

Op-Ed Submission, Approx. 525 words

Cynthia Jenkins, Executive Director, Historic Beaufort Foundation

843-379-3331

Historic Beaufort Foundation is protecting the Robert Smalls legacy at his historic house

Robert Smalls is a major figure in local, regional and national history. His story needs wider understanding and appreciation. There are multiple ways to achieve this but opening his former house to daily walking tours isn't the answer – it's a problem.

Because our efforts with the new owners to reach consensus have failed, this month we asked the South Carolina Circuit Court to review the easement and our interpretation of its requirements.

The new owners, Billy and Paul Keyserling, hope to convert the private residence to an “interpretive center” and already are having daily walking tours of the house at 511 Prince Street. That kind of overuse will accelerate deterioration of the house and grounds. It's also a violation of the easement donated to the Historic Beaufort Foundation by owners of the home 20 years ago.

The easement holds both HBF and all future owners to the terms of the legally binding contract. The use of the property was restricted by the words “only a private residence.” While the primary purpose of the document is to ensure the house and grounds are preserved and protected, it also allows public access in a limited fashion to prevent deterioration of this important property.

The Keyserlings don't agree with this interpretation of the easement. Their stated goal is to transfer the historic property to the Federal government so that it can be run for daily tours – which already are happening.

The ongoing tours violate the easement and threaten to erode the unique qualities of this protected neighborhood, one free from commercialization and large-scale tourism. Residents of the Point bought their homes with the assurance and expectation that their historic neighborhood was protected by zoning.

Our work at HBF is guided by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards which are the basic principles for maintaining the integrity and significance of historic buildings. The first of the 10 Standards states that buildings should be used for their original purpose as much as possible – in this case, a private home.

From the beginning, we have been willing to work with the Keyserlings, the National Park Service and the National Trust to come to an agreement, within the terms of the easement, that would both protect the house and property while supporting reasonable public access. We are hopeful that a resolution can be reached.

In the meantime, the Historic Beaufort Foundation continues its mission to preserve, protect and present sites and artifacts of historic, architectural and cultural interest throughout Beaufort County.

Cynthia Jenkins is the executive director of Historic Beaufort Foundation and an acknowledged expert in preservation. In 2021 she received the prestigious Governor's Award for Excellence in Preservation, the highest honor given by South Carolina in recognition of an individual's significant achievements or landmark efforts in the support of historic preservation in the state.