

## **THE MAGNOLIA MAY BLOOM AGAIN - A GREENSBORO MAN - News & Record (Greensboro, NC) - July 17, 1999 - page D1**

July 17, 1999 | News & Record (Greensboro, NC) | DONALD W. PATTERSON Staff Writer | Page D1

Sam Pass thinks it would be wonderful if Ray Charles came back to the Magnolia House, Greensboro's historic motel for black people.

Having the famous entertainer perform here would be a great way to raise the hundreds of thousands of dollars Pass says he needs to renovate and expand the historic house and turn it into a nonprofit bed-and-breakfast.

``This is a museum. It's a historic place," says Pass, a 48-year-old Federal Express driver and recent graduate of N.C. A&T. ``It is our intention to put this on the tourist scene for Greensboro, for people to see and know. Not every motel can boast of having Ray Charles or Satchel Paige ... or Martin Luther King Jr."

The house now stands empty, with huge sheets of plywood nailed over its doors and windows. A rusting ``Magnolia House Motel" sign still stands in the front yard. A towering magnolia tree, from which the house may have taken its name, dominates the front yard.

Pass says saving the motel would go a long way toward revitalizing the Gorrell Street neighborhood, near Bennett College, where the house has stood for more than a century.

``This is my neighborhood," says Pass, who lives on Martin Street, around the corner from the Magnolia House. ``That's why I am doing what I am doing. We are interested in making this neighborhood as beautiful as College Hill."

The Magnolia House, which began its life as a private home, served as a motel during the 1950s and '60s.

Ray Charles and countless other black entertainers, sports stars, writers, civil rights leaders, educators and travelers - who weren't welcomed at Greensboro's white-owned hotels and motels during the days of segregation - stayed there.

The guest list included civil rights leaders such as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy, baseball stars such as Satchel Paige and Jackie Robinson, novelist James Baldwin, heavyweight boxing champion Ezzard Charles, historian Carter G. Woodson and entertainers such as James Brown, Ike and Tina Turner and Lionel Hampton.

Once he has completed the renovation, Pass says the rooms in the bed-and-breakfast will be named for celebrities who stayed there.

Pass says the rambling, 4,000-square-foot, two-story Victorian house was built in 1889, in what

was then a white neighborhood. Sitting at the corner of Gorrell and Plott streets, high above Murrow Boulevard, the house is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Originally, the house featured a wraparound porch, which has been partially closed in, and bay windows on the front and side. The foundation, steps, five chimneys and a low wall around two sides of the property are made of granite quarried in Mount Airy. The foundation features custom-designed vents and a coal storage bin.

The inside has pocket doors leading into a downstairs parlor, leaded glass over and beside a main doorway and a huge antique tub in one of the bathrooms. Over the years the original house underwent at least two and perhaps three expansions.

“This was a grand place,” Pass says during a tour this week. “You can tell it has some character to it.”

Although he is still researching the history of the house, Pass knows that it was owned in the 1940s by a woman named Nina Starr Plott, the widow of J.T. Plott. In 1949, Mrs. Plott sold the house to Arthur and Louise Gist, parents of Herman Gist, the late state legislator from Greensboro.

The Gists turned the house into a motel.

Pass says he views the renovated motel as a memorial to the Gists. “They are recognized as pioneers in Greensboro, especially on the south side of town in our African American community.”

Some believe the Magnolia House was the first motel for black people in Greensboro.

But Hal Sieber, who has written about local black history, says at least three facilities predate the Magnolia House. They include lodging that was available over McNair's Drugstore on East Market Street, near N.C. A&T, and rooms above Ice Cream Joe's on Gorrell Street across from Bennett College.

“In Greensboro, I don't know of any place that could truly be called a hotel (for black people),” Sieber says. “But certainly the Magnolia House was the most sophisticated lodging for African Americans, providing entertainment for local residents as well as a place to live for visitors.”

The house had six bedrooms upstairs and sitting rooms and a dining room downstairs.

“I lived on the poor side of town and when I went up there, it was like high class,” says Donald Trapp, a Greensboro minister. “It had Oriental carpets on the floor and a chandelier. It stayed full all the time, especially on weekends.”

Pass believes the motel closed in the late '60s or early '70s. It then became a boarding house and was eventually abandoned.

He and his wife, Kimberly, bought the house in 1996 from Grace Gist, the widow of Herman Gist.

“The house was in pretty bad shape,” Pass says. “Drug addicts were breaking in and using the

facility to take care of their habits. There was a lot of clothes, debris. It was just awful."

Originally, Pass thought he would turn the house into lodging for students at A&T and Bennett. But then he decided ``it deserved more than just being a rooming facility. That is when it dawned on me that I might consider creating the Magnolia House as a bed-and-breakfast inn."

As a nonprofit operation, the house will be used to train area students in business administration, hotel administration, food preparation and landscaping, Pass says. It will also provide a place to train social service recipients and community residents.

Pass wants to convert the six rooms upstairs into four large bedrooms. Later, he'd like to add four more rooms at the rear of the house.

Just restoring and furnishing the house as an operating bed-and-breakfast will take \$708,000, he says. So far, he has received a \$60,000 Community Development Block Grant, which is federal money that comes through the City of Greensboro, and several thousand dollars in private donations. He says he is determined to raise the money he needs and have the house restored by the fall of 2000. The property has gained tax-exempt status, but he still has to get it rezoned for a business use.

``We aren't just going to try; we're going to do it," Pass says of the restoration. ``I've dedicated my life to this."

Those who know Pass believe he can do it.

``Sam has this vision of what he wants to do with it, and I know he will be successful," says Ronnie Bailey, an associate professor of architectural engineering at A&T, who is conducting a feasibility study for the project. ``If we lose the surrounding neighborhoods of downtown, we are going to have problems in terms of developing downtown. ... City government and the Greensboro community will take part in it when they see something started."

City leaders already like Pass' plan.

``Any time we have an opportunity to restore something that was as active and vital as the Magnolia House ... we need to do that," says Greensboro City Council member Claudette Burroughs-White, whose district includes the old motel. ``I think we need to uplift that and be sure that it continues to be a part of the history of Greensboro."

To help raise the money he needs, Pass says he wants to hold a series of benefit concerts, perhaps on a blocked-off Gorrell Street.

``Wouldn't it be fantastic to have Ray Charles visit the Magnolia House and perform as a fundraiser?" Pass says. ``I think it would be something Greensboro would love to see."