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FROM THE FIELD

Windows to the Past: People, Place, and Memory in Downtown Greensboro

Benjamin Filene and the Windows to the Past Project Team

Benjamin Filene, director of public history and associate professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and graduate students collaborated on Windows to the Past: People, Places & Memory in Downtown Greensboro, a multi-faceted project that offers public audiences different ways of "touring" downtown and making connections between people, streetscapes, and sense of place.

Have you ever wondered what a favorite downtown spot was twenty-five, fifty, or even one hundred years ago? Six museum studies students at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro have spent the last year-and-a-half trying to figure out just that. They have been poring through Greensboro's city directories, deeds, census records, photographs, fire insurance maps, and classified ads, as well as examining the structures themselves and conducting oral interviews.

How does one make the case for local history? My students receive master's degrees in history with a concentration in museum studies (other students in the program concentrate in historic preservation). As future curators, site managers, museum educators, and directors, they need to wrestle with how to do meaningful history that matters to a community.

Every year I have the students carry out a local project that involves research, interpretation, design, and fabrication of public products for and with community partners. For the 2011 class, I posed a particularly challenging question: how can one uncover and share the "hidden histories" of downtown Greensboro's buildings? This was not just a research task but a challenge of interpretation and collaboration. Students established partnerships with Downtown Greensboro, Inc., Action Greensboro, Inc., Elsewhere Collaborative, and students in

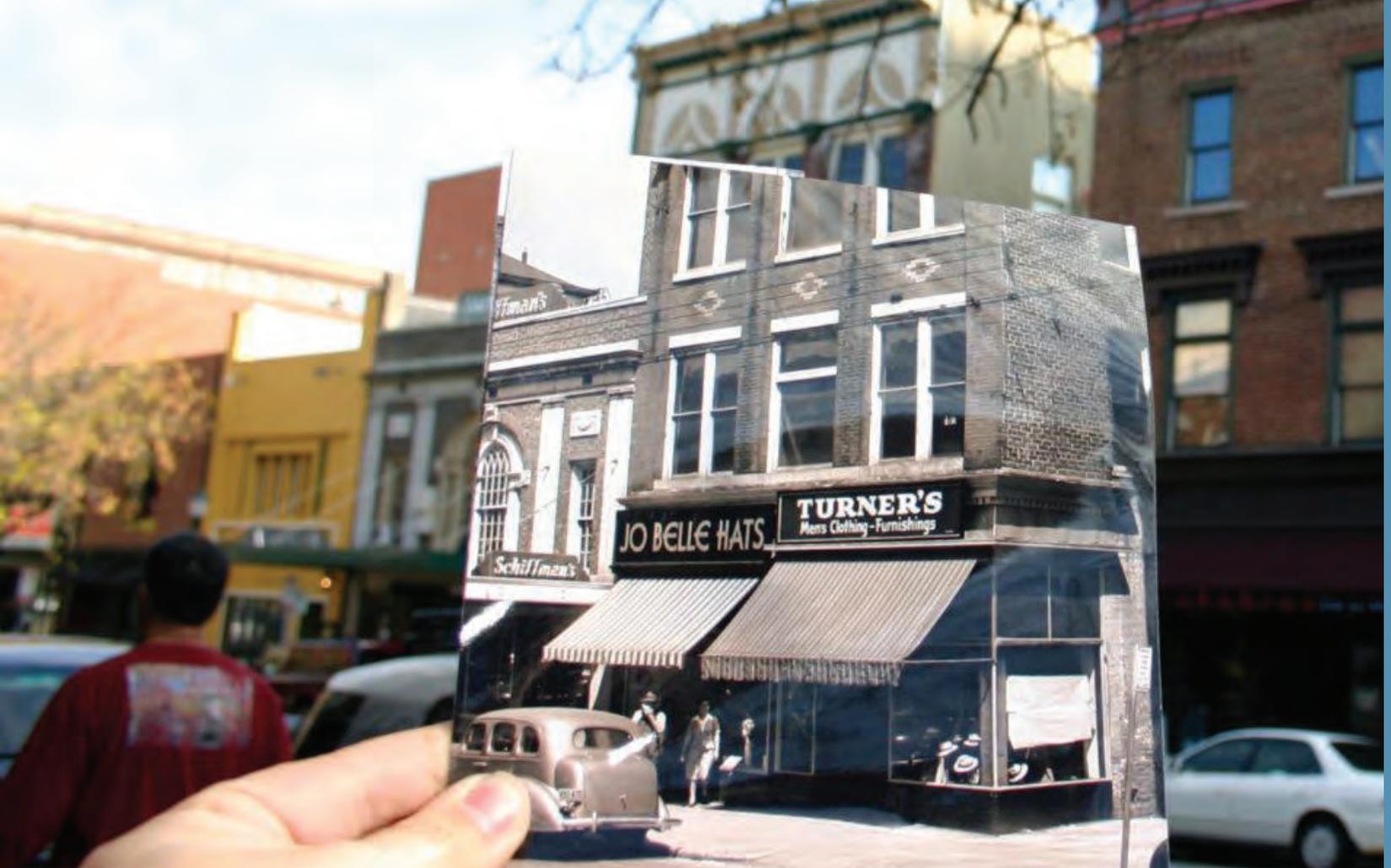
the graduate seminar in digital humanities/digital history taught at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill by Robert C. Allen and Pamela Lach, creators of the Main Street, Carolina software platform. The students funded their work through a grant from the North Carolina Humanities Council. As they pored through public records and conducted oral interviews, they looked for connections among the tales and tidbits they were uncovering. In the end, they were struck by how their findings offered a rich way of seeing downtown Greensboro's sense of place evolve: changing ideas of race, class, and gender shaped who was central to and who was marginalized from the downtown community.

While buildings are the starting point, the goal was to "repopulate" the past by sharing human stories. The *Windows to the Past* team created window-front displays, a printed self-guided tour, a website, blog, and a podcast; and they partnered with UNC at Chapel Hill students to design and implement an interactive web-based tour using the Main Street, Carolina software platform.

Throughout the project, a core theme was voice — giving voice to mute buildings, understanding whose voice was being amplified and silenced in the historical record, allowing interviewees to speak in their own voice. As well, the students worked hard to find a shared voice through which they themselves could speak as public historians. With that in mind, the reflections below are the students' own — testaments to their ability to embrace how small-scale history can open up big



The Windows to the Past team. (L to R): Benjamin Filene, Kelli Landing, Felicia Lowrance, Alaina McKee, Amelia Gallo, Stephanie Krysiak, Sam Berton.



Schiffman's Jewelry Company, Greensboro, then and now. Founded by Simon Schiffman in 1893, Schiffman's Jewelry Company began on the 300 block of South Elm Street, but moved into the Pythian Building storefront in 1923. Vintage photo courtesy Greensboro Historical Museum Archives. 2012 composite photo by Alaina McKee.

questions and invite new ways of seeing the world around us.

In the hopes that the research they found will reach the widest possible audience, they created multiple ways of “touring” downtown. The first is through window-front exhibit panels, featured in sixteen buildings downtown until May 1, 2012. Each of these panels features stories about the people who worked, lived, and passed through each of those buildings. To accompany these panels, they created a walking tour brochure. Another way to explore downtown stories is the website: <http://mainstreet.lib.unc.edu/projects/greensboro>. The website contains information from over thirty buildings downtown. Here you can find more stories, pictures, fire insurance maps, and audio clips.

Through the Ordinary: Rediscovering Greensboro's History

The *Windows to the Past* team offers a small sample of the stories uncovered about Greensboro's history. The students

hope this project will inspire others to keep digging for more stories about the city. History isn't just about the presidents, businessmen, and national events. It is made every day through average people leading their lives. Schiffman's Jewelry Company offers one example.

The original store was across the street because the township divides in half in the middle of Elm Street. Ladies would not go down the west side of the street. The east side was for the women of ill-repute and their friends and neighbors. In 1936, a tenant left a cigarette lit and burned the building down. In 1937 Mr. Charles Hunt built the existing building as it is today, and we stayed in the same location.

~ Arnold “Tony” Schiffman, grandson of founder Simon Schiffman

One Man's Dream Creates Two Communities

Trains bring people, merchandise, and ideas through towns. But they can also divide them. The train tracks on Elm Street did just that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, Greensboro owes its nickname, the Gate City, to the large number of trains that passed through town each day. During his tenure as governor of North Carolina, John Motley Morehead was instrumental in developing the railroad in our state. In 1850 he became the first president of the North Carolina Railroad. During his farewell address to the North Carolina Railroad stockholders, Morehead said, "Living, I have spent five years of the best portion of my life in the service of the North Carolina Railroad. Dead, I wish to be buried alongside of it in the bosom of my own beloved Carolina." As Morehead had envisioned, the city flourished with the construction of the railroad. Southern Railroad Company opened its first passenger station on Elm Street on June

Carved into the stone above the main entrance is "SOUTHERN RAILWAY." When the building was constructed in 1927, the Southern Railway Company used Greensboro as a main hub for both passenger and freight trains. In the 1940s, more than forty trains moved through the station each day. Currently the building is named the "J. Douglas Galyon Depot" after Douglas Galyon, a Guilford County resident who was Chairman of the North Carolina Board of Transportation from 2001 to 2010. Passenger trains still move out of the depot, except now they are controlled by the Amtrak system. Photo courtesy Greensboro Historical Museum Archives.



Hamburger Square, about 1940. Constructed in 1895, this building now houses Natty Greene's Pub and Brewing Company. In 1953 it was the famous hot dog-serving California Sandwich Shop. The building to its left was the occasionally dicey Blue Bird Billiard Parlor. Photo courtesy Greensboro Historical Museum Archives.

9, 1888. By the 1920s, Greensboro outgrew this station, and a new one was commissioned. It opened in 1927. Until the 1940s, nearly forty trains a day passed through Greensboro. During peak hours, Greensboro residents at either end of Elm Street were separated from one another due to this constant train traffic. Separate grocers, shops, music stores, banks, and even post offices grew up on both sides of the tracks.

A Division of Class

Like most cities, Greensboro has continually been divided by class. With the Occupy Wall Street movements that have swept the country, these distinctions have recently moved center stage. In Greensboro, class distinctions were just as visible in the

1950s. The economic distinctions were simply a way of life.

In the fifties, the area known as Hamburger Square, where the current-day Natty Greene's brew-pub stands, was known as the place for the rough-and-tumble lower classes of Greensboro. So-called "proper" women stayed away from the area. Children were told not to look sideways when driving through the square. At the same time, for some this was a place of inclusion. At Jim's Lunch, across the street from Natty Greene's, blacks and whites were served at the same counter. For many, this area holds great memories. For others, this area was a place of fear and danger. Either way, Hamburger Square became central to developing and creating different communities downtown.





Fordham's Drug Store is named for its founder, Christopher Columbus Fordham, Sr. Fordham, better known as "C.C.," who gambled when he decided to build a drugstore on the south side of the railroad tracks in 1898. This was new terrain for businesses, since most chose to stay on the more populated, northern side of the tracks. C. C.'s gamble paid off. When other entrepreneurs saw his success, they also began to enter this previously unknown territory, just as C.C. (and his famous namesake) had. Photo Courtesy Greensboro Historical Museum Archives.

The Man Behind the Fountain

Every community has some local members who are legends. Some, like John Motley Morehead, have been deemed historically important. Yet others who may not be famous outside of Greensboro strongly impacted the community just by being a part of it. Charlie Cleveland Sharpe, Jr., was one such local celebrity. Born in 1914, Sharpe graduated from High Point College and attended Duke Divinity School. However, upon graduating from Duke, he became a jack-of-all-trades. He was a Golden Gloves boxer, worked as a laborer, managed the Tool Box gas station, sold Bibles, wrote poetry, and even impersonated Santa Claus for the local children.

Sharpe's poems were famous in Greensboro. He authored "A Soda Jerk's Prayer" which hung behind the soda fountain at Fordham's Drug Store, where he worked for three decades. Jim Schlosser, formerly of the *Greensboro News & Record*, states that, "Charlie Sharpe was only Greensboro's second best known soda jerk," right behind O. Henry. According to Schlosser, "He loved telling the store's history and showing how he mixed beverages." It was at Fordham's that Charlie enjoyed rich conversations across the counter with his customers. However, according to his obituary, his true avocations lay elsewhere: he was "always ready to preach" and to play "the 'joyful noise' with his sweet violin."

Let me see Thine image in every soul
That lays a nickel on this bar.
And may I not forget that each is destined
In Thy Kingdom to become a shining star.

~ from "A Soda Jerk's Prayer"

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE POWER OF PUBLIC HISTORY:

Archibald, Robert R. *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999: an exploration of how personal memories and connections to place shape our sense of who we are, where we belong, and why history matters.

What We See: Advancing the Observations of Jane Jacobs. Stephen A. Goldsmith and Lynn Elizabeth, eds. Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2010: in tribute to Jacobs' 1961 book *The Death and Life of American Cities* (an early call to celebrate the vibrant messiness of urban life), a collection that looks at how we can understand and learn from cities today.

Hayden, Dolores. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996: an influential bridge between urban planning, public history, and architecture that builds from case studies of public projects in Los Angeles.

Isenberg, Alison. *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004: a history of how downtowns have evolved not only as economic centers but as cultural symbols of our cities and their times.

Stilgoe, John R. *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places*. New York: Walker and Company, 1998: a quirky and sometimes moving call to open our eyes and see our human-made landscapes with fresh eyes.

FOR MORE STORIES ABOUT GREENSBORO, VISIT:

<http://mainstreet.lib.unc.edu/projects/greensboro>