

LIFESTYLE

I Quit My Job to Open a Home Store and Guest Cottage in Coastal Maine

Here's how I left one dream career for another.

BY KELLY ALLEN | PUBLISHED: JUL 10, 2025

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ARI KELLERMAN

When envisioning a dream life after corporate, many people share a fantasy: escape to a **charming town** and open something of a bed and breakfast. For **Alexander Widener**, a similar aspiration to become an interiors shopkeeper was fueled by yearly summer trips to Wiscasset, **Maine**, with his husband. “The sign that welcomes you says ‘the prettiest village in Maine,’ and it’s true,” he says of the coastal destination located about an hour north of Portland. “There was a pretty well known antique store here called **Marston House Antiques**. We’d come and shop and stay in the guest cottage on the property.”

Every time they left, Widener was in awe of the French owner Françoise’s life—eager to lead a similar one some day. Then last year, while driving up, Widener wondered, “What if we get there, and Françoise wants to sell us the property? What would we do?” He continues, “[My husband was] like, ‘You’re crazy.’ And we got here and she goes, ‘I’m selling the property. I’m moving back to France.’ And she’s like, ‘Are you interested?’”



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Alexander Widener

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At the time, the couple had a house in **Rhode Island** and a fresh lease on an apartment in **New York City** where they worked. “My husband had started a new job, his dream job at a really prestigious theater,” Widener says, adding that he was also living a version of his dream career in the interior design industry. After stints at textile brand Matouk and **Sister Parish Design**, he most recently held a marketing role at the **decorative trimmings** company Samuel & Sons.

“

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They struggled with the idea to uproot it all. Naturally, they spent the ride home weighing the pros and cons. Then came a flurry of signs from the universe. One involved spotting a 1990s Porsche green convertible—the couple’s dream car they hoped to acquire as a symbol of success one day. The license plate on it read, “WHY WAIT?” “It didn't feel like the timing was right, but I knew that I had to give it a shot or I would regret it forever,” Widener says.


Since the 19th-century guest cottage on the property was in good shape, Widener figured bookings for it would keep them afloat while they worked on the shop. So they purchased the property in December, right around Christmas. Widener left his job in early 2025, shortly after turning 30—“the age that Ina Garten opened Barefoot Contessa,” notes Widener, who recently listened to, and recommends, **her memoir**.

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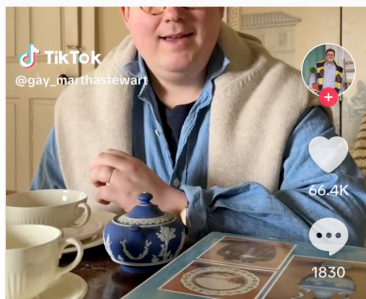
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Widener knew he needed to market the shop and cottage on social media to spread the word, and he didn’t waste any time doing so. The week he quit his job, he posted **his first-ever video on TikTok**. He explains: “I woke up one morning and my horoscope said, ‘Today’s the day to put yourself in the public eye. If there’s something you want to share with the world, share it now.’ And, I was like, ‘OK, wow, that’s a very instructional horoscope, and so I sat down and made a video about Wedgwood... and it immediately took off.”





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Sure, he had a career in marketing, but he wasn't using any tricks of the trade. "I just was being earnest and making this nerdy design video, and it felt like I immediately tapped into this audience that was craving design and beautiful things and wanted to learn about objects in a way that was approachable and comfortable," he says.

From there, Widener continued to share his passions and chronicle his work. He shared insight into sprucing up the two-room guest cottage with small changes: custom bed hangings fashioned from antique French linen sheets, custom embroidered bedding, and framed botanical wall art. "I feel like everyone always wants to escape when they're staying somewhere, so I wanted it to be like a breath of fresh air," he says.



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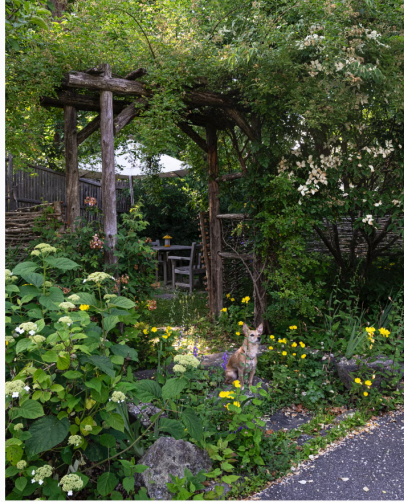


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He showcased the five-day installation of a wattle fence in the garden, which every guest has access to a semi-private space in. “We really inherited a gorgeous garden,” he says. “That’s one of the things that’s so fun about coming to a new place is watching it transform through the seasons, and so every week new flowers are coming up and I’m like, ‘Oh wow, we got really lucky.’”

Now, the interiors shop aptly named **Widener Company** is officially open. Widener worked with the paint company Little Greene to set the shop’s tone. One room painted in **Carys** is inspired by decorating firm Colefax and Fowler, specifically owner/decorator/American socialite **Nancy Lancaster’s famous yellow room** in London. “To me [the color is] just so joyful, and that’s the thing I wanted people to feel when they walk into my shop—to just be happy and feel joyful and be open to beauty.”

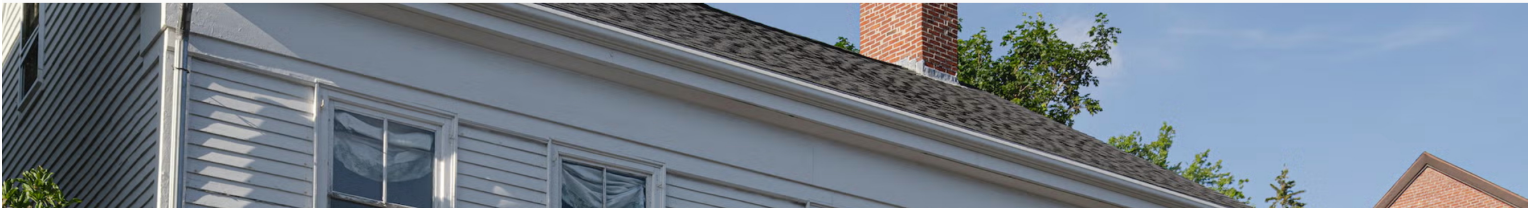
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Widener sells a mix of old and new things—textiles, furniture, decorative objects, and even some of his personal antique dish and porcelain collection. Many pieces are handmade in some way. “The thing that really captivates me about objects is when you can see the hand in them,” he says. “There’s nothing better than holding a 200-year-old quilt that someone hand stitched that’s made from hand-locked fabrics. And you’re holding it 200 years later, and you’re connected through time and space to that person who made it, who loved it, who created it.”

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With a local basket weaver, Widener worked on a line of **shaker-inspired baskets** and basket totes. The latter is like “an L.L. Bean tote but a basket,” he explains. “They’re really lightweight and surprisingly durable and very chic.” Pieces from other local makers, like mugs and vases, along with candles and a skincare line round out the shop offerings.

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The treasure trove shop is a result of Widener’s passion for collecting, and entrepreneurial drive, which started at a young age. “My mom tells the story when I was 6 years old, of waking up before everyone else and throwing a yard sale in my front yard of my beanie babies and random stuff,” he says. “I’ve always been sort of a collector and someone who was entrepreneurial.”





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Growing up in a small town in **Pennsylvania**, Widener would also go to church rummage sales, flea markets, auctions, and yard sales with his mom who loved to collect old linens and textiles. “I think so many of us in the design world come from a family who hired a decorator to decorate their house, or your aunt was a decorator, or your mom was a decorator. I didn’t even know a decorator existed,” he says. “When I moved to New York, it opened my eyes to this world that I never knew existed.”

He fell in love with design “because of how it makes you feel, and because of how you can celebrate the different aspects of yourself in your home,” he says. Widener also offers design chats in which he helps people with things like furniture layouts and color suggestions, offering a few tricks of the trade in the process. “I’m not a trained designer, but what I can do is help people figure out how to make their spaces feel the way they want them to feel,” he says. “And sometimes, I think you just need a sounding board.”

“

I feel like the moment that I took a chance on myself, everything started to fall into place.

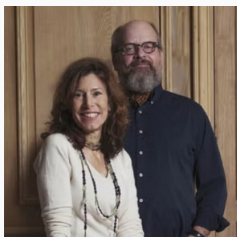
The most surprising part of Widener’s trajectory so far has been taking off on TikTok and embracing his personality. While he never set out to focus on the content, people in his life have told him to share his “random thoughts with other people” because “they might find it interesting.” Widener’s TikTok account was originally titled The Gay Martha Stewart, a name he’s since retired. “I think the most surprising part has been the feeling of coming into myself for the first time,” he says. “I feel like the moment that I took a chance on myself, everything started to fall into place, and that’s been really surprising and comforting and has really helped me become more confident and has helped me become the kind of person that I wanted to be in my work.”

Quitting his job to open an interiors shop and guest cottage hasn’t simply been a breeze. “I’ve been working since I was 15 years old, and this is the hardest I have ever worked,” he says. “Of course, when you’re starting a business, you’re working for free, so it can be really scary. It’s the biggest risk I’ve ever taken, but it also feels like it’s going to be the biggest reward.”

Widener is just getting started. Looking ahead, he wants to write a book. He

Michael is just getting started. Looking ahead, he wants to write a book. He adds, "I'm excited to continue to connect with people all over the world and share about all of these things that make our world so beautiful, especially in a time when it doesn't feel like there's any beauty that exists."

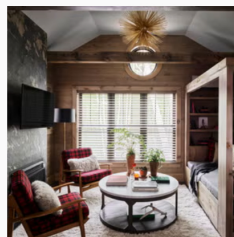
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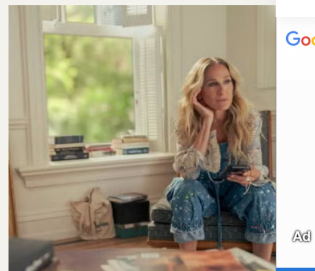
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