

# History of African Americans at UNC-Chapel Hill

By Davené Swinson



The first four students admitted to UNC-CH graduate and professional schools were (from l. to r.) James Lassiter, Floyd McKissick, Kenneth Lee, and Harvey Beech.

Although the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill did not officially open its doors to African Americans as students until the mid-twentieth century, African Americans have always played an important role in this university's history. From the slave labor used to build the university in its early history to the students who fill its campus today, UNC-CH has been shaped into a top-notch school by this portion of the population who form the second largest group on campus.

During the early history of the university, slaves were sent to the school by their masters to peddle fruit and other goods and to entertain the UNC students. One such slave, named George Moses Horton, made a permanent impact on the University. His entertainment for the students included speeches and impromptu poetry and led to the selling of his poetry for 25 to 75 cents. Horton gave a speech for the 4th of July in 1852 to UNC-

CH students in Gerrard Hall. Today, Professor Trudier O'Harris runs the George Moses Horton Society for the Study of African-American Poetry that is named in his honor.

The mid-1800s also saw several other African Americans on this campus. A small group of masons built the stone walls along the campus and the Forest Theatre. In 1868, a guard of soldiers was sent to take possession of the University by Governor William Holden and the Board of Trustees until University President David Swain was removed from office. Rounding off this era was the diligent support and dedication to the University of former slave Wilson Swain Caldwell. Caldwell was the first employee of the University when it reopened after the Civil War in 1875. A statue dedicated to him can now be found in the Old Chapel Hill Cemetery.

The twentieth century began a long, overdue process of integrating African Americans into the student and faculty populations. In 1933, Thomas