



## From Ole Asheboro to New Southside: The Evolution of a Neighborhood

**Hello, and welcome to the UNCG Public History Program Southside walking tour. Please park in one of the designated parking spaces along Southside Square, off of Martin Luther King Drive. A water fountain will be to your left. Before proceeding on your tour, be sure that you have downloaded and printed the destination map. Please take all necessary safety precautions. Please do not begin walking to the first stop until directed to do so. Thank you again and enjoy your tour. UNC-Greensboro presents... *From Ole Asheboro to New Southside: The Evolution of a Neighborhood.***

This tour focuses on the neighborhood's evolution from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Southside was an economically diverse neighborhood that bordered an industrial area, to its present state as a middle class community that is driven by a service economy. You will explore the diversity of one of Greensboro's earliest suburbs and the changes it has witnessed culminating in its attempted return to its roots.

From the fountain, turn south along Martin Luther King Drive. You will see a large white Neo-Classical Revival home with a similar style church behind it. These two structures are the only Neo-Classical Revival style buildings in Southside. This home is original to and represents the type of homes that were common to Southside in the early 1900s. Imagine this street being lined by grand homes like this one. During the early 1900s, what is now known as Southside and its surrounding area along Gorrell, Murray, and McAdoo Streets, was once known as Ole Asheboro, an elite, upper-class neighborhood. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive was formerly called Asheboro Street before the name was changed to honor the slain human rights activist. The very large and exquisite homes exulted character and pride. The well to do had physically moved away from workers and farmers, and Ole Asheboro became the home for Greensboro's privileged. The wealthy residents segregated themselves from the industrial and business center of town.

This Neo-Classical Revival home was owned by a successful real estate developer, who was president of local businesses in the area. Most of the elite homes primarily exhibited the Queen Anne and Italianate styles. This house would have stood out for its uniqueness of style, as well as for its size. Its Neo-Classical elements include the two-story portico of paired Corinthian columns, pedimented dormers, and turned balusters. Visualize the Ole Asheboro neighborhood of the early 1900s as a prosperous up-and-coming center of industry and a cosmopolitan area for the affluent.

Now, look around you and marvel at the sight of today's alluring streetscape. These three-story brick buildings along Martin Luther King Drive are representative of the Southside revitalization effort in the 1960's and 70's. Now, after many twists and

turns, which included the impoverishment of this area and its segregation as a working class black neighborhood, once again, the Southside Neighborhood has returned to its roots of splendor and pride.

Please turn to your left now and walk north along Martin Luther King Drive. Continue to observe the cityscape of condos and businesses around you. In 1996, the Greensboro City Council approved the Southside Plan, which called for the preservation of existing historic structures for owner-occupied residences mainly including upper-scale housing with street appeal and other amenities to add to the turn-of-the-century ambiance. The goal was to blend a marketable first class mix of streetscape design of single-family homes, town-homes, neighborhood businesses, and open space, all packaged to restore the historic character of the neighborhood while promoting its quality and integrity. If you have not yet reached the corner of MLK and Gorrell, please pause your player until you do.

**Please cross Gorrell Street to stand under the Southside Arch. If you look towards downtown, you will see the railroad tracks of the Southern Railroad and the Old Rail station.**

The nearly barren area you see now was once the lifeline for Greensboro's economy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Southern Railroad Company depot that was once here would have been a bustling hub of business activity in the city. Trains would be arriving, workmen and women would be coming and going, and in increasing numbers, many of these workers came to reside in Southside. Look up and down the tracks, and try to visualize what it would have looked like 100 years ago. Textiles factories would have lined the tracks, as it was textiles that defined the South during this time. Imagine this train station filled with many different classes of people, from those who owned the factories to those who worked the floors. What is now empty space would have been crowded and full of the life of a working day.

If you look to your left out toward the downtown landscape on Elm St., over the tracks that remain today, you will see where the Southern Railroad Company erected a station in 1899, providing a depot where several different lines crossed, and thus helping to earn Greensboro its nickname as the "Gate City." Newly founded textile factories, and their accompanying demand for labor, began to change the face of Southside. During the Antebellum South and Reconstruction era, the working class had virtually no presence in this area. But by this time, there was an industrial and social vision of a New South. In the New South, the upper and working classes mingled and shared a space, a neighborhood. Groups that had previously been separate were now living close by and interacted more than they would have before.

Mill owners needed to be close to their factories and, in the days before commutes and cars, so did mill workers. While the railroad fortified the prosperity of Asheboro Street, the advent of the automobile in the 1940's and 50's became the catalyst for the neighborhood's decline. Other competitive neighborhoods were developed, which lured away some of the rich anchors of the Southside Neighborhood in search of newer and grander homes.

**Continue walking east now along Gorrell Street so that your back is to MLK Drive.**

It is interesting to note that on April 2, 1936, Greensboro's first recorded tornado destroyed Gorrell and McAdoo streets, as well as the surrounding area. Sources say, within 2 to 3 minutes, 12-14 people died and over 140 people were injured. Property damage totaled approximately two million dollars. It took the area a while to rebuild, and many business and homeowners moved from the area.

**Please pause the player until you reach the corner of Gorrell and McAdoo Street.**

To your left, you will see a large white Queen Anne style house. It is one of the few grand homes that survived the tornado. It is also one of the few remaining turn-of-the-century Ole Asheboro structures and is now under restoration. Once again, keep in mind that this home represents the original character of the elite neighborhood before "white flight" ensued. However, there were more modest dwellings nearby that housed many of the workers; therefore, poor and rich lived in the same proximity of each other.

With the flight of Southside's white citizens in the 30's and 40's, poor working-class African Americans moved into the area. As homeowners moved away and tenancy increased, so began the slow and physical decline which eventually resulted in dilapidation and blight in and around the Southside neighborhood. The once rich and exclusive neighborhood gave way to poverty and crime and became concentrated with poor African Americans. In the 1950's, the implementation of the federal Urban Renewal involved mass demolition and acquisitions in an attempt to arrest decline and make way for new private development.

As you now cross McAdoo Street, you will see the still active Fire Station no. 4 on your left. This structure reflects Southside as a predominately black working-class neighborhood, because this was an all-black fire department, the first in the area. In 1961, the Greensboro Fire Department was reorganized and expanded. Part of that expansion included the integration of the department, after 35 years of professional service. Neighboring Winston-Salem was the first town in North Carolina to hire African American firefighters about 10 years before, and Greensboro was following the trend.

In 1961, Waldo Faulkener was an influential city council member who worked hard to get the first African Americans hired. During that time, these 28 new hires were the largest training class in the Department's history. They came from all over North Carolina, and many of them had college educations.

Even though these men were stationed separately from their white counterparts, all the firefighters were familiar with each other and worked together when responding to fire calls. Mr. Ray Flowers, one of the distinguished original African American firefighters from Station 4, cannot recall any problems amongst the Greensboro firefighters when answering calls.

[clip of Ray Flowers]

The firefighters are there to do whatever is necessary, and the hierarchical organization still exists today. These men remained at Station 4 until, in the mid 1960s, Greensboro's firefighters worked together to lobby for full integration of the fire stations across the city. Both black and white realized the results would be beneficial to them; immediate access to four captain positions would be open to whites; and blacks, in turn, would be able to seek positions all over the city. A vote was held, and the decision to integrate was presented to the Chief. Integration in the

Greensboro fire service was not a decision forced down, but rather was pushed for by the firefighters themselves.

If you would like, please pause your player and step forward to the front of the station to read the plaque which was dedicated to Waldo Faulkener and the first African American staff of firefighters to work in Greensboro.

**Continue walking east now down Gorrell Street. As you cross the Gorrell Street Bridge, which is the Murrow Street overpass, please look to your right and see the once magnificent and famous Magnolia House Motel, which is located on the corner of Plott Street and Gorrell. Since this building is currently being restored, it does not resemble its once grand appearance. This structure is an historical landmark of Old Greensborough and is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Please pause your player until you have reached and are standing in front of the Motel.**

The Magnolia House Motel was once a beautiful two-story Victorian house, much like the others that lined this street. It was built in 1889 and originally was the home of a wealthy traveling salesman named D. D. Debutts. This structure consists of four thousand square feet of living space, with six rooms on the first floor and eight rooms on the second floor. Its foundation sits on granite stones quarried in Mt. Airy, North Carolina, and the building has five chimneys. The bay windows, exterior molding around the eaves, and its partially slated roof show the exquisite character in the fine structure. The custom designed vents and coal storage bin around the foundation also enhance the beauty of this magnificent building. Look around and just imagine how majestic this neighborhood must have looked with its large, beautiful homes and manicured lawns. Once only the very privileged and elite could afford to live here.

The home was eventually sold to Mr. & Mrs. J. T. Plott, for whom the street is named. They, in turn, sold the home on September 6, 1949 to African American investors named Arthur and Louise Gist, whose son later became a member of the North Carolina General Assembly. The Gists realized their dream to convert the House into a first class motel to accommodate African Americans traveling in this area during the period of Jim Crow laws and segregation. As white Americans enjoyed the splendor of the two hundred room O. Henry and King Cotton Hotels in downtown Greensboro, African Americans lodged at the Magnolia House. In the 50's and 60's, many African American celebrities such as Ray Charles, Ike and Tina Turner, Smokey Robinson, James Brown, and many others were guests here while they performed live shows in Greensboro. The Motel also accommodated lodging to families of students attending the historically black schools of Bennett College and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State College.

Currently, the Magnolia House is owned by Magnolia House Motel, Inc., a local non-profit agency which purchased the dilapidated structure in 1997. The non-profit was founded by Sam Pass, its Executive Director. Mr. Pass is currently president of the Gorrell Street Neighborhood Association. Vigorous fundraising efforts are being made to restore Magnolia House to its original grandeur so that it can become a bed and breakfast community center.

It is anticipated that the restored facility will be used as a training site and center for various activities and events to promote educational development initiatives for

disadvantaged youth in and around the city of Greensboro. Its restoration will lift the esteem of the residents surrounding it and give them incentive to renovate and restore the many other charming old homes in the neighborhood. Those who take pride in preserving black history are excited by the prospect of this restoration. However, the city has provided no funding.

**Please turn back now going west on Gorrell Street and you will turn left onto McAdoo. Please pause your player until you reach 413 McAdoo, which will be a home on your left.**

This home is original to the segregation period in Southside. Recall the Queen Anne and Neo-Classical homes you have previously seen. It is interesting to juxtapose these residences and note the more modest lifestyle and community it represents. This home represents the four-square form that was most popularly built in Southside in the 1920's. Its first occupant was H.D. Smith, a brakeman for the Railroad. The proximity of residents with such disparate occupations shows how this area was once very much a mixed-income neighborhood.

**Now, cross McAdoo Street towards Murray Street. Proceed forward along Murray Street until you reach Martin Luther King Drive again and turn left. Walk south along MLK, crossing over E. Bragg Street. On your left, you will see a large, two-story brick Colonial Revival style building. Please pause your player until you reach this structure.**

This was once the Caldwell Elementary School. In 2000, the Ole Asheboro Neighborhood Association converted the unused building into the Nettie Coad Apartments. However, you will notice that the words "Caldwell School" are still clearly engraved along the top of the building, which still resembles an old school.

In 1958-1959, this school became a site of contention over desegregation, which had been recently mandated by the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954. In the days after the ruling, Greensboro school officials, much like many other school districts across North Carolina, acknowledged that compliance would be followed. In fact, Greensboro was the first city in the South to announce they would comply with the decision to integrate.

What transpired instead was a series of pupil placement laws, which established an application process for black students to request reassignments at white schools, usually based on a closer location. The school board's selection was rigid at best. In 1958, 18 applications were filled for transfers, and only 2 were approved. Later that year, two African American families applied to have their children attend the Caldwell Elementary School. The Caldwell School was all-white, with the all-black Pearson School physically attached. Their applications were at first denied, but then accepted because the parents threatened to file a lawsuit. The separate Caldwell and Pearson schools illustrated the unconstitutional "separate but equal" attitude that resonated throughout the South.

In response to the threatened lawsuit, the Caldwell PTA closed the Pearson School and organized the transfer of all 435 white Caldwell students. All-white faculty and staff were also replaced with black personnel. When the school year began in 1959, instead of being integrated, the Caldwell School became an all-black school.

Efforts to desegregate in Greensboro simply led to further isolation of the African-American neighborhood in Southside.

**Please turn back north on MLK Drive and walk towards the water fountain. Please stop at 351 MLK, which will be a large white Italianate style house on the right at the corner of MLK and Sues Blues Alley. Please pause your player until you reach the house.**

This house is called the T. Bernard House. It was the late 19<sup>th</sup> century residence of the Southern Railroad trainmaster, Bernard. It is one of the best examples of Italianate style in the city. Its Italianate features include flattened segmental arches, handcrafted cornices, and a glorious bay window. It is fitting to bring the tour to a close at this stop, since a railroad supervisor lived here. Let us remember the importance of the railroads in establishing Ole Asheboro as an industrial, economic center of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Greensboro. Look around again at the attempts today to recreate this affluent atmosphere. It is hard to imagine that in the 1940's and 50's this very street was once lined by dilapidated buildings that harbored unrelenting poverty and crime.

The Southside Plan is striving to restore the former prestigious character to this historical neighborhood. The new Southside is the result of gentrification that has resulted in a mixed racial community. Yet, we need to consider the impact of gentrification; have we lost the history of the working-class people of this community? Does gentrification cause us to forget that this neighborhood was once a segregated environment? Finally, has gentrification recovered the mixed income living pattern that typified this type of community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? The aesthetics of Southside are undeniably alluring, but does it cause us to forget the social and economic issues that confronted earlier residents of Greensboro?

We hope you have enjoyed your tour of the evolution of Southside. We truly appreciate your taking the time to learn about one of Greensboro's most important neighborhoods. Please return to our website and enjoy the other walking tours of Greensboro.