA BY  
THE COAST OF NANTUCKET, KNOWN AS THE GREY LADY OF  
MASSACHUSETTS FOR ITS ROLLING BLANKETS OF FOG.

WRITTEN BY LOIS CAHALL PHOTOGRAPHED BY TERRY POMMETT



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You find yourself lapping your way to an inlet...Sesachacha Pond on the easterly shore. As you flop facedown in the sand—*Castaway* style—you lift your spinning head to a pristine strip of deserted beach. Your vision grasps a tiny designer cottage tucked into a sand dune. Certainly this is some sort of mirage...

Ahh...this is the Quidnet cottage owned by Peter Karlson and Danielle DeBenedictis. The tale and solitude of this house is as romantic as its setting. Grey-shingled and silent, the cottage in Quidnet presents itself like the Caneel Bay of Nantucket (although St. John in the Virgin Islands should be so lucky.) And while Nantucket—affectionately called “ACK” from the airport symbols made famous on the TV Show *Wings*—has become a destination tourist stop with automobiles now outnumbering bicycles, the hamlet of Quidnet manages to remain quiet, quaint, almost self-contained. It is a place of solace for writers, a respite for workers, a beach stroll for lovers, and always the way we remember it...with just the faint echo of a seagull call...and still charming after all these years.

“Our first experience on Nantucket wasn’t our cottage,” Danielle explains. “I was the first woman running for Congress

in Boston, in 1976. There was a fundraiser in my honor and it was there that I met my future husband. You have to get so many signatures to get your name on the ballot,” she says. “We got hundreds of thousands of signatures, and I was to march on July 4th in many parades, but instead Peter suggested, ‘Let me take you away. Some place romantic.’”

So someone suggested the Summer House, an inn and restaurant in the village of Siasconset, Nantucket. It was as romantic as Peter and Danielle could have hoped for. “We came back every year and then it got run down—wall paper peeling off the walls. Then it was 1979, three years later, and I was now married to Peter and pregnant. I decided I wanted to buy it. That’s when Peter said ‘You’re crazy! You’re busy! You have a big job as an attorney!’”

So they lost the Summer House to somebody else. In the meantime, Danielle suggested, “let’s buy a house.” And they came upon one in Quidnet. “It was a fishing cottage. I thought it was incomparable, which it is. I had always wanted to be on the water, but the brokers would tell me, ‘Stand on top of the roof of your car and you can see the water in the distance. There’s your waterfront.’ That’s not what I had in mind. And we didn’t have a lot of money.

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“So one day they showed us this little love shack, which is the closest house to the water in all of Nantucket....There was no heating unit. Just a wood burning stove for the people living in it year round. We bought it in 1980 and lived in it until 1984. Then we filed for permission to build a bigger house there, but 1500 square feet was the maximum of the footprint. So we made it an architectural feat with so much glass for walls and armoires for closets that it became very *tromp l’oeil* [fool the eye] for space.”

Danielle chuckles at a fond memory: “We took a flight to England and got all these books on antique pine furniture and where the most famous hotels and gourmet restaurants were. We mapped out a trip and stayed at one of these fabulous English manor houses in every town that ended with the words ‘shire.’” Peter and Danielle ate fabulous meals while they traveled, trying everything from bangers and mash to Stilton and leek pie.

Their research and travels led to Quidnet cottage being decorated in the casual, eclectic, yet elegant, English Country style. “The closet door is actually a front door from a salvage yard in Gloucester, England. It was there that I discovered this large piece of stained glass. The translucent effect of it doesn’t take up much room in the room. I incorporated that whole door with two sidelights set in by our architect. Everything in our Quidnet cottage is custom-made—down to the drop sinks in the pine breakfronts designed by Sheryl Wagner, long before she had distributed sinks in America. We were staying at the Connaught, a hotel in London’s Mayfair district, and I arranged to have everything shipped to Nantucket.

“Our sunken tub in our bathroom—the wood that frames it—is from an old church,” Danielle says, explaining that it comes from the back of pews with clips on them for both prayer and music sheets. “I used that to trim out the tub. It was original to say the least.”

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“Our kitchen was made out of antique pine pieces that were retrofitted to American appliances. We found this craftsman in a little village near the Cotswolds, and we showed him the plans. He custom made everything and transformed the large space into a gourmet kitchen. Eventually it was shipped back in segments to the States. While in the Cotswolds, I also purchased a large dining room table that I found in an antique shop and had the legs cut off to make a coffee table. This was to fill the large living room space and to have a gathering place for loved ones.” The fireplace surrounds come from old British houses, she says, and the wooden mantel in the kitchen was attached in one piece.

In addition to a carefully planned interior, the outside deck of the cottage was thought out as well. “Nantucket is known for its outdoor showers after the beach,” Danielle says. “So I got the idea to have a big deck off the bathroom and have a roof on it. That way, when you step outside that door in the bathroom, you can take a shower in a very luxurious and private outdoor space.” And while the cottage only boasts two bedrooms, it again is all about the illusion of space, since the open, airy, gourmet kitchen feels large. That is a good thing when you are entertaining the likes of Boston chefs Lydia Shire and Todd English, who have come for brunch, gathering around to cook eggs Benedict and lobster salad after the Nantucket Wine Festival.

It was around 1980, just after they had bought the cottage, that Danielle and Peter once more started frequenting the Summer House, the popular restaurant in ‘Sconset, as it is locally called. “We were the Summer House “groupies.” We’d bring our baby girl, Francesca, in a basket, and we got friendly with the old lady who owned it.”

Night after night, they shared cognac by the fireplace. Eventually, the owner told Danielle that she had a neighbor, who did a lot of complaining about the noise. Danielle told her, “Let’s get him to invest in this place.” That complaining neighbor turned out to be actor/director John Shea. Shea spent many years living and owning a cottage on the grounds, having done countless television shows, though he is most known for his character “Lex Luthor” on “Lois & Clark,” opposite Terri Hatcher. A meeting was arranged, and before long, a partnership between the Karlsons and Shea was born.

“Next thing I know it is 1984. We’ve bought the Summer House, and I’ve got permits for both our Quidnet cottage and the Summer House in hand to renovate simultaneously,” Danielle says. “I was an official resident of Nantucket!”

And so it turns out that the Karlson’s Quidnet home is the type of cottage that the Grey Lady might choose for her residence. Undoubtedly you’d see her dining nights by candlelight at the Summer House. Come to think about it, perhaps we *do* see her. Maybe the *real* Grey Lady turns out to be Danielle DeBenedictis. ■

FOR A LIST OF SOURCES, SEE PAGE 119



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