

Slade, James: People That Do Right ^[1]

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Dr. James Slade: People That Do Right

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 2/11/2001. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Dr. James Slade is the sort of impossibly old-fashioned doctor who still makes house calls and has never thought about joining an HMO. For 35 years he has been practicing pediatrics and general medicine in his hometown of Edenton, in the northeastern part of the state. His dedication and soft-spoken, steady-as-a-rock demeanor are as much a part of local life as the Delray Chevrolet that he has driven to work every day since 1958.

Dr. Slade doesn't make much of it, but he was one of the first black medical school students at the University of North Carolina. With the help of the NAACP, black students had tried unsuccessfully to enroll at UNC graduate schools since the early 1930s. Under the leadership of [Frank Porter Graham](#) ^[3], UNC slowly changed. In 1936, when N&O editor Jonathan Daniels called for UNC to fire a professor for dining with an interracial group, Graham and other faculty defended the professor, a landmark moment in the state's history of race relations. This sort of openness to racial issues made NAACP lawyers believe that UNC would be a good first target for their campaign to integrate graduate schools in the South. This occurred first at UNC law school. Under a federal appeals court order, four black students entered the law school in 1951. Other graduate programs followed. Dr. Slade enrolled in the medical school after graduating from [North Carolina A&T](#) ^[4] in 1953. UNC integrated its undergraduate student body in 1955.

In 1990 UNC medical school awarded Dr. Slade one of its most prestigious honors, the Distinguished Service Award.

In [Dr. James Slade's words](#):



Dr. James Slade. Photo by Chris Seward, 2001. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I used to go through Chapel Hill sometimes on my way to A&T, but I never dreamed of going to medical school at the University of North Carolina. In 1951, though, UNC had begun to accept black students at the medical school. When I went I had already been accepted at Meharry, a black medical school in Nashville, Tenn., so I told him: because it's closer to home and cheaper. I also had some other things in mind. I didn't tell them this, but I felt like I could do the work as well as I was the second black medical student at UNC. Edward O. Diggs was the first black admitted to the medical school -- he was from Winston-Salem. The beginning of my first year was the beginning of his third year, so he graduated at the end. It was interesting. I remember the first time I went in the hospital cafeteria, the girls were a little skeptical about serving me. I guess they didn't know what to do. I went and talked to Diggs, and he told me that he hadn't had any problems there. When I got down to the cashier, she told me, "You'll have to sit over there in the corner." I started toward the corner, but then I stopped and I sat dead center. We didn't have but two girls in my class, and one of the girls came and sat down at By Diggs being there first, a lot of times I had somebody I could talk to. By my third year, after Diggs graduated, I was used to it somewhat. Of course, the third year of medical school is entirely different than the first two. In the first two years, At the beginning of my third year, the chief of surgery called me and talked to me. He said they didn't particularly think it was right, but they wanted to know if I would consent to work just on 3C -- the black patients' ward. The wards were sepe I went along with it. It wasn't anything I would have put a stamp of approval on, but, by the same token, I was willing to go ahead, at that point in time, and see what would work out. My white patients didn't resent my taking care of them, but t Obstetrics -- OB -- was hardest. OB was strictly divided down the line by race. On OB, where I should have been learning to do pelvic exams, they would never let me do them on white patients. I could only do them on black. And I only got ce I had no real problem with my instructors. I have to give credit where credit is due. There was one fellow in Embryology, Department of Anatomy, who was sort of prejudiced. It wasn't a secret. He would write in the newspaper how blacks wer The dormitory situation was pretty interesting. They had a dorm for freshman medical students, but they assigned me to another dormitory, Steele Hall. There were undergraduate students in the same dorm, and I was assigned to the top sec The black ladies that served our meals over at Lenoir Hall helped a great deal. Once in a while, one of them, in particular, would invite me to church, and then home to dinner. I got to know some of the people in the community. And when I gr Everything wasn't perfect in Chapel Hill, but I have never doubted my decision to go into medicine, and I never really regretted going to Chapel Hill. If I had wanted to go into obstetrics, it might have been a problem, but I wasn't. We have peo

David Cecelski explores North Carolina's history, one person at a time.

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[African Americans](#) ^[5]
[Biography](#) ^[6]
[Civil Rights](#) ^[7]
[Discrimination](#) ^[8]
[Education](#) ^[9]
[Medicine](#) ^[10]
[Personal and oral histories](#) ^[11]
[Physicians/Dentists/Other Medical Professionals](#) ^[12]
[Segregation](#) ^[13]
[Universities and colleges](#) ^[14]

Authors:

[Cecelski, David S.](#) ^[15]

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[Edenton](#) ^[17]

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Links

[1] <https://ncpedia.org/listening-to-history/slade-james>

- [2] <https://ncpedia.org/listening-to-history>
- [3] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/graham-frank-porter>
- [4] <https://ncpedia.org/north-carolina-agricultural-and-tec>
- [5] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/african-americans>
- [6] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term>
- [7] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/civil-rights>
- [8] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/race-discriminati>
- [9] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/education>
- [10] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/medicine>
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- [16] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/coastal-38>
- [17] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/coastal-56>
- [18] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/listening>