

FEATURED

Many famous people have stayed at the Magnolia House. Now you can, too.

DAWN DeCWIKIEL-KANE Dec 9, 2021 0

SUBSCRIBE for \$5.99 per month

1 of 5



Hotel owner Natalie Pass-Miller explains the history behind the living room area during a tour at the Historic Magnolia House in Greensboro on Wednesday. Set for a soft debut on Dec. 10, the Historic Magnolia House will officially open its doors as a boutique hotel in January. It will serve as a living piece of history and one of only several Green Book sites still in operation within its historical context, offering a Mid-Century Modern glimpse into Southern hospitality of the past.

KENNETH FERRIERA photos, NEWS & RECORD



DAWN DeCWIKIEL-KANE

GREENSBORO — Godfather of Soul James Brown slept here.

So did baseball legend Jackie Robinson.

And musical duo Ike and Tina Turner.

To name a few.

Come January, you can sleep here, too.

The Historic Magnolia House will become a boutique hotel that will offer lodging, as it did for African-American travelers during segregation.

In recent years, the nearly 5,000-square-foot home had hosted lunches and special events.

Now, the Historic Magnolia House has been further restored as a modernized replica of its heyday. It includes four second-floor guest rooms and a concierge lounge, with new mid-century modern decor.

Each room's theme and decor pay tribute to famous guests of the past.

"When we got the paint on the walls and the wallpaper and the lights started coming together, it felt almost like the house was hugging me, thanking me, for being able to represent the stories that it represents," owner Natalie Pass-Miller said.

To celebrate its soft launch, Atlanta-based jazz vocalist Rhonda Thomas will perform a holiday jazz concert tonight in a heated backyard tent there. That will give attendees a first look at the restoration of the original "Green Book" hotel where Black travelers could safely stay during the Jim Crow era.



The two-story Victorian-Italianate home, painted white with green trim, stands at 442 Gorrell St. in the shadow of the Bennett College water tank. It was built in 1889 as a single-family residence in what is now the South Greensboro Historic District. It's documented in the National Register of Historic Places.

Arthur and Louise "Louie" Gist bought the house in 1949 and converted it to a bed-and-breakfast. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Magnolia House offered distinguished and upscale accommodations for Black motorists in the segregated South.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and baseball star Satchel Paige were among a long list of famous guests that would pass through.

The Magnolia House joined restaurants, nightclubs, gas stations and beauty salons listed in "The Green Book" for Black motorists seeking safe places to stay and dine. The state-by-state guide, published between 1936 and 1966, served as a travel guide and a tool of resistance to confront racial discrimination.

Owners' son Herman Gist became a state legislator. Son Arthur "Buddy" Gist Jr. became a protege of trumpeter Miles Davis and a business partner of Jackie Robinson. The youngest child, Annie Lou Gist, was active in the NAACP while attending Bennett College.

Herman Gist lived there until his death in 1994. Sam Pass, Natalie Pass-Miller's father, bought it in 1996 from Grace Gist, Herman's widow.

Sam Pass began its restoration. Now, that project is in his daughter's hands.

Pass-Miller is the current owner and principal officer of Magnolia House Foundation, a nonprofit organization whose chief role is to grow awareness for African-American history in the Triad.

Support Local Journalism

Your subscription makes our reporting possible.

SUBSCRIBE for \$5.99 per month

Sponsors helped to make its recent restoration happen, with products and services totaling more than \$100,000, Pass-Miller said.

"It's really been a community event," she said.

Vivid Interiors, a women-owned design firm in downtown, offered services. Pass-Miller met owners Laura Mensch and Gina Hicks through classes at the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce.

Mensch and Hicks donated their services and found vendors to supply others, along with furniture and fabric. The proximity to High Point's furniture, fabric and design industries helped.

"We wanted to bring the house back to life," Hicks said. "We wanted to honor the time when it was used as a Green Book hotel, where all of these amazing guests stayed."

Local sculptor Jim Gallucci created a metal replica sign to stand on its front lawn under the magnolia tree.

Half of the original sign hangs inside the house.

Shades of fresh green and peach-colored paint cover first-floor walls. Pine floors have been refinished. Six North Carolina artists provided original artwork.

Green shades pay tribute to the house's Green Book history. On the wall of the teal living room hang photos of guests from yesteryear.

The upstairs bedrooms and lounge — each with different colors and designs — honor those guests. The Baldwin Room, with its king bed and black-and-white design, has been dedicated to writers and intellectuals such as James Baldwin and Carter G. Woodson.

Guests can gather in the separate Carter G's Lounge.

The Carlotta Room, a deep pink room with two queen beds, honors Queens of Soul such as Tina Turner, Gladys Knight and Ruth Brown.

The Legends Room recalls sports figures such as Jackie Robinson and Satchell Paige.

The Kind of Blue Room honors the friendship between Buddy Gist and iconic jazz trumpeter Miles Davis, who recorded his "Kind of Blue" album in 1959.

Soon, for the first time in more than 50 years, guests can book a room. The starting rate will be \$200 to \$300 a night, with a two-night minimum. Breakfast will be included.



In recent years, Magnolia House had offered Sunday brunches and shoebox lunches — a symbol of segregation that enabled motorists to bring less-perishable food on their travels. Operators suspended those services during recent work, but plan to restore them in January.

Pass-Miller's plans don't end with the recent restoration. She wants to expand the Magnolia House to include an African-American history museum.

She views the Magnolia House as the flagship location of her organization's charge to preserve African-American sites and reunite them with their communities.

Pass-Miller appreciates what she sees in the house's past and present.

"It's the house that soul built," she said. "That's what we are honoring here. It deserves nothing but the best."

Contact Dawn DeCwikiel-Kane at 336-373-5204 and follow @dawndkaneNR on Twitter.