

Keeping Bartlett *Bartlett*

Straddling Bell and Williamson counties, Bartlett was a booming town in the early 20th century. It was a main shipping point for cotton until the Depression and cotton industry decline turned it into a ghost town.

When Jennifer Tucker arrived in Bartlett a few years ago, she saw beyond the weeds and boarded-up buildings to a place in need of revitalization with a treasure trove of stories waiting to be told.

Tucker is a Austin real estate broker and history buff always on the lookout for the next building to restore. She was initially drawn to a Victorian home in Bartlett but it was the 120-year-old church across the street that kept her awake at night, with its dilapidated exterior and original bell tower and windows.

She wrote the owner a long, heartfelt letter asking to buy the property, certain he must be overwhelmed with offers and wouldn't sell to her. "Everybody writes me letters, but I liked yours," was his response. After two years of dealing with life circumstances, the city's permitting process, and a painstaking renovation journey, she transformed the building into a destination guest house that now attracts guests from around the world.

Standing inside the newly opened guest house, she suddenly realized it was no longer a rickety old building. "I had changed the church from an abandoned building to a revived one. I knew in that moment it was never going to be the same again. I cried that day," she says, her voice breaking. "Sometimes it still hits me."

A Historian's History

An Alabama native and real estate and architecture enthusiast, Tucker was drawn to Austin in 2005 by its "great weather, friendly people, and strong housing market. I got the added bonus of awesome old historic

towns surrounding Austin and I chose Bartlett as the place to focus my historic renovations."

She later opened a brokerage, Amazing Realty, as part of the growth of her real estate and investing work. While her day job involves flipping houses and helping people find their dream home, her historic preservation projects are her pride and joy, all of which is evident as she describes the Presbyterian church built in 1899 and remembers what it took to bring it back to life. "My banker said to me, 'Jennifer, that's a risk. I'll loan you the money, but if you can't get any bookings, you have to exit.' My family was like, 'We support you, but it's Bartlett.' Everybody had patted me on the head and said, 'Oh that's cute to do an abandoned church project, real cute Jenn.'"

Within 20 minutes after launching her guest house on Airbnb, she had eight bookings. Today, people from around the world make it their gathering place for Christmas celebrations and family reunions. "Nobody questions me now," she says. "Everyone keeps saying, 'Wow, what are you going to do next?'"

Revitalizing Bartlett

Constantly stumbling on new historic renovation ventures has become a problem for Tucker. "I keep saying just one more and I'll be done. And then one more comes."

Her fingerprints can be seen all over Bartlett, from the historic Bartlett Presbyterian Church, two farmhouses from the early 1900s, the Bartlett Bank (now a guest house), and several revitalized historic murals. Currently on her radar are the Tribune Building, which is set to become a coffee shop and retail store, and the lumber yard compound apartment complex that will be converted into a family destination with

died. Another Bartlett legend, Mary Cronin, ran the town's first railroad and painted governors' portraits, which are still on display at the Capitol building. "When you think back to the 1900s, women rarely had jobs, much less ran companies," Tucker says. "Those kinds of things were happening in Bartlett."

Determined to preserve those stories, she has penned two books on Bartlett's history, leads a monthly historic walking tour, and creates YouTube videos on Bartlett tales. "I didn't want to be just hearing these stories and holding on to them. I felt they needed to be told."



a playground and food trailer park. She is in talks with the city to coordinate a public private partnership to restore the utility building, which could become a restaurant and short-term rental. She also operates the Bartlett Mercantile that will reopen in the fall with T-shirts, postcards, candles, candy—"all the cutest little things you would find in a small-town mercantile."

With each building Tucker resurrects, she unearths a new story that reveals another piece of Bartlett's saga. Stories like the town being the first recipient of a \$33,000 rural electrification grant from President Roosevelt's New Deal program that lit up Bartlett in the 1930s. Or the Bartlett Bank, where *The Newton Boys* starring Matthew McConaughey was filmed. The bank opened in 1904 and was run by Mary Bartlett after her husband and bank owner John Bartlett

It's Personal

For all the civic-mindedness that drives her to restore historic buildings, she still runs into people who think she's just doing it for the money. "I don't think people realize how much heart and soul go into this. You can't do this for money. If it's for money, it would be marketed and advertised and have three stories and a parking lot. This is not where the money is. This is where the heart is."

And while she's starting to see her goal of bringing Bartlett back to life accomplished, Tucker never wants to change her favorite Texas town. "One of the things that makes Bartlett Bartlett is it's still the same," she says. "Bartlett's evolving but it's still that town on the railroad tracks with a story to tell. Bartlett is still Bartlett and that's the beauty of it."