

TRENDING NOW Artist Lorraine O'Grady invites self-reflection in Weatherspoon retrospective



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Green New Feel: Magnolia House restored to former glory as B&B

By Sayaka Matsuoka - December 9, 2021

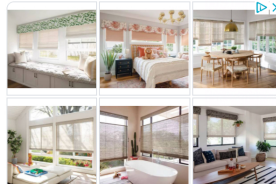


Featured photo: Magnolia House owner Natalie Miller stands under the new sign that's been installed outside of the motel. The sign is a replica of the one that was there when the house was a Green Book site for Black travelers in the '50s. Half of the original sign is now installed next to the front desk in the motel. (photo by Carolyn de Berry)

Natalie Miller is 98 percent of the way there.

As she walks through the 1889-era house that she's spent the last five years restoring, her eyes glance from the warm, mid-century walnut pieces to the dark teal paint that pulls together the interior. As she sits in the sunny dining room of the Magnolia House on Tuesday morning, she points out everything from furniture, chosen intentionally, to the hues of green that accent the walls.

"We talked through, 'What is the vision for what the hotel looks like? How can we truly replicate what that feels like when James Baldwin walked through the doors and stayed,' or, 'What was Louis Armstrong's experience like when he cleaned his trumpet here?'" Miller says. "It was truly about being able to capture those elements."



SMITH & NOBLE



The Magnolia House, a historic site in Greensboro, was one of hundreds of stops in the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, otherwise known as the “Green Book,” a guide that Black travelers used to find safe places to stay in the Jim Crow South. The house was built in 1889 as a private resident and converted into a bed and breakfast in 1949 after it was bought by Arthur and Louise Gist. Over the next several years, many notable Black cultural figures from Tina Turner to James Baldwin to Jackie Robinson sought refuge within the home’s walls and now, more than seven decades later, Miller will be unveiling the home once again as a bed and breakfast.



Legends like James Baldwin, Jackie Robinson, Tina Turner and Louis Armstrong stayed at Magnolia in the 1950's. (photo by Carolyn de Berry)

When Miller began helping her father — Samuel Pass, who bought the place in 1995 — restore the home to what it looked like when it was a stop on the Green Book, she says that the house was about 85 percent of the way there. Her father had been renovating the house so that it looked structurally like it did in the 1950s, when visitors would come to stay. In the last few years, the house has been used to [host multiple events](#); a small walkthrough museum was installed to educate the locals about the historical significance of the building. The last 15 percent, Miller says, was being able to get the home ready to host overnight guests again. And starting this Friday, they will do just that.

This weekend, the home will be celebrating its reopening with a jazz holiday concert and an unveiling of the upstairs bedrooms, which will soon be ready to be reserved by guests. Currently there are four rooms being prepared for the event, but Miller says that she envisions adding additional rooms to the house. It's all part of a larger mission to make a cultural and historical hub of Black history in Greensboro. And that's how they've designed the rooms, too.



Up the narrow, wooden staircase, visitors will be first greeted by a bright-pink room accented by fuzzy faux pillows and gold trim. This suite, named “Carlotta,” is an homage to the “queens of soul” who stayed at Magnolia in the past: Tina Turner, Ruth Brown, Gladys Knight and others. Nearby, a more muted, green plaid and chestnut-colored “Legends” room features old-fashioned boxing gloves and other sports memorabilia as a callout to athletes of past like Jackie Robinson. Next to it, the “Baldwin” room in black and white with geometric accents honors the intellectuals, such as its namesake who visited Magnolia. The final room, “Kind of Blue,” is a visual representation of Arthur and Louise Gist's son, Buddy Gist's friendship with jazz legend Miles Davis.



As Miller gives a tour of the remodeled home, staff bustle around, putting last-minute touches on the walls and finishing the beds in preparation for the weekend's unveiling. Part of the success of the overall look, Miller says, is their partnership with Vivid Interiors, a local interior design shop that has been working with her and her staff to revamp the space.

"In each of those rooms, we're capturing an essence or what the swag was of those different categories," Miller says. "So when you walk in there and you stay in there, that's what you should really be feeling."

In addition to the vast interior changes, Miller points out some of the updates to the exterior of the home, most notably the installation of a replica of the hotel's old sign.



Natalie Miller took on the Magnolia House as her own project after her father, Samuel Pass, spent years renovating the building. Now, the site is ready to be unveiled as a bed and breakfast again. (photo by Carolyn de Berry)

Posted into the ground next to the mature magnolia tree in front of the house, a sign in old-school font reads "Magnolia House Motel." According to Miller, the sign lights up at night, just like the old one used to do to signal to guests that they had reached a safe haven. Inside, next to the front desk, half of the original sign hangs on the wall being plexiglass.

As a child Miller says her father, who grew up in the neighborhood, used to run up and down the street to peek at the fancy cars lined outside of the hotel, hoping to catch a glimpse of a famous musician or baseball player. And while the cars may be gone and the sign may be different, the spirit of the house as it was when it was a Green Book site lives on.

"We're one of four or five [Green Book] sites in the state that is structurally replicated and functionally replicated," Miller says. "Meaning when you walk into Magnolia, you truly are experiencing that authentic Green Book experience."