

Rosenwald Schools

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Rosenwald schools refer to a group of educational institutions established in the South for African Americans in the first half of twentieth century. The schools were named for Julius Rosenwald, president and later chairman of Sears Roebuck & Co. and creator of the philanthropic Rosenwald Fund, which provided matching funds for the schools. Nearly 400 schools and houses were constructed in Alabama and nearly 5,000 new schools were built in 15 southern states between 1917 and 1932 as part of this civic effort to increase educational opportunities in the largely rural and segregated South.



BEAVER DAM SCHOOL IN TONEY, MADISON

Julius Rosenwald was one of several northern philanthropists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who supported both elementary and higher education and teacher training for blacks. Important in Alabama were George Peabody, who established the Peabody Educational Fund in 1867, and Anna T. Jeanes, who established what is commonly remembered as the Jeanes Fund in 1907. Rosenwald met Tuskegee Institute founder Booker T. Washington in late 1911 when Washington was the keynote speaker at a gathering of civic leaders in Chicago. Rosenwald, who introduced Washington to the crowd, was impressed with Washington's cause and soon signed on as a trustee of the Tuskegee Institute, a position he continued to hold after Washington's death.

In 1914, Rosenwald helped fund the building of six schools in Alabama with a \$25,000 grant to Washington and Tuskegee, which served as the base of operations for the project. The first to open its doors was a frame building in Loachapoka, Lee County. The other five were in Notasulga and Brownsville (Macon County), Chewacla (Lee County), and Big Zion and Madison Park (Montgomery County). The schools typically had a single teacher for all grades, and instruction generally focused on a basic curriculum of reading, writing, and arithmetic augmented by shop and vocational skills, including farming, gardening, dress making, and principals of personal hygiene.

In 1917, Rosenwald established the Rosenwald Fund to oversee the establishment of additional schools. (The schools were almost never officially named after Rosenwald but were known generically as such. In later years, after a school had crumbled or burned down, it sometimes was remembered as a "Rosenwald school" rather than by its actual name.) In 1920, management problems at Tuskegee prompted fund officials to establish an independent office for the school building program in Nashville, Tennessee. By 1928, at the height of the matching-grant program, at least one in every



JULIUS ROSENWALD

five rural schools for black students in the South was a Rosenwald school. Some 40 percent of black children in the South attended a Rosenwald school at the height of the program's popularity. In addition to the schools, the fund constructed 217 homes for teachers and 163 shop buildings at a total cost of \$28.4 million. In later years, the Rosenwald Fund also provided grants to African American artists and writers, such as author James Baldwin.

Of the monies expended on the Rosenwald schools over the years, 64 percent came from tax revenues, 17 percent was donated by African Americans, 15 percent was contributed by Rosenwald and the Rosenwald Fund, and just over 4 percent came from other private white donors. In Alabama, local residents contributed what they could, and some, like Peter Alba, a Civil War hero and philanthropist from Mobile County, donated land. The Grand Bay School, built on Alba's property, consisted of five large rooms, three of which were used for primary through seventh-grade classes. The other two rooms served as living quarters for the teachers.

Julius Rosenwald died at home in suburban Chicago on January 6, 1932. Condolences and eulogies poured in from a variety of national figures, including African American leaders W. E. B. DuBois and Walter White, then secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Pres. Herbert Hoover delivered a eulogy on March 27, 1932, over the National Broadcasting Corporation radio network from New York City that was broadcast nationally. Of the many obituaries in the public press accompanying the announcement of Rosenwald's death, the most interesting came from W.E.B. DuBois. He noted that Rosenwald, a Jew, was more than familiar with racial prejudice and that his philanthropy was a shameful indictment of white Christian society. DuBois also said that it was ironic that a Jew was sponsoring educational initiatives for African Americans in the South—work that should have been undertaken by leaders in those states—and that this irony was lost on the white residents of the South.



OLD MERRITT SCHOOL IN BULLOCK COUNTY

Some of the Rosewald schools in Alabama still stand. The Elmore County Training School, built in west Wetumpka in 1924, was made of brick and fared better than most Rosenwald schools. It currently houses the Elmore County Black History Museum. In Notasulga, the Rosenwald school and associated Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church were added to the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage and have been restored. Some surviving structures, such as the New Hope Rosenwald School in Chambers County, have already been added to the National Register of Historic Places (2001). All that remains of the original Grand Bay school building is a chunk of stone and mortar about 2 by 3 feet in size. Overall, preservation efforts remain haphazard and are usually dependent on committed local citizens, often alumni of the schools. Various efforts exist to document and catalog the Rosenwald schools, including one by the Alabama Historical Commission, several other states, and especially the Rosenwald Schools Initiative of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Additional Resources

Ascoli, Peter. Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

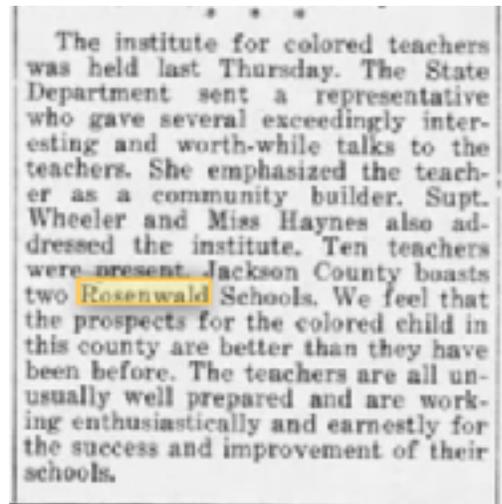
Embree, Edwin R., and Julia Waxman. *Investment in People: The Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund*. New York City: Harper & Brothers, 1949.

Hoffschwelle, Mary, and John David Smith, et al. *Rosenwald Schools of the American South*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006.

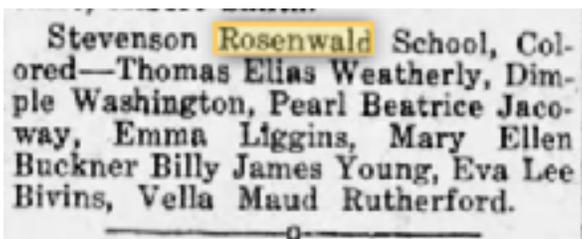
The first mention of Julius Rosenwald and his schools in Jackson County was the March 3, 1927 *Progressive Age* when the paper covered the meeting of the county school board, and noted, "There was a long and interesting discussion about the Rosenwald School for colored people in the Fackler District. A petition was brought before the board requesting the removal of the present trustees and a new Board of Trustees selected or elected at a meeting of the colored people of that District. One investigation it developed that none of the three so selected had paid their incidental fees in two or three years past. The Board thereupon declined to appoint them and instructed the trustees that are now serving to collect the delinquent incidental fees of 25 center per month and if they want a new board to appear before it at a later date."

A black man, J. H. Harris, of Fackler responded in the March 10 paper saying that he wanted school board member M. F. Timberlake to accompany him so that he could "prove to all of you that Timberlake's statements are absolutely untrue. We paid our incidental fees and have Timberlake's receipt for same."

In December 1927, an institute for colored teachers was held, and two representatives from Jackson County attended. The article notes that in 1927, "Jackson County boasts two Rosenwald Schools. We feel that the prospects for the colored child in this county are better than they have been before."



The institute for colored teachers was held last Thursday. The State Department sent a representative who gave several exceedingly interesting and worth-while talks to the teachers. She emphasized the teacher as a community builder. Supt. Wheeler and Miss Haynes also addressed the institute. Ten teachers were present. Jackson County boasts two Rosenwald Schools. We feel that the prospects for the colored child in this county are better than they have been before. The teachers are all unusually well prepared and are working enthusiastically and earnestly for the success and improvement of their schools.



Stevenson Rosenwald School, Colored—Thomas Elias Weatherly, Dimple Washington, Pearl Beatrice Jacobway, Emma Liggins, Mary Ellen Buckner, Billy James Young, Eva Lee Bivins, Vella Maud Rutherford.

In the May 3, 1928 *School Page*, the *Progressive Age* recognized students with perfect attendance, and the Stevenson Rosenwald School students include a number of future leaders of the Black community, included Thomas Elias Weatherly, who would later be principal at Carver School in Scottsboro. A similar column in January 1931 put attendance for the Fackler Rosenwald School at 92 percent.

A third Rosenwald school was added in 1929. When the county board of education met in January 1929, this notation was made: "The Superintendent was instructed to make two contracts for the Rosenwald School at Bridgeport: one contract for the materials and the other for the labor."

The November 7, 1929 Financial Report for the Jackson County School System published in the *Progressive Age* noted in the list of receipts that \$500 was received from the Rosenwald Fund. A February 6, 1930 issue of "News for the State's Capitol" showed how much the state had received from the Rosenwald fund. "The contribution of \$26,350 from the Rosenwald Fund,

appropriate for the year October 1929-1930 will enable the counties to receive aid in matching the State's appropriation."

In 1934, candidates running against incumbent governor Bibb Graves criticized his soundly for spending money on colored school and having a building at "Negro normal" named Graves Hall for the governor. But, editor Jim Benson pointed out in the Progressive Age, "this argument was knocked into cocked hat by Governor Graves when he explained that the State of Alabama had no part in this building from a financial standpoint, but it was erected by contributions from Julius Rosenwald of Chicago. The man has contributed very generously to the erection of negro schools all over the nation and especially in the south. He has helped with a number of schools in this county, Fackler, Stevenson and other places."