

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 27
Number 4 *The Rosenwald Plan: Architecture for
Education*

Article 3

12-21-2001

The Architecture of Rosenwald Schools

Historic Huntsville Foundation

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Historic Huntsville Foundation (2001) "The Architecture of Rosenwald Schools," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*: Vol. 27: No. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol27/iss4/3>

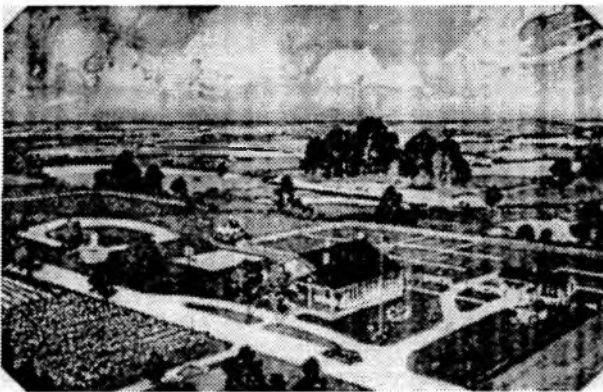
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The Architecture of Rosenwald Schools

The earliest Rosenwald Schools were built under the guidance of local carpenters. They built what they knew; styles and structures resembled other buildings in the area. The farm and church vernacular was adapted to what the community considered appropriate for a school. Many of these structures, although funded through Rosenwald, looked nothing like the Rosenwald Schools that have been identified.

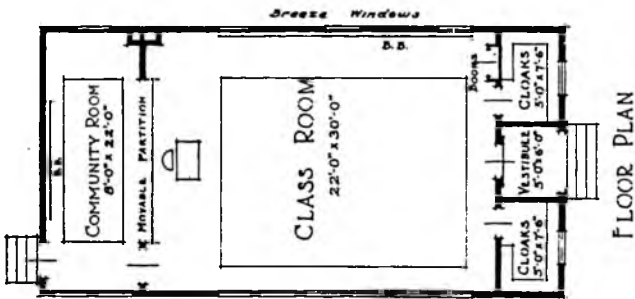
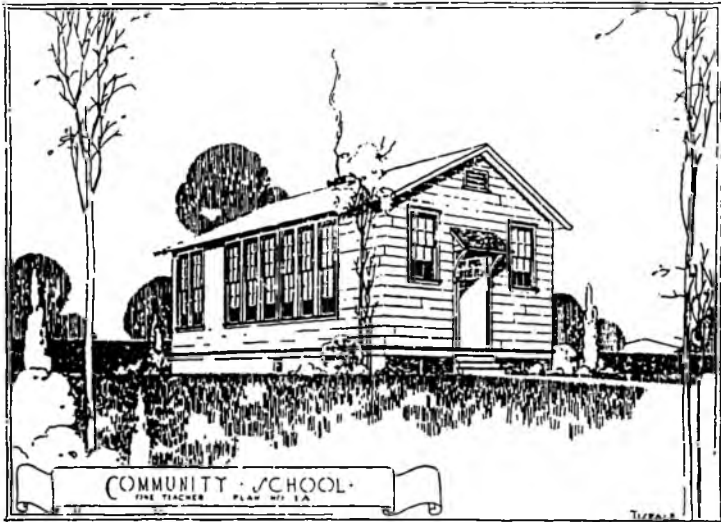
In 1920, as the Rosenwald Fund gathered momentum, flaws appeared in some school construction projects. To alleviate problems, Samuel Leonard Smith became General Field Agent with headquarters in Nashville. Smith, a highly trained educator, developed floor plans and specifications for a variety of school needs. He published his standardized building designs in 1924, in a small booklet called *Community School Plans* (Mansell & Binkley 29).

These detailed layouts did away with the need for architect's fees, further reducing costs, and the plans became so popular that white communities as well as black soon adopted his approach. The pamphlet included contractor's specifications; the floor plans included bills of material. Parents and concerned citizens would know exactly how much material was needed (121 bags of Portland cement, three kegs of



*Ideal Site Layout for Rosenwald School Grounds—
The site plan from Smith's booklet includes a four-room
shop to the right of the school and teacher housing
across the street. Courtesy Mansell & Binkley.*

commercial nails, 166 linear feet of metal gutters, etc.). Smith even included designs for teachers' homes and sanitary school privies, as well as suggestions for selecting and developing each site.



ONE-TEACHER
 COMMUNITY SCHOOL PLAN NO I-A
 TO FACE NORTH OR SOUTH ONLY

The typical building was roughly a 20-foot-by-40-foot rectangular unit—simple and functional, with exterior hints of Colonial Revival or Craftsman detailing.

Weatherboard, a style of overlapping wood siding, was the finish of choice for the wood frame structures. Smith suggested three exterior

color schemes: “White trimmed in gray or gray trimmed in white or cream would be attractive. If it is desired to use a wood preservative stain, a nut brown trimmed in white or cream would be satisfactory” (Smith).

All schools contained a brick chimney for fire safety, a cloak room and a space for industrial activities (either an additional room or a separate building, depending on community). Every school building of two or more teachers included movable doors, allowing rooms to be opened into a large auditorium for use as a community center.

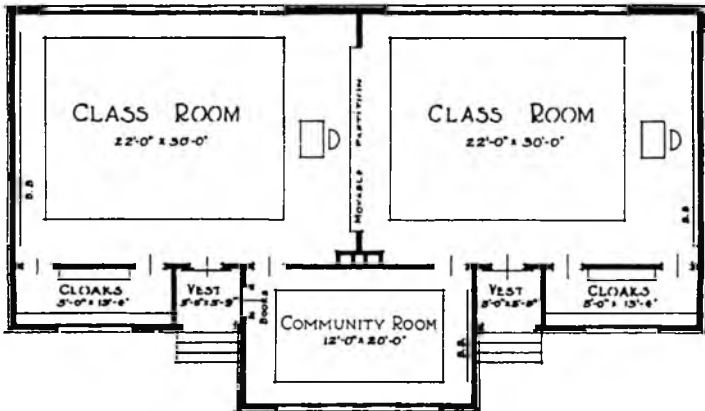
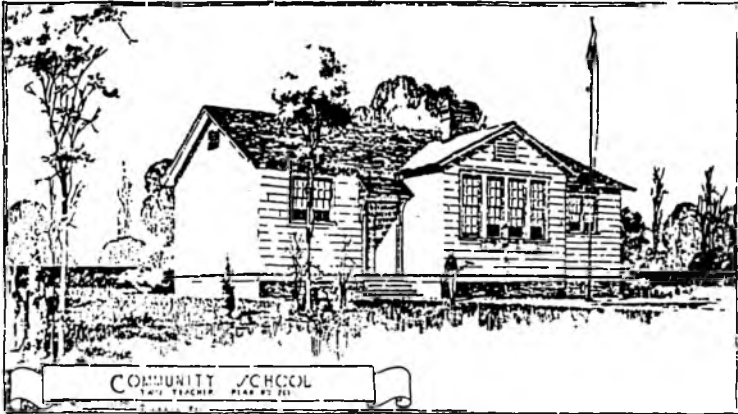
The most noticeable feature, however, was the use of natural lighting; electricity was generally not available in the rural South at the time. Smith incorporated the lighting and heating designs of Fletcher B. Dresslar, his teacher and mentor. The sets of multiple double-hung windows, which take full advantage of the east-west light, make the Rosenwald schools immediately recognizable today (Mansell 28-30).

The buildings were sited so that southern exposure was limited, to avoid excessive heat, and to account for the inability to ventilate when windows were shaded. The shades for the east and west windows were tan in color, eliminating heat absorption caused by traditional dark green shades. The interior color schemes available—“cream ceiling with buff walls and walnut trim or an ivory ceiling with light gray walls and walnut stained trim”—increased reflection of light and kept the rooms from feeling small (Hanchett). The desks were to be placed so that windows were to the left of the students, preventing shadows from their writing arms (assuming, of course, that all writers were right-handed). Most modern classrooms are still arranged as Smith suggested, despite the use of electric lighting.

By the 1950s, rural workers began to migrate to better jobs in the northern cities. Rural population declined. Improved roads and school buses allowed for a more efficient system, and school consolidation became the trend for those who remained on the farms. Integration gathered large numbers of school children from a distance into single large buildings. The use of small neighborhood schoolhouses, including Rosenwald schools, fell by the wayside. Though many of the buildings survived as community centers, most were simply abandoned over

time, used for community storage or dismantled to salvage lumber and other reusable construction elements.

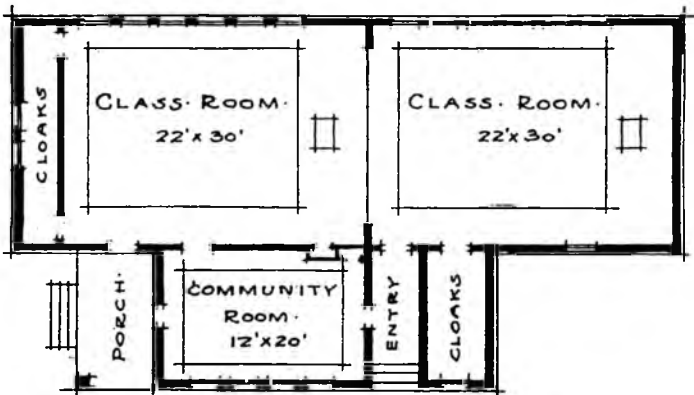
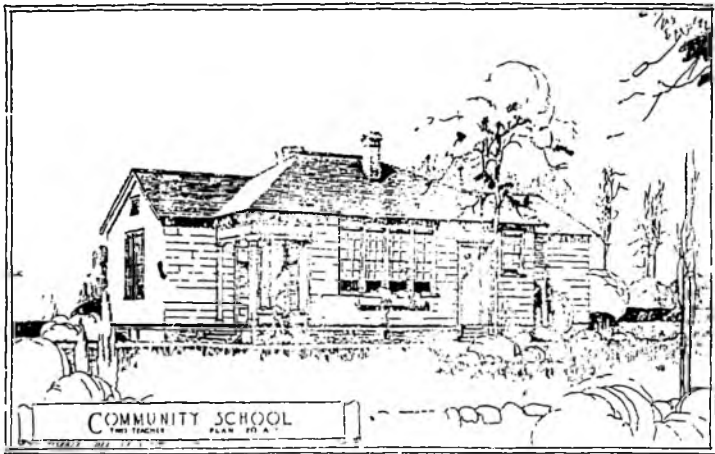
Throughout the South, a few buildings have survived. Currently in use are Rosenwald Schools in Panama City, FL; Rosenwald St. David School in Darlington, SC; Rosenwald Elementary in Society Hill, SC; Rosenwald Dunbar in Nicholasville, KY; and Rosenwald Elementary in



FLOOR PLAN No 20
TWO TEACHER COMMUNITY SCHOOL
TO FACE EAST OR WEST ONLY

South Bay, FL. These schools are alive and well with web sites on the Internet.

In North Carolina, locals are trying to raise money to save the former Walnut Cove Colored Elementary and the London School at Walnut Grove.



· FLOOR PLAN No. 20-A ·
· COMMUNITY SCHOOL ·
TO FACE NORTH OR SOUTH ONLY.

Closer to home, a rare brick Rosenwald building remains in western Colbert County, AL. Leighton Training School was built in 1929 on 11 acres. The school later became the basis for Leighton Middle School. It closed in 1993.

Still performing its mission, Cherokee Middle School in Cherokee, AL, has a web site and continues to educate children.

The architectural impact of Rosenwald's fund and Smith's plans helped insure an equality of school experience that is reflected in former students' memories. The simple structures did not pretend to be ostentatious monuments, but were buildings that provided a space for children to grow, to learn and to be part of their community in comfort.

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