Most people see only the obvious at 442 Gorrell Street – a handsome, two-story frame house accented with lime green trim and encircled by a low wall of rough-hewn Mount Airy granite. Torren Gatson, an assistant professor of history, sees more. When he lays eyes on Greensboro’s historic Magnolia House, he sees “a community vessel.”

As the Magnolia House Motel from the late 1940s through the 1970s, the property was a safe haven for African American travelers in the Jim Crow era. The Green Book Motorist Guide, the resource for Black travelers recently made famous by Hollywood, listed it in several editions. Here, close by Bennett College and N.C. A&T State University, the author James Baldwin stayed the night. So did Satchel Paige, Ike and Tina Turner, and Louis Armstrong, who is said to have had a fondness for the innkeeper’s ham biscuits.

Dr. Gatson, in addition to his position in the academy, is a public historian. He revels in engaging with the community to learn the people’s stories, history in the first person. For instance, there’s the kid who remembers riding his bike past the Magnolia House and seeing James Brown hanging out and playing with the neighborhood children. That kid was Samuel Pass, whose powerful childhood memories led him, as an adult, to buy the property and rescue it.

Today his daughter, Natalie Pass-Miller, is interim director of the nonprofit established to restore and preserve the property and celebrate its service to the African American traveling public. Equally significant is its role as a staging area for social action and the civil rights movement. It’s this latter function that gets the public historian most fired up.

The Magnolia House, Gatson explains, played an elemental role in “the fight for civil rights” in Greensboro and Guilford County. It was a “bastion of culture for African Americans,” he says, where Black people were welcome in the days before integration and racially mixed business and social functions. Owners Arthur and Louise Gist, who bought the 5,000-square-foot structure in 1949, opened the facility to meetings of the NAACP and other progressive organizations.

But the porch was particularly important, Gatson says, for those living in shotgun houses, some of the most modest Southern homes. He and Dr. Asha Kutty, his colleague in interior architecture, are studying porches in a shotgun house community in Wilson, North Carolina.

The East Wilson Historic District had more than 300 of those houses, most built in the early 20th century. Today, the historically African American neighborhood has fewer than 90.

Gatson and Kutty will collect oral histories from current and former residents to gain an understanding of what transpired on the porch, a transition zone between the public street and the private interior, and what that meant. “The porch evolved to serve as a catalyst, a spearhead for community and culture,” Gatson says. The pairing of a historian and an architect to explore this aspect of African American culture, he says, should result in “some truly unique work and rich perspectives.”
Gatson and his graduate student collaborators examine archival photos with Natalie Pass-Miller (third from left). Students spent the day collecting memories and photos from older local residents and the library. Hands-on, community-engaged work is a hallmark of the Department of History's master's in museum studies program. Photo predates the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Just the fact that the Congress of Racial Equality and the NAACP held planning, strategy, and logistical sessions at the Magnolia House,” Gatson says, “firmly establishes its place in history. The facility also hosted business meetings. Black Veterans of Foreign Wars met there, as did a Black Women’s Democratic Club and other community groups. “So, while it’s a motel and a center for civil rights, we’re also saying it’s a community vessel.”

The multi-layered history reflects a family invested in their community. Arthur Gist was a veteran. Ann, the couple’s daughter, and another woman made headlines in June 1957 when they attempted to visit Greensboro’s Whites-only, city-owned Lindley Park Pool.

Arthur and Louise’s sons, Herman and Buddy, carved their own niches in the city’s political and cultural history. Herman represented Guilford County in the General Assembly for more than a decade before his death in 1994. The late Louise, a civil rights activist who worked off campus, is the story of history reflects a family invested in their community. Arthur Gist was a veteran. Ann, the couple’s daughter, and another woman made headlines in June 1957 when they attempted to visit Greensboro’s Whites-only, city-owned Lindley Park Pool.

Arthur and Louise’s sons, Herman and Buddy, carved their own niches in the city’s political and cultural history. Herman represented Guilford County in the General Assembly for more than a decade before his death in 1994. The late Louise, a civil rights activist who worked off campus, is the story of history reflects a family invested in their community. Arthur Gist was a veteran. Ann, the couple’s daughter, and another woman made headlines in June 1957 when they attempted to visit Greensboro’s Whites-only, city-owned Lindley Park Pool.

Arthur and Louise’s sons, Herman and Buddy, carved their own niches in the city’s political and cultural history. Herman represented Guilford County in the General Assembly for more than a decade before his death in 1994. The late Louise, a civil rights activist who worked off campus, is the story of history reflects a family invested in their community. Arthur Gist was a veteran. Ann, the couple’s daughter, and another woman made headlines in June 1957 when they attempted to visit Greensboro’s Whites-only, city-owned Lindley Park Pool.

Arthur and Louise’s sons, Herman and Buddy, carved their own niches in the city’s political and cultural history. Herman represented Guilford County in the General Assembly for more than a decade before his death in 1994. The late Louise, a civil rights activist who worked off campus, is the story of