Walk across the university’s historic Horseshoe, and you’ll no doubt encounter the Maxcy Monument, a massive, granite stone memorial to the university’s first president.

But what if you could see Jonathan Maxcy himself and hear him talk about campus life in the early 19th century? There’s more to that antebellum story than you might imagine, with slaves and slave quarters as much a part of the campus landscape as the wealthy white families’ sons who made up the Carolina student body back then.

Conveying that complex story of the university’s past is the aim of a new iPad-based application being developed by computer science and media arts professors and students.

“By December we plan to have a working version of what’s called a critical interactive, an app that will make the institution’s 19th-century history more visible,” said Duncan Buell, a computer science professor on the team.

“The idea is that you could walk around the Horseshoe with an iPad and, depending on where you are, the ‘ghosts’ of different people — including students and slaves — from USC’s antebellum past appear on the screen and share some bit of historical information.”

The “Ghosts of South Carolina College” project is based on history professor Robert Weyeneth’s research on antebellum slaves at S.C. College, the precursor of the University of South Carolina. Like many colleges and universities across the country during that era, South Carolina College owned slaves and many of its students came from slave-holding families.

“One of the aims of this project is to make Weyeneth’s research more visible while providing an interactive context for learning more about the university’s history from that era,” said media arts assistant professor Heidi Rae Cooley.

Buell, Cooley and Weyeneth are working with students from computer science and the humanities to create the interactive in a special course. Users of the critical interactive will initially choose an icon representing either a census document or a bill of sale. Choose the first icon and you’ll experience the Horseshoe through the eyes of a 19th-century white male student; choose the second and the campus is seen from the perspective of a 19th-century slave.

“We think that experiencing the situation from both sides might help students and others accept and deal with some parts of the university’s history that are generally not mentioned,” Buell said.

Buell and Cooley plan to apply for grant funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities in January and from other foundations to expand the project. Eventually, they hope to tap into research conducted by another USC history professor, Bobby Donaldson, on the former Ward One neighborhood that was displaced in the 1960s by construction of the Carolina Coliseum.