



*Alumni from 1929-39, Panther Branch School, Juniper Level vicinity, Wake County, July 2000.*

# Where Were the Rosenwald Schools?

**Once a center of rural black communities, the schools showed how local people dedicated themselves to public education. North Carolina communities built more of them than any other state.**

*By Patricia Staino*

Photos courtesy of the N.C. Division of Archives and History

You'll find them down back roads, overgrown by weeds and brush. You'll find them still in use, although they may be masquerading as houses, storefronts or barns. You'll find what's left of them, dilapidated and decaying. One thing is certain—you won't find them without effort.

North Carolina was home to more Rosenwald schools than any other state in the country. Built between 1917 and 1932, these small, wooden structures are located in the state's rural counties, and once served as the center of rural black community life. Now an effort is under way to find, identify and record the locations of these schools before the structures disappear altogether. But even if the buildings are gone, the legacy of the Rosenwald schools is a cornerstone in the foundation of North Carolina's public education system.

"This was the first time a concerted effort was made to improve educational facilities for African-Americans," said Claudia Brown, architectural survey coordinator at the state's Office of Historic Preservation Survey and Planning Branch. "There were public schools for them, but there was a difference in the quality. With the Rosenwald schools it wasn't just about the money; it was that they showed an interest and provided plans and materials."

The schools are named for Julius Rosenwald, who at the time of the program's inception was the president of Sears, Roebuck and Company. Rosenwald had become friendly with black educator Booker T. Washington and began making charitable donations to the

black secondary schools and colleges that Washington's Tuskegee Institute was helping to establish. Washington asked if a small portion of one \$25,000 gift could be used for elementary school programs and Rosenwald agreed, with one stipulation; rather than give the money to black communities, he wanted to match funds that the people had raised themselves to fund the schools. A couple of years later, he set up the Rosenwald Fund to continue this work on a larger scale.

"The schools are important in North Carolina history because they really show how communities, some very small, could come together, raise the money and commit human resources to building high-quality schools," said Deanna Kerrigan, external programs manager of the North Carolina Museum of History, which began in June offering teachers an online workshop about the Rosenwald schools in African-American history.

All but seven of the state's counties had at least one Rosenwald school, although most are concentrated in the piedmont and coastal plain.

In the early 20th century, education was greatly affected by a town's or city's wealth or lack of it. There was no federal education regulation, and people believed schools were the local governments' responsibility. The wealthy white neighborhoods had the money for good facilities and programs, but many rural communities, particularly the black communities, faced short school years, substandard buildings (often those abandoned by white schools) and teachers with little schooling themselves.

For Rosenwald, the goal of the fund went beyond building schools and improving black education. He hoped that the program would

help promote positive interaction between the black and white communities that culminated in working together toward a common cause. His conditions for granting the money to communities were that the state and county contribute to the building of the facility and agree to maintain it as part of the public school system; that white citizens contribute part of the money and take an interest in the school; and that black citizens show a desire for education by contributing money or labor to the project.

Rosenwald schools could cost up to \$4,000 to build, and those living in the rural communities were hard-pressed to spare their own livelihood to support them. When an administrator approached a community about building a school, there was usually a kickoff fundraising rally followed by a number of fundraising activities. Some of the plans included planting and selling cotton and raising hogs and chickens for the profits, and even felling their own lumber for the construction, hauling it themselves and processing it in their own mills.

During the time of the fund's school-building activities, more than 5,300 buildings were erected in 15 southern states. North Carolina was the leader with more than 830 schools.

"Mr. Rosenwald always spoke of the leadership role in North Carolina in spending his money," said Nyoni Collins, project director of the North Carolina Rosenwald Schools Community Project and founder of the Sankofa Center. "His only complaint was that we weren't spending it fast enough. He believed that fund money should be spent during the life of the philanthropist."

Collins began gathering the oral histories of the Rosenwald schools and students after learning that her father had taught at one of the schools in Alabama and that

her mother had attended one as a child. She began conducting workshops in various communities and encouraged attendees to look at documentation that was available to the public.

In 2000, she turned to the Office of Historic Preservation to make use of its records for her research, and the Rosenwald Schools Community Project was born.

The Office of Historic Preservation is now undertaking a project to identify and log sites where Rosenwald schools stood and still stand.

"Finding these schools isn't easy," said Claudia Brown. "Properties are listed in records by names without addresses, some place names aren't in use anymore, some structures are in backwoods that are overgrown."

Brown's office didn't have the funds to launch the search internally, so last year it began to solicit volunteers.

About 40 volunteers across the state are working to find and document the Rosenwald schools in their communities. Recording the details of each school in the public record is the first step in preserving the buildings by raising interest and awareness.

"We've never done anything on this scale before on a volunteer basis," said Brown. "We usually fund these activities with a federal grant and hire a professional to do the survey. But we're much more likely to be successful by using volunteers, because they live in the community and have an interest...and [they] get information a professional wouldn't get, like the oral history and personal experiences."

In addition to providing money for the schools, the Rosenwald fund's administrators provided the actual blueprints to save communities the costs of hiring architects. Because of this, the schools usually had one to seven classrooms, were made of weatherboard with brick chimneys, were white, gray or brown, and were situated on two acres of land. Unfortunately, many of the schools were left abandoned after the civil rights movement and busing integrated the public school systems.

"People may pass by Rosenwald schools every day," said Collins. "These people know their own communities. It is my hope that they will be able to assist us on a statewide level in learning more about these schools, their locations and their histories. North Carolina was a leading state in construction of the schools, number

of students served and the amount of money raised. The state should be rightfully proud of the community commitment to building these schools. It would not have happened without strong community leadership and strong state commitment."

Collins believes that collecting the stories of the schools and the oral histories of the students is just as important as finding and preserving the buildings. The schools are not well-known today because, in addition to Rosenwald being reluctant to aggrandize his name in connection

with his philanthropy, most of the people who attended these schools are no longer alive. Those who are living are now well into their 80s, and Collins says it needs to be a priority to record their memories and experiences.

Administrators of the fund shut down the school-building program in 1932. Many believed it had failed to have the long-term, far-reaching effect Julius Rosenwald had anticipated, and they wanted to turn the fund's focus to activities that would better promote interracial cooperation. They were discouraged by studies that showed black education was falling even further behind the education provided for white students. While the state's investment in black education increased from \$1.28 million in 1919 to \$4.53 million in 1927, the investment in white education jumped from \$10.69 million to \$50.05 million in the same time period.

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**Lincoln Park School, 1272 South Curreant Street, Pinebluff, Moore County. August 1996.**

But many still believe the Rosenwald schools laid the foundation for the changes in the state's education system that came later in the century. The program showed that the interest in public education existed in the community but that it needed federal intervention to thrive.

"These schools are important to the history of North Carolina as a whole, not just to African American history," said Deanna Kerrigan at the Museum of History. "They really paint a picture of how resourceful rural communities were and are."

*Patricia Staino is a freelance writer in Raleigh.*

**To help the Rosenwald Schools project find remaining schools and sites:**

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Survey and Planning Branch  
State Office of Historic Preservation  
Mailing address: 4618 Mail Service Center,  
Raleigh, NC 27699-4618  
Phone: (919) 733-6545.*

**To help with oral histories of alumni:**

*Nyoni Collins  
Sankofa Center  
P.O. Box 1315  
Wake Forest, NC 27588  
(919) 554-1799*

**North Carolina Rosenwald Schools on the National Register Study List**

**Durham County**

*Russell School, Lebanon vicinity*

**Franklin County**

*Concord Elementary School, Kittrell*

**Gaston County**

*Reid Rosenwald Teacherage, Belmont*

**Gates County**

*(Former) Corapeake School, Corapeake vicinity*

**Halifax County**

*Allen Grove School, Allen Grove vicinity*

**Henderson County**

*East Flat Rock High School, East Flat Rock*

**Martin County**

*Burroughs School, Williamston vicinity*

**Mecklenburg County**

*Newell Rosenwald School, Charlotte  
Rockwell Rosenwald School, Charlotte*

**Nash County**

*Spring Hope Colored High School (C. C. Spaulding High School), Spring Hope*

**Pender County**

*(Former) Canetuck Rosenwald School, Still Bluff vicinity*

**Richmond County**

*Covington Rosenwald School, Covington vicinity  
Diggs Rosenwald School, Diggs vicinity*

**Stanly County**

*Kingville Rosenwald School, Albemarle  
New London Colored School, New London vicinity*

**Tyrrell County**

*Alligator Schoolhouse, Columbia vicinity*

**Union County**

*Laney School, Trinity*

**Washington County**

*Formerly, Washington County Training School, Plymouth*

**Wayne County**

*Carver Elementary School, Mount Olive*

**Wilkes County**

*Lincoln Heights High School, Wilkesboro*



**Ware Creek School, Blounts Creek vicinity, Beaufort County. July 1994.**

**North Carolina Rosenwald Schools Listed In The National Register Of Historic Places**

**Beaufort County**

*Ware Creek School, Washington vicinity*

**Forsyth County**

*Atkins High School, Winston-Salem*

**Hertford County**

*C. S. Brown School Auditorium, Winton*

**Lee County**

*Lee County Training School (W. B. Wicker School), Sanford*

**Mecklenburg County**

*Billingsville School, Charlotte*

**Moore County**

*Lincoln Park School, Pinebluff vicinity*

**Pasquotank County**

*Model Practice School, a contributing building in the Elizabeth City State Teachers College Historic District, Elizabeth City*

**Randolph County**

*Central School (Randolph County Training School), Asheboro*

**Rowan County**

*Granite Quarry School, Granite Quarry*

**Stokes County**

*Walnut Cove Colored School/London School, Walnut Cove*

**Wake County**

*W.E.B. Dubois School, Wake Forest  
Panther Branch School (Juniper Level School), Juniper Level  
Riley Hill School, Wendell vicinity  
St. Matthews School, Raleigh vicinity*