

## **Slade, Abisha** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Slade, Abisha**

by Nannie M. Tilley, 1994; Revised by Jared Dease, Government and Heritage Library, January 2023

#### **15 Sept. 1799–1870?**

Abisha Slade, tobacco farmer and local politician, was born in Caswell County <sup>[2]</sup>, the son of Ezekiel, a planter of northern Caswell County, and Mary Hubbard Slade. Reared in a comfortably situated family of large landholdings, he wrote well and stood high in his county, serving as clerk of the court for Caswell from 1840 to 1852. He also carried on extensive farming operations and owned considerable property in Yanceyville <sup>[3]</sup>, the seat of Caswell County.

Slade's claim to fame lay in the development of a sure formula for the production of flue-cured tobacco—the basic step in



Bright Leaf Tobacco's marker is located on SR 1511 (Blanch Road) west of Blanch in Caswell County. Photo is presented on North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program.

<sup>[4]</sup> the production of a type of leaf that began the great revolution in the tobacco industry and laid the foundation for such fortunes as those of Richard J. Reynolds <sup>[5]</sup>, Julian S. Carr <sup>[6]</sup>, the Dukes, and others. By 1839 it had long been known that a sandy loam soil occasionally produced a bright yellow leaf of tobacco. In that year, largely by accident, Slade began efforts to make production of such leaf a certainty. On a rainy night in 1839, a person Abisha had enslaved, Stephen, fell asleep while he was supposed to be watching a barn of curing leaf tobacco. Waking suddenly and finding that the small open fires in the barn had almost died down, Stephen seized charred butts of logs from the adjacent blacksmith shop and placed them on the dying fires. This sudden application of drying heat drove the moisture from the curing leaves and a beautiful unsplotched yellow leaf resulted. Abisha Slade, not understanding the exact cause of this amazing curing, began experimentation that by 1856 resulted in a sure formula for producing cured yellow leaf based on the original practice discovered by Stephen. In Lynchburg, Va., he sold his crop of that year for an unusually large sum, which attracted newspaper comment in and far beyond the Old Bright Tobacco Belt. Though Slade's curings were made with charcoal, it was not long before wood-curing flues were evolved for the application of a drying heat at the critical juncture of curing. Thus tobacco grown in sandy loam and cured by Slade's formula, first called bright leaf, eventually became known as fluecured tobacco—the major type produced in the United States.

Slade was known far and wide among tobacco growers of the Virginia-Carolina area. He was an enthusiastic man who actually traversed the tobacco belt to explain the details of his curing formula. Cramming his overcoat pockets with samples of his bright leaf for use in teaching farmers to produce the same type, Slade traveled over much of the area of North Carolina and Virginia known now as the Old Bright Belt. Major Robert Lipscomb Ragland of Halifax County, Va., who followed Slade as the expert grower of bright leaf, saw the "first sample of fine gold leaf" in the hands of Captain Abisha Slade at an agricultural meeting at Cluster Springs, Va., on September 6, 1856. Slade had gone there "by solicitation and appointment" to teach the farmers "the new process of curing yellow tobacco."

After the Civil War <sup>[7]</sup> and the emancipation of enslaved laborers, the workers Slade had enslaved were freed; thus, Slade's property was no longer maintainable or profitable. He lost all of his property. Though he was the progenitor of several tobacco fortunes, he died in poverty. He was married three times: on January 25, 1826 to Mary K. Harrison, on April 23, 1846 to Mary Graves, and later to Sarah Taylor. He had at least three children, one named Mary Jane by his first wife and another, Pauline Williams, by his third wife. Slade was buried in a cemetery on Rattlesnake Creek <sup>[8]</sup> near Blanch <sup>[9]</sup>, in northern Caswell County. His grave is unmarked and for many years his name was badly garbled in the various accounts of his accomplishments.

#### **References:**

Bible of Ezekiel Slade (possession of Mrs. Florine Slade Daily in 1937).

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Anderson Slade (son of slave Stephen, Blanch, N.C.), personal contact, 2 June 1937.

Pauline Williams Slade (daughter of Abisha Slade, Danville, Va.), personal contact, 26 June 1937.

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Winston-Salem *Southern Tobacco Journal*, 15 June 1920, 25 Sept. 1930.

### Additional Resources:

Crockett, Cheryle J. 2008. *My Slade phenomenon*. Pittsburgh, Pa: Dorrance Pub. Co., Inc. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/my-slade-phenomenon/oclc/253646095> <sup>[12]</sup> (accessed July 25, 2014).

Kendall, Katharine Kerr. 1990. *Caswell County, North Carolina marriage bonds, 1778-1868*. Baltimore, MD: Clearfield. <http://search.lib.unc.edu/search?R=UNCb1786127> <sup>[13]</sup> (accessed July 25, 2014).

Search results for 'Bright Leaf Tobacco' in North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program: <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?MarkerId=G-5> <sup>[14]</sup> (accessed July 28, 2014).

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### Authors:

[Tilley, Nannie M.](#) <sup>[18]</sup>

### Origin - location:

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[Yanceyville](#) <sup>[20]</sup>

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[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.](#) <sup>[21]</sup>

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