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Rosenwald Schools in Madison County

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Rosenwald Schools in Madison County

Many communities applied to and were approved by the Rosenwald Fund, but records show that many failed—for whatever reasons—to complete the agreement, and were canceled. Those that completed the agreement began building schools in Madison County in 1913.

The following includes historical information drawn from school and town records, as well as the recollections of those individuals who attended them during their childhood.

Conyers School

Conyers School received approval from the Rosenwald Fund about 1913, when Tom Conyers made the property available for sale. This two-teacher school at Gurley was found where the eastern side of Section Line Road meets Hereford Road today. As more children attended, the building grew to include three rooms and another, smaller

chamber was also utilized as a make-shift classroom.

Eventually, the building also served as the community's junior high school and a meeting place for youth activities such as Boy Scouts (*Historical...Scouting*).

In 1957, Conyers School became part of the consolidation of several schools at Brownsboro.

T. David Freeman, later mayor of Gurley, recalls attending his first 10



Conyers School—The building was used as the Conyer Junior High at the time this photo was taken. Photo courtesy of The Huntsville/Madison County Public Library (H/MCPL).

years of school at Conyers Rosenwald, from 1936 to 1946. He and his sister walked the three miles to and from school until his father got the job driving the school bus. The boys gathered brush for kindling in the winter and laid the fire for the next morning. His teacher for the first three grades, Lillian McCrary, began each morning with a devotion.

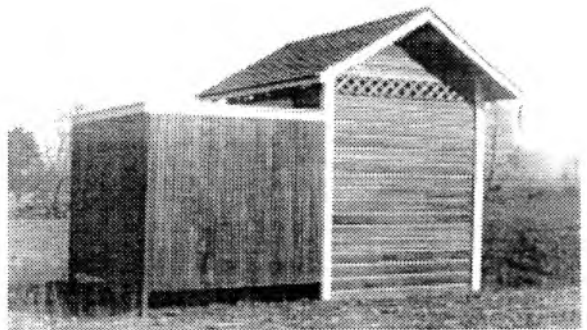
At recess, the boys often fashioned a homemade softball and batted with a sturdy stick. Freeman recalls that he might have been the best marble shooter, but admits there weren't a lot of the old boys around to argue with him about that. The girls played hopscotch and other games. The children ate their noon meal inside at their desks; Freeman carried peanut butter and crackers for lunch, but would trade for whatever might prove interesting in another boy's lunch bag.

The traditional subjects were covered at Conyers, he says. Poetry and Bible verses were memorized, and at the weekly spelling bee everyone competed intensely. All the children wanted to excel, to be considered smart. Parents encouraged that attitude, and poor grades were just unacceptable at home.

Councill Rosenwald School

The two-room, two-teacher Councill Rosenwald School was built during the 1925-1926 budget year, on two acres of land. Grades 1-6 were taught in the frame building, which originally was situated northwest of

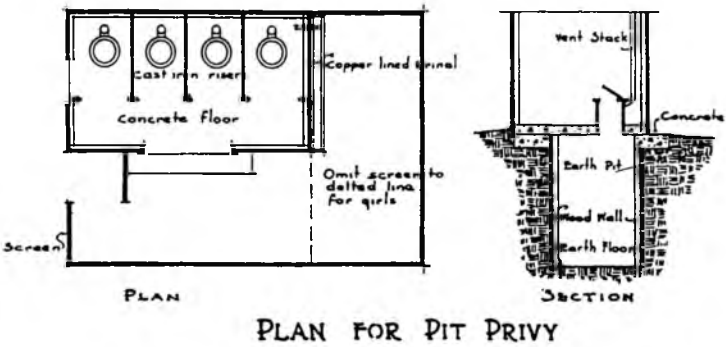
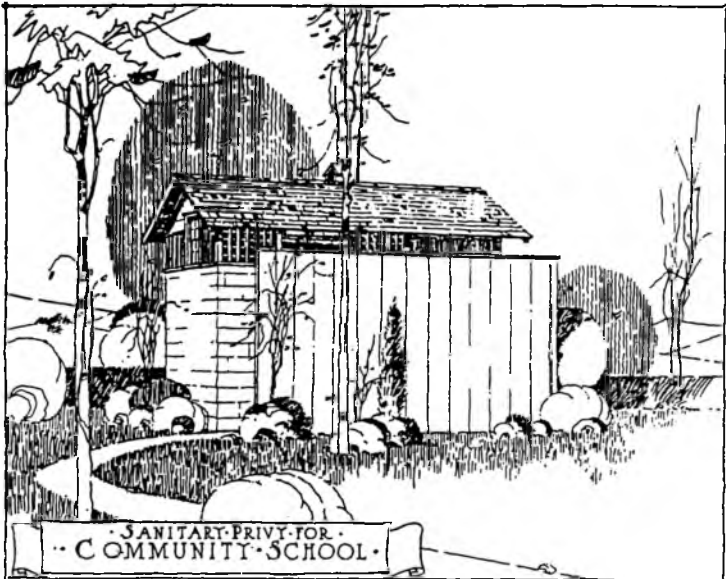
Alabama A&M University's Palmer Hall. The building is still on A&M's campus, now found west of Meridianville Road at the ROTC Center. Dedicated teachers and administrators Luvenia Minor, Mabel Winston, Mabel Powell, Mrs.



Councill School Privy—The brown stain with white trim and use of wood can be seen on the school's three-hole privy. Courtesy Fisk University.

McIntire (first name unknown), Dorothy Roberts Simpson, Reva White, Thomas McCrary, Georgia True, Ruby Briggs and Eva Bell instilled high standards for the children (*Councill Reunion 9*).

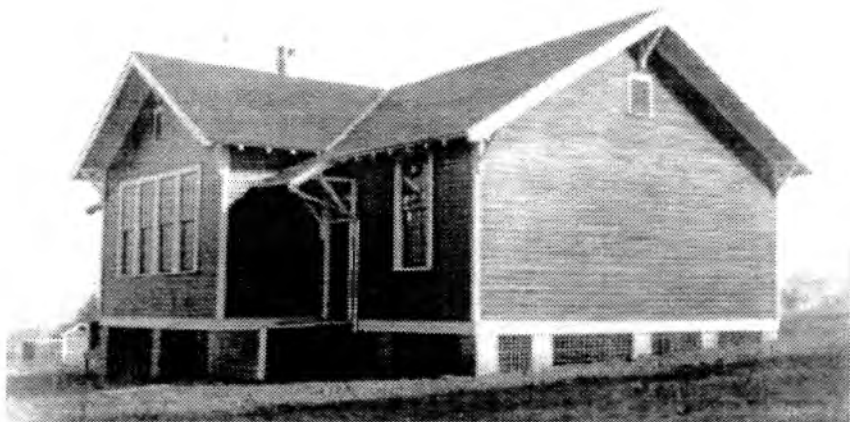
Councill Rosenwald combined six grades into three rooms: grades 1-2, 3-4 and 5-6, respectively, and hired a third teacher to turn its large storage room into the third classroom. Later, more rooms were added.



Like all the Rosenwald schools, Councill had a carefully constructed outdoor privy, reflecting the Fund's concern with proper sanitary measures. There were three separate, enclosed stalls under one roof (a "three-holer," in the vernacular of the day). A covered entryway enabled children to stay out of the rain while waiting their turn.

Councill Rosenwald School should not be confused with other Councill schools in the area: the City of Huntsville Councill School (circa 1892) situated on what is now St. Clair Street, next to the library; the Meridian Street Councill Training School built in 1948; and a County Councill School. All the Councill schools were named for educator and A&M founder William Hooper Councill, a former slave.

Valiene Crutcher Battle remembers walking the two miles from Winchester Road, west of what is now Memorial Parkway, down the graveled Meridianville Pike with her brothers and sisters. She and her siblings were pleased to be going to school. They were well fed and clothed, clean and happy to be learning to read and write. Discipline was seldom a problem at school, she says, because all the children knew their parents might walk in at any time to see what they were doing. If a spanking became necessary, it was done in the cloakroom and out of sight—but not out of hearing.



Councill School— Original 1925-26. Note how building is built on brick piers to level floor without having to grade site. Piers also kept termite and moisture damage from the wood structure. Courtesy Fisk University

On rainy or really cold days, if the crops were “laid-by,” a parent from the neighborhood would hitch a mule to the wagon and come for the children in the afternoon. Books, pencil, and paper were shouldered proudly in a satchel, Battle says, likely made by mother. Lunch was biscuits with ham or sausage, and carried in a brown paper bag.

Battle particularly enjoyed when the teacher, Miss Winston, appointed her to be the monitor to keep the children quiet if the teacher had to leave the room. All the rooms were crowded, but everyone received enough attention to learn reading, printing and cursive writing. The children were urged to do the best they could and continue in school.

School met everyone’s needs, she recalls, and parents were thrilled. Plus, students at Councill were “special” because of the proximity to the college. They had field trips to the A&M campus, excursions to the home economics department and, of course, they shared tears when the home of classmate Harold Drake burned. Harold’s father was president of A&M at that time; his family lived at the famous Green Bottom Inn on campus. Battle continued her two-mile walk throughout her school years and on into her first years of college.

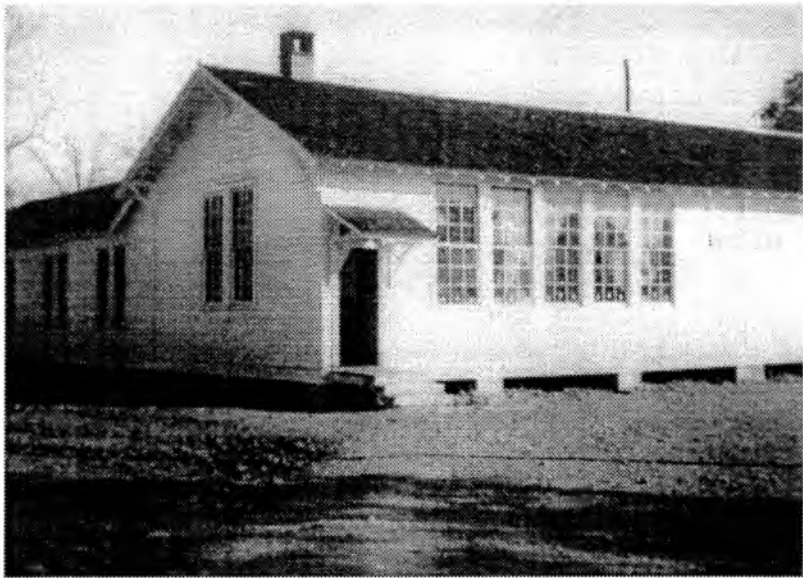
Farmer’s Capital School

Farmer’s Capital School in the New Market area of Madison County became a reality in 1928, when Garth Humphrey and his neighbors raised \$700. The County added \$200, meeting the required amount of \$900. This allowed the County to secure \$450 from state (public) matching funds.

Garth and Bertha Humphrey led the way. Two other brothers and their wives were



Farmer’s Capital Upper Grades classroom— Notice the sliding panel doors between rooms behind the boy who has collected coats. Spring 1951. Courtesy H/MCPL.



Farmer's Capital School—This building was eventually moved across the road and renamed Moore's Mill School. Recently the name was changed to Lynn Fanning School. Although it was used for Head Start programs, none of the original building remains. 1951. Courtesy H/MCPL.

involved—Eddie and his wife Mynthe and Orlando Humphrey and his wife Mattie. Together they deeded two acres of land for the school. Their father Burrel Humphrey, a carpenter and brick mason, began construction on the one-room school. Later, a second classroom was added. Adding to their contributions, Bertha and Garth Humphrey often boarded the teachers in their home; the latter remained a school trustee for several years (*History 1-6; Heritage 259*).

As a result of his family's contributions, Lloyd Humphrey didn't have far to walk to school in the late 1940s. Today, he still recalls the two classrooms with dividing doors in the center, which would be opened for plays and entertainment. Cloakrooms were at each end; Humphrey muses that whatever happened among students that they didn't want the teacher to know about, happened in the cloakroom.)

The county provided coal for the potbelly stove, which became red-hot by afternoon. In the winter, two boys were sent to get kindling for the following morning. Sometimes a penny was collected from each child

so the fire could be started early, permitting the teacher to begin the day with a warm room. At recess, Humphrey remembers, the boys wrestled and played marbles, hopscotch, tag and baseball in the spring.

Miss Gribby was a favorite teacher, he says. She did a fantastic job in a crowded environment, which she expected the children to help keep clean and orderly. She was a well-prepared teacher who was strictly in charge, and what she said was law in her room. She seldom threatened her pupils with a switch, and never embarrassed a child for poor work; nor would she allow any child to be humiliated about poor clothes or “country” manners. She might, however, sometimes take a child into the cloakroom with her comb or a damp cloth to help them tidy up.

All the children were encouraged to work hard and do their best, Humphrey recalls. As a result, many of Miss Grisby’s students went on to college. Humphrey himself went on to become a teacher and principal at several Madison County schools.

Graysom School

Graysom School was a one-teacher building constructed very early in the program, about 1913. The site of this school has not been located.



Horton School

Horton School received approval and was built after 1913, mainly through the efforts of Yancy Horton, Adolphus Love, Walter Jacobs, Moses Love, Everett T. Horton and Paris Bransford.

Horton School—The facade of the two-room school shows the smaller windows that illuminated the cloak room and the larger windows of the classrooms flanking the more formal entrance. Courtesy Dr. Elnora Lanier.

The school was built at Pond Beat, on what is now Buxton Road on Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville. All the area farmers were bought out in 1941—when the U.S. Army purchased the property to found the Arsenal—and the schools were closed.

Elnora Clay Lanier attended Horton School as a child, where she was taught first by Juliabelle Gunn Toney, and later by Henry Torrence. Lanier recalls walking the three miles to school with the rest of the Clay children, carrying their sack lunches.

The day traditionally began with the Pledge of Allegiance, a devotion and a song. Pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln adorned the front wall. The children sat at shared desks, studying their pre-primers, primers and eventually their hard-back readers. Everyone—girls included—played stickball at recess. Lanier recalls that conscientious teachers spent recess and lunchtime helping the slower readers.

Teachers and children worked together to keep the classrooms clean and the potbelly stove going when needed. The older students took turns drawing water from the nearby well.

All together, Lanier says, dedicated teachers, involved parents and eager children worked hard to make the Horton School—the community’s opportunity for better education—a success (“Legacy...”).

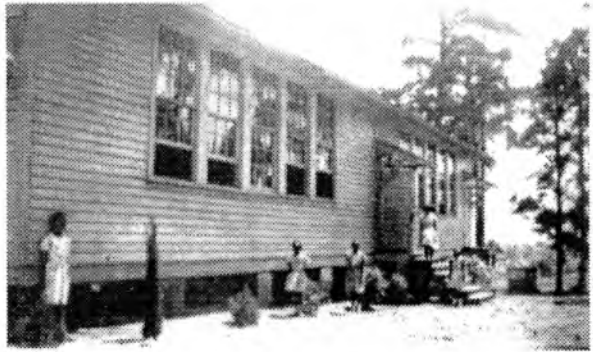
Mt. Carmel School

Mt. Carmel School was built around 1913 for two teachers. A third room was added in the 1930-31 budget year, raising total cost to \$2,725. This money was donated by the black community and matched with public and Rosenwald funds. The school was located between Ryland and Winchester Roads on what is now Clearview Road in Madison



Mt. Carmel Elementary School—North or south end of building with entrance and cloak room windows. Two teachers pictured suggests this is a two-room building. Note electric wires. 1951. Courtesy H/MCPL.

County. Later, it became part of the consolidation of many small rural schools at Brownsboro. Today, it serves as the Antioch Primitive Baptist Church, pastored by Rev. Walter Peavy.



Mt. Carmel—East or west side showing landscaping and classroom windows open for ventilation. 1951. Courtesy H/MCPL.

Clara Friend Lacy and her siblings

daily walked the four or five miles to Mt. Carmel. Their father insisted they never miss school, even during harvest season each fall—when, Lacy recalls, a nurse would travel out to the school from the county office to dole out shots. Jimmie Jordan, a kind and loving woman, was her first teacher; the upper grades were handled by devoted educator Charles Manning.

At the start of the day, she says, the children lined up by grades with their books and sack lunches to enter the building. At recess, the girls played under the many pine trees, making playhouses with furniture and decorating the rooms with nearby wildflowers.

The girls wore cotton stockings and dresses made from feed sacks; the boys wore bib overalls. The atmosphere at school was warm and caring, Lacy remembers; the children worked hard and helped one another get their work done.

Mt. Lebanon School

In 1924, Mt. Lebanon School had just two acres and one teacher. A second room was added in 1926-27, raising its total cost to \$3,050. The school was located on Mt. Lebanon Road, northwest of Meridianville.

A second black Mt. Lebanon School is noted on a 1927 Madison County map, situated outside the then-city limits near what is now Four

Mile Post Road and Whitesburg Drive. Though it was not part of the Rosenwald program, this school survived into the 1950s.

Evie Wade Stewart attended Mt. Lebanon School, walking the half-mile or so to class with her 15 brothers and sisters.

She remembers a number of educators: teachers Johnnie Anderson, Louella Mosley, Ada Nance and Pearly Eddy; principals Mr. Sledge, Mr. Ewing and Betty E. Derrick—for whom the Mt. Lebanon community center is named. Stewart knew these people as good and loving teachers. She went on to spend her adult life in the community—later serving as a substitute teacher there.



Mt. Lebanon School—One-room building with painted exterior and side entrance. Note Craftsman details such as brackets and exposed beams under wide overhangs. 1923. Courtesy Fisk University.

The children carried whatever was left over from breakfast to school for lunch. The girls wore cumbersome, itchy, cotton stockings with high-laced shoes.

Coats and hats were hung on a special hook in the cloakroom—boys on one side, girls on the other. One teacher taught all the grades—boys on one side, girls on the other.

The day began with a devotion and the salute to the flag. At recess everyone played group games like “Poppin’ the Whip” or ring games like “Little Sally Walker.” There was no radio or television; church and school were the centers of community activity, and according to Stewart, the neighborhood would have reached out and helped if any child had been without shoes.

The pleasures of childhood, beyond the family, were the joys of sharing and growing together at school (Stewart interview).

Silver Hill School

Silver Hill was an early one-room school, built about 1913 and located at Mullins Flat, on what is now Redstone Arsenal. One teacher taught grades 1-4; a second handled grades 5-8. Teachers included Annie Hammond, L. C. Jamar, Sr., Ruby Briggs and Mattie Donegan. Silver Hill School was closed in the 1940s, when the military's purchase of much of Madison County forced farming families to relocate.

Emma Jane Langford Horton remembers Silver Hill; she and her brothers

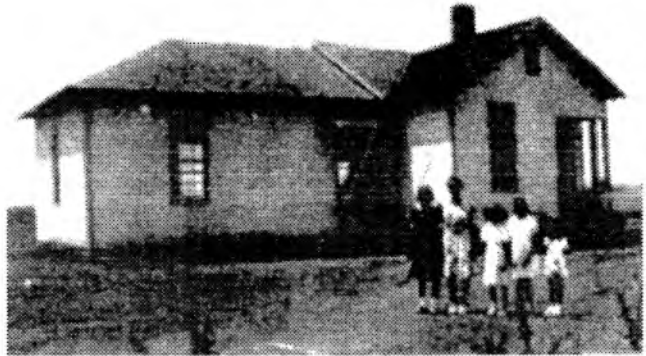
attended school there, and those were happy days.

Emma was eager to learn and felt ready to handle all the subjects presented. She was disappointed not to be able to continue to the next level, but

that required leaving home and boarding with relatives in Huntsville to attend the only black high school in the entire county.

Her parents and teachers must have done a good job. As her seven children grew up and moved away from home, Horton earned her G.E.D. and attended Calhoun and Alabama A&M.

Delores Horton Slaughter also attended Silver Hill School for first and second grades. She remembers her teacher, Mrs. Rice, "was beautiful with the children." Her teaching made all the children feel special and loved, Slaughter recalls.



Silver Hill School—Note the slight variation of the Smith plans: hip gable of roof and combination porch and cloak room entry wing to right. Courtesy Dr. Elnora Lanier.

Hodie Lanier McGraw attended Silver Hill for half a year while she lived with her grandparents; Anna Hammond, her teacher, was particularly kind and patient. McGraw remembers that the young children watched in admiration as older students competed in the spelling bee. They also enjoyed plays on the little stage at the front of the room.

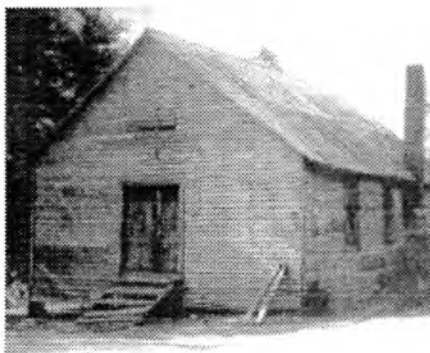
When she transferred to the Councill School to continue her education, she found it crowded, lacking the individual attention offered at Silver Hill. Undaunted, McGraw went on to complete her degree at Alabama A&M.

Toney School

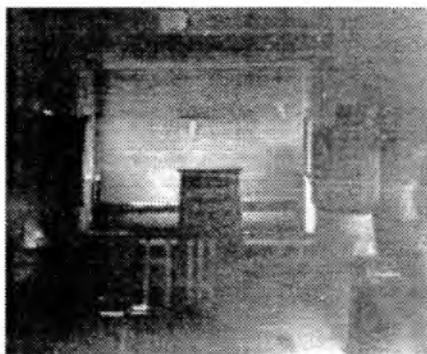
Toney School received approval to build in 1914, but action was not taken immediately; in fact, no proper school building existed there through the early 1920s. Classes were held in the church and lodge buildings for two summer months and for seven weeks of a winter session offered in 1922-1923.

In spring of 1924, parents in the community, led by Calvin Tibbs, raised \$225 to purchase two acres of land from Mr. and Mrs. Tee Carter. The Rosenwald building was erected for two teachers who served grades 1-8 (*History 2*; Turner, W.C. interview).

Eva Burns and Miss Wing were the original teachers, managing at least 60 children every class session. Only those children whose parents could afford such a luxury could sit at real school



*Toney Methodist Church School—
Grades 3-4 were housed here in 1951.
Courtesy H/MCPL.*



*Toney Methodist Church School—
Interior showing pulpit and stage used
by teachers and ministers. Poor lighting
and pews made schooling difficult.
Courtesy H/MCPL.*

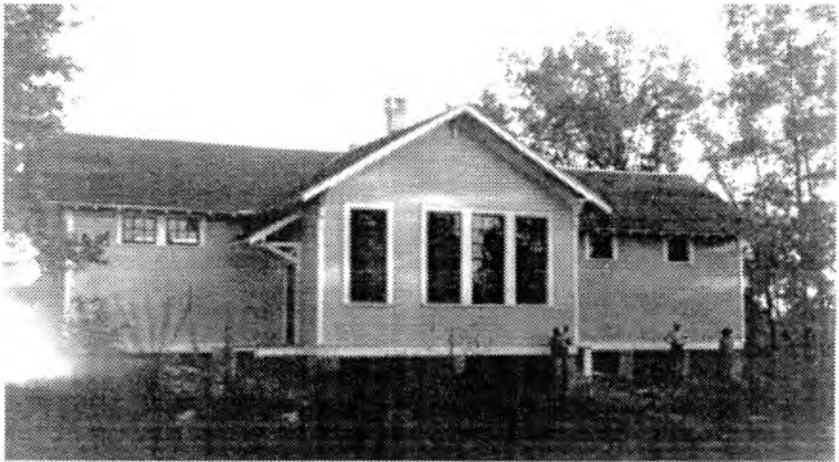
desks, which cost five dollars apiece. Most children sat on hard wooden benches.

By the 1950s, Toney Rosenwald became overcrowded again, and the children were spread out, with the upper grades going to the neighboring church buildings—Turner, Steadfast, Mt. Zion, the Primitive Baptist and New Zion (see photos, page 34).

The Toney School was the last remaining Rosenwald building in Madison County; it was torn down in August 2000.

J. B. Turner, now 85, and his younger sister Mamie Turner Tibbs, recall their days at the Toney Rosenwald School as happy and full. Tibbs says that when the new building opened, the children “thought they had gone to heaven” in that wonderful new schoolhouse.

For the Turner children, the walk to school was about two miles each way. Of course, they always took shortcuts through the woods. They recall the cloakroom—and that not every youngster had a coat to hang up. Lunch was taken to school in the familiar lard bucket. Some children’s pails were empty, but other children always shared their cold sausage or bacon biscuits and dried apples with those who had none.



Toney School—Front of building shows smaller cloak room windows on wings and separate entries for each classroom which share a vestibule. In this 1924 photograph, parents—one holding a child—pause from helping to build the school. Courtesy Fisk University.

Turner and his sister remember playing familiar games at recess: Red Rover, tag or jump rope. Later, basketball became a challenging sport for both boys and girls. Sometimes the girls outscored the boys—even while hampered by their dresses.

Not everyone behaved well enough to make it out to recess, however. Teachers at Toney did not threaten the students with switches; they had a sturdy wooden paddle. And the children knew they were likely to be spanked again at home if word got out about a bad day at school.

Turner and Tibbs agree that they are fortunate to have enjoyed the special setting that came at such a great cost of effort and money for the



Toney Baptist Church School—Grade I met here in 1951. Courtesy H/MCPL.



Toney Baptist Church School—Interior showing dangerous exposed stove flue and lack of lighting and desks. 1951. Courtesy H/MCPL.

community. Tibbs still has the school bell—perhaps the only thing left from Toney Rosenwald School, except fond memories.

Gertrude Langford Simmons, a former principal at Berkley, taught at Toney in the transition years during the 1950s. The faculty was well educated and professional, but the buildings, she recalls, were primitive and inadequate. For instance, what students, sitting in pews of a church, writing on their laps, could take good notes or properly hold a book?

Though she saw the lack of material equipment as a setback, Simmons believed the vision and determination of the teachers and parents created an extended family and network of support.

“We’re poor, but we ain’t pitiful,” Simmons says, echoing a value taught to her in her own childhood. The benign poverty of the South was less harmful than the ghettos of the North, she maintains, and that fact, combined with community support, ensured that children who attended the Toney School obtained a positive self-image, allowing them to enter the adult world as good citizens.

The school served as a center for community activity, sponsoring a Boy Scout troop led by Willie E. Burwell and other fathers. The girls and their mothers were encouraged to participate in home demonstration club activities. The school song expected the students “to compete with the best in the land,” and this spirit allowed their athletes to participate

energetically in the North Alabama Athletic Association.

The town’s sense of unity and loyalty has remained strong since



Toney School—Rear view showing window bays, exit and brick chimney. Photo circa 1924.

those years, says former Toney School attendee W.C. Turner. Today, a neighborhood park, “Four Flags over Toney,” is dedicated to the school. The school’s legacy of discipline, love, loyalty and hard work has continued to serve as a guiding force for the community.

The community at Normal—though never directly associated with the Rosenwald schools—offered education courses taught by a trained faculty at Alabama A&M. Some fortunate students continued on to the next level at the Laboratory School, the only high school available to black students in Madison County for many years. Though Alex Haley, bestselling author of *Roots* and *Queen*, was perhaps the most noteworthy student to attend, the solid educational foundation gave rise to innumerable professional adults, many of whom remained to serve Madison County well (Turner, Dorothy interview).

Afterword: The Remains of a Dream

Those who attended the Rosenwald schools agree: only the oldest generations now remember the wonder of those days. The promise of those humble buildings.

As the Rosenwald Fund was concluding its mission, in the years following its founder's death, only one exception to the discontinued building program was made. President Franklin D. Roosevelt requested one last Rosenwald School be built in 1937 at Warm Springs, GA. First lady Eleanor Roosevelt served as a trustee of the Fund from 1940 until its termination in 1948 (Mansell 37-8).

Throughout the South, many of the schools operated until well after World War II. But even as the counties began taking responsibility for upkeep, many of the buildings were being less and less well maintained. Overflow students once again were housed in local churches and lodges, and remember spending their formative years not at desks in a Rosenwald schoolhouse, but in St. Peter's Church or the Veterans' Building in Madison, or Saint Ruth's at Madison Crossroads.

A few buildings scattered about the countryside—none now in Madison County—are all that remain of a dream for education that once struggled its way into reality at the hands of a Jewish merchant, a former slave educator and a Quaker spinster.

One by one, the buildings pass from the scene, torn down to make room for a world where schoolrooms are less precious, more easily taken for granted. Only those surviving former students remember. And they too are fewer in number as the years shutter past... Echoing footfalls in a darkened coatroom.

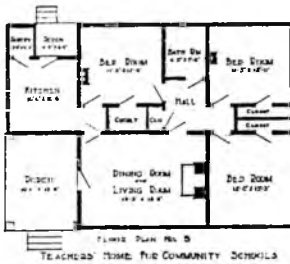
Soon, all that will be left are the words that have been written about Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington and Anna Jeanes, and a few faded photographs of buildings that once embodied their shared dreams for proper and equal education. Dreams they helped bring to fruition for countless African-American children. Dreams countless African-American families brought to fruition for themselves.

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Smith's booklet, *Community School Plans*, included plans for the larger and more ambitious communities. Much like a catalog (perhaps a Sears catalog), the community could choose the plan that best fit their needs and send for the detailed plans, contractor's notes, and supply inventory.



The ideal Rosenwald Community School would include a Teacherage to provide housing for teachers and a Four-Room Shop for vocational training for the students. The shop maintained the simple Craftsman style and fenestration plan of the school building, while the teachers' home included Colonial Revival details such as columns near the porch, sidelights for the front door and dormer windows.

