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Nancy Rohr

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# **The Rosenwald Plan: Architecture for Education**

*Nancy Rohr*

The Rosenwald Plan helped fund rural black schools in the South from 1913 to 1937. At a time when education was seen by most as a luxury, the communities that took advantage of the Rosenwald Plan gave their children opportunities and experiences that have since become synonymous with the simple wood schoolhouse. One of these communities was right here—in Madison County, AL.

## ***Rural Southern Education: History and Background***

Schooldays for southern rural children often spark fond memories of a simpler, golden time. The day might have started and ended the same for most children: the hustle of gathering up schoolwork and lunch and leaving the house to join friends on the way to school, listening to the bell calling to hurry up—or to drag one’s feet, prolonging the doom of homework not prepared.

The darkened cloakroom retained the smell of damp coats and the excitement of dark places. Each morning formally started with the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag, demanding recitation of words that were sometimes as difficult to pronounce as to understand. At least the heartfelt “thank you” prayer was more simple to grasp.

Rural children assembled in a one-room schoolhouse, cold in the winter and hot in the summer, with a water bucket and dipper out back. Still farther out back was the privy. The children sat two to a desk, where the serious work of reading, writing, ’rithmetic and recitation filled the day. The spirit of competition prevailed each Friday with the weekly spelling bee.

Recess brought freedom again—all the outside games seemed to involve running and shouting. There was no playground equipment; no one expected any. A rock wrapped in rags and tied tightly became a ball, and jacks were played with smooth pebbles. If a shade tree was nearby, on warm days the children could enjoy eating lunches brought from home.

Often, the teacher prudently read aloud to let the younger children rest and recover. Later, walking home always took longer than the morning trip to school. Notes were compared, girls giggled, boys kicked stones along the way and there was much skipping and laughter.

There was a sense of comfort and continuity about the day's routine. The teacher always knew each child. She knew the brothers and sisters, and even the parents, who had come before. She knew what church was—or was not—attended. Most likely she knew which families were having a more difficult time than usual making ends meet. And of course, she always knew which boys had a crush on her.

The setting for African-American education, particularly in the rural South, was certainly inadequate at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While some children were privately taught, it was against the law prior to the Civil War to teach slaves to read or write (except in Tennessee). The Freedmen's Bureau, created by the federal government during the War, maintained segregation and minimal educational quality for African-American children. By 1870, however, funds were lacking, and before long, the Bureau's responsibilities were taken over by individual states (Bond).

City school children may have fared better, but rarely were regular school buildings provided for rural students. Generally, African-American schools were housed in local churches and lodge halls. Supplies were sparse or nonexistent—as was true for rural white schools as well.

As in most rural locations, a teacher with any high school education was considered more than well qualified. Some teachers were hired just to fill available spaces, without proper credentials but at least—it was hoped—with a sincere desire to educate children. Teachers often boarded in the neighborhood with a welcoming family, but this arrangement inevitably added to that family's financial burden, with perhaps a little less food to go around the table at mealtime.

School sessions were short, usually two to four months at the most. In the winter, older boys gathered brush before the school day started and the girls carried it inside. Before the county took on the responsibility, parents supplied much-needed wood or coal for the stove, but there

wasn't always enough to heat the building. Former students recall wearing their coats all day to stay warm.

Some communities were able to sponsor summer school for two months when there was no regular school. However, as recently as 1954, all rural schools in Madison County were on a "cotton picking" schedule, and classes were discontinued until the cotton crop was harvested (*Heritage and History*).

The children may not have recognized the sacrifices made by parents and leaders in the community to provide them with schooling, but for some, it was the only formal structure of their young lives. Times were hard; they had always *been* hard. Parents and teachers hoped to provide a way for the boys and girls to better themselves and perhaps prepare for a brighter tomorrow. School days were often very different for black and white children of the rural South—and they were often alike.

### ***The Rosenwald Plan***

In the early 1900s, men of great wealth and social compassion emerged as leaders in the United States. A Golden Age of Philanthropy appeared with some of these industrial giants. The fortunes shared by Carnegie, Rockefeller, McCormick, Guggenheim, Duke, DuPont and Kellogg had a profound influence on giving and endowments in this country. Among the newly mega-rich was the son of German-Jewish immigrants who had settled in Springfield, IL. Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932) was to change the perception of gift-giving in America even more.



***Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932)—***  
*Photo circa 1931. Courtesy*  
*Chicago Tribune. <http://www.tribads.com/tribute/bio30.html>.*

At the age of 63, Rosenwald reached the peak of his business career, becoming president of Sears, Roebuck & Company. Acts of philanthropy became, in effect, his second career (Stein). Rosenwald had a

deep passion for this country and witnessed its transformation by technology. He “saw himself as a public servant, the temporary steward of treasure entrusted to him for the purpose of bettering the world” (Embree 13, 24). Moreover, Rosenwald felt “governmental support would only lead to permanent dependence and a cycle of even deeper poverty” (Dalin 4, 37).

In accordance, Rosenwald gave to a far-reaching range of charities, including numerous worldwide Jewish organizations. He initiated and was the principal contributor to the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. His philanthropical gifts included grants for hospitals and universities. He helped subsidize the building of YMCAs for segregated blacks and provided dental clinics in public schools. Rosenwald’s major effort, however, involved construction of schools for African-Americans in the rural South.

Rosenwald had read Booker T. Washington’s autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, and was particularly impressed with the concept of self-help and action. Washington had written that “the actual sight of a first-class house that a Negro has built is ten times more potent than pages of discussion about a house that he ought to build, or perhaps could build” (Werner 115).

Already having concluded that “it was always better to help people become gainfully employed than to give them alms” (Dalin 37), Rosenwald intended to promote self-reliance and self-help—not to become a supporter of the welfare state. Much later, in 1930, he wrote, “real endowments are not money, but ideas” (“Trend...” 749).

At Washington’s invitation, Rosenwald visited Tuskegee Institute in Alabama at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was impressed with the energetic progress he saw there.

Rosenwald understood the education movement for African-Americans, particularly in the rural environment, to be passive and stagnant. Reports from the time state that “in Alabama, a state where half the population was black, only 20 percent of the black children were enrolled in school as compared with 60 percent of white children,” and “in all the South there was not a single standard 8<sup>th</sup> grade rural Negro public school” nor any formal high school (Dalin 38). Teachers in the

African-American schools averaged an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, and their annual salary in many states was less than \$150 (Embree 38). But at Tuskegee, Rosenwald perceived the “energy and achievement” that was possible with local commitment and effort (Mansell 2).

Within a year, Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington developed a plan to make matching grants available to rural communities for education, gearing those grants toward people who wanted to help themselves and would become integral partners in the system. According to the plan, two acres of land had to be deeded for the school and the matching funds raised before construction could start. Unless the land was donated, it was often difficult for tenant farmers of modest means to purchase the acreage and raise the cash for construction of the building.

In spite of the struggle, Rosenwald agreed by 1913 to give \$300 to each of six one-room schools in Alabama that met this criterion—and nearly 100 more buildings quickly followed. The enterprise worked so well that the Rosenwald School Building Fund was formally incorporated in 1917. The Fund remained relatively modest until 1927, when Rosenwald increased the Fund’s endowment to \$20 million with a gift of Sears & Roebuck stock.

With this extensive gift, one condition was imposed: the Fund would spend itself out of existence no later than 25 years after his death, thus avoiding what he called “the Dead Hand in Philanthropy.” His concept was designed to prevent the officers and trustees from becoming preoccupied merely with conserving capital. They would “not have time to grow stale, nor to build themselves into self-promoting bureaucracy” (“Principles...” 600). He recognized that social conditions change too rapidly to store up large sums of money for the future. His fund would serve the needs of the day, and future generations would provide for their own needs as they arose (Embree 208, 31).

Altogether, an astounding 5,358 buildings were erected in 883 counties of 15 Southern states with the aid of the Rosenwald Fund. This number includes school buildings, teachers’ homes and vocational training facilities. In 1913, even before the Fund was solidified, the first school was constructed in Nostalsulga, AL—twelve miles from Tuskegee (“How Firm...”). A second room soon had to be added because of overcrowding.

The next 78 schools built were in Alabama, with the total number in this state eventually reaching 382 schools in 64 of 67 counties (“How Firm..”). Northern Alabama communities were able to build seven schools in Lauderdale County, five in Limestone, three in Jackson, eight in Colbert, four in Lawrence, two each in Morgan and Franklin, one in Marshall and nine in Madison County.

In the latter county, four of the schools were one-room buildings. Five had two rooms. Costs ranged from \$850 at Graysom to \$3,700 at Toney (Mansell 52, 54-59). In 1916, the state legislature offered public money for black schools that amounted to half of that raised by local communities.

Washington and Rosenwald had hoped for more cooperation toward their building plan. They had hoped that seeing the efforts of the blacks to better their communities would change the entrenched attitudes and behavior of many Southern whites.

Rosenwald had always had two goals in funding black educational needs. First, he wanted “to stimulate public agencies to take a larger share of social responsibility.” He also hoped “to spur a pattern of cooperation that would bring about lasting change, well beyond the life of the grant for schoolhouse construction.[...] The program was projected not merely as a series of schoolhouses, but as a community enterprise in cooperation between citizens and officials, white and colored” (Hanchett 398). Unfortunately, this was not the way it would be; only 4 percent of total funding came from private white contributions and Madison County’s white contribution was only slightly higher (Hanchett 426; Mansell 57).

Booker T. Washington’s view of schooling for blacks is today often seen as merely a limited means of advancement. Washington felt that once basic education skills were taught to all children, any continued education mandated then-typical roles. Rural education past the 8th grade—for black *and* white children—was generally considered unnecessary unless one planned to teach or, even more rarely, to enter a profession.

Rosenwald agreed that industrial education and domestic or agricultural science were the only futures possible for poor rural children.

**Table 1: Funding of Rosenwald Schools-Madison County, AL**

School	Type (# of teachers)	Cost (\$)	Contributions(\$)			
			Negro	White	Public	Rosenwald
Conyers	2	1,300	550	--	450	300
Councill	2	3,200	1,600	--	900	700
Farmer's	1	1,650	900	100	450	200
Graysom	1	850	300	--	150	400
Horton	1	950	350	--	300	300
Mt. Carmel	2	1,050	450	--	300	300
Mt. Lebanon	2	3,050	1,500	--	950	600
Silver Hill	1	950	350	--	300	300
Toney	2	3,700	1,150	900	1,000	700

*Source: Julius Rosenwald Papers. Nashville, TN: Fisk University Library Special Collections; Mansell and Binkley 24, 57.*

*Editor's Note: The funding and cost of each Madison County Rosenwald School varied according to need, population and year. The "Type" column indicates not only the number of teachers, but the number of classrooms in each case.*

Boys were taught farm mechanics and agriculture to be better farmers. Girls were educated about home health, sewing and cooking to be better wives for the farmers. Many of the larger schools maintained a shop or home arts room. The two acres of land mandated by Rosenwald for the matching funds made farm gardens available on the property.

By 1932, Rosenwald had contributed \$4.4 million to build schools for rural black children; blacks contributed \$4.7 million; government funds matched \$18.1 million and other foundations provided \$1.2 million (Wooster).



Julius Rosenwald died in 1932. The construction of new school buildings officially ceased that year.

In his lifetime, it is estimated Rosenwald shared between \$60 million and \$70 million with various social causes (Embree 15). At the time of his death, there were outpourings of affection and sadness from around the world.

The Rosenwald program, which began its achievements in Alabama, was a milestone in black rural southern education. The Rosenwald Fund sparked an energy to provide the means for thousands of children to have their first opportunity for regular attendance in school. Perhaps even more importantly, the program ignited activity on the part of parents to work toward education for the future of their children.

Though the buildings have all but disappeared, the nine completed schools in Madison County—and their living legacy—represented sacrifices of love and pride.

*Nancy Rohr is a former teacher and tutor. She holds a B.A. in Elementary Education from Marshall University and a M.A. in Reading Education from Alabama A&M. As a researcher of local history, she has been published in the magazines Silver, Alabama Heritage, Historic Huntsville Review and the Quarterly. Ms. Rohr would like to thank Shelia Gilbreath of Interlibrary Loan at the Huntsville Public Library for her assistance.*

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