

Travel & Tourism

# Historic Magnolia House reopens to overnight guests



Magnolia House, an historic hotel for African-Americans travelers, reopened Friday next to Bennett College in Greensboro.  
LLOYD WHITTINGTON

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A boutique hotel with a celebrity African-American clientele that included the likes of Louis Armstrong, Jackie Robinson, Ray Charles, James Baldwin, Ike and Tina Turner, Satchel Paige and James Brown has reopened in the Triad.

Magnolia House, an historic hotel for African-Americans travelers, reopened Friday at the corner of Gorrell and Plott streets next to Bennett College in Greensboro's Southside neighborhood.

The 4,500 square foot, two-story Victorian-style house on .4 acre was a top-rated resting place for African-American travelers from 1949 through the end of segregation. From 1955- 1961, the four-bedroom hotel with first-floor rooms for relaxation and dining, and a porch, was one of the top six hotels in North Carolina for black travelers, according to The Negro Motorist Green Book, the guide for black travelers during segregation.

"We were the only hotel of prominence between Richmond, Virginia, and Atlanta," said Natalie Miller, whose father, Samuel Pass, bought the property in 1995 and has gradually restored it.



The upstairs bedrooms each have themes. The pink Carlotta room honors musicians Tina Turner and Gladys Knight. The Legends room, which has a sports theme, honors Robinson. The Baldwin room honors writer James Baldwin and Carter Woodson. The Kind of Blue room honors jazz trumpeter Miles Davis and Buddy Gist, who bought the house in 1949 and opened it as a hotel.

"There's a lot of stories in these walls," Miller said.

The hotel, named after the tall Magnolia tree in the front yard, will also serve Sunday brunch and lunches in shoeboxes similar to those black travelers often filled with food in case they couldn't find a place where they would be served.

"The whole history of the black traveler is all about the little things," Miller said.

Miller said she expected rooms to rent for between \$200 and \$300 per night with a two-night minimum.

Built by a white family in 1889, the home thrived in the 1950s and 1960s as a haven for upscale African-American travelers. When segregation opened other options for black travelers, the house fell into disrepair, according to Miller.

Over the past few years, Miller spearheaded efforts to restore the house to its condition in its heyday. She said the hotel played host to important NAACP events and holiday parties for black employees of companies such as Piedmont Natural Gas.

Miller said she has received various forms of support from the city of Greensboro as well as various civic organizations and foundations.

Vivid Interiors of Greensboro decorated the hotel pro bono.

"They brought the vision to life through design," Miller said.

Miller estimated that the restoration cost at least "mid-six figures," or \$500,000 to \$1 million. Through her Magnolia House Foundation, Miller said she plans to restore other homes of significant African-American history.

Behind the hotel, Miller has a giant white tent containing several items for a museum she plans to commemorate the African-American experience during segregation.