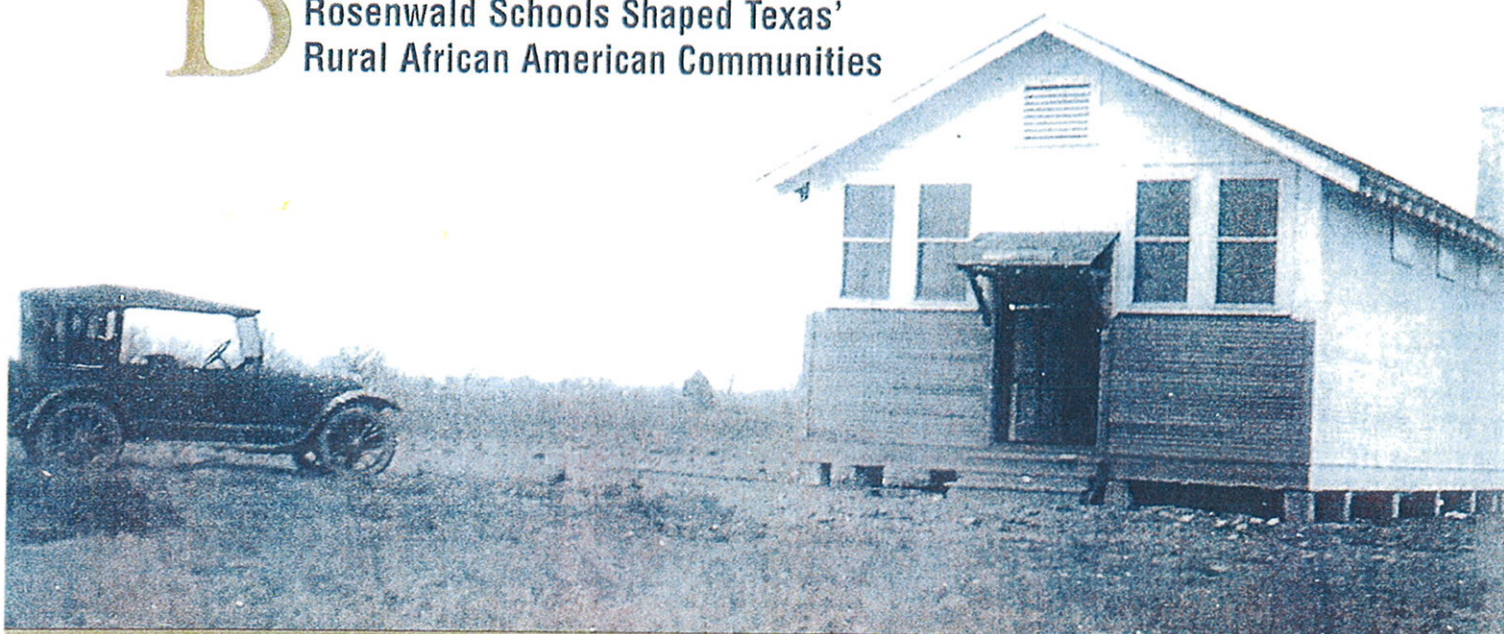


BUILDING LEGACIES

Rosenwald Schools Shaped Texas' Rural African American Communities



In the 1950s, there were 527 Rosenwald schools in Texas. Now, only 30 of these rural African American educational facilities remain standing.

One of them is the Hopewell School near Bastrop. Although the 1921 wood-frame building is beginning to show its age — faded weatherboards and warped floors sit on an old pier-and-beam foundation — it is among the most intact of the remaining Rosenwald facilities.

Austin resident Thaddeus McDonald recalls attending the primary school (grades one through six) from 1938 to 45. His teacher taught nearly 50 students the “three R’s” with a special emphasis on arithmetic.

“I remember that we were very advanced in the area of mathematics,” McDonald said. “When we went on to junior high school in Austin, we stood out because we had a more thorough knowledge of arithmetic than the other students. We saw the value of our educational foundation.”

That was the intent of Julius Rosenwald (1862–1932), a Chicago philanthropist and former president of Sears, Roebuck and Company who was interested in the educational needs of African Americans in the rural South. He believed urban and industrial development could be achieved by creating a better trained labor force through vocational education.

African American education during the early 1900s was usually conducted in churches, shacks and cabins. These facilities typically had no amenities, and their upkeep was dependent almost entirely on the limited resources of the principal, students and community members. Rosenwald intended his facilities to serve as models of modern schoolhouse construction.

Dr. Mamie McKnight, a commissioner with the Texas Historical Commission, said the schools provided a much-needed advancement in education for Texas’ rural African American students.

“There were always schools of some sort in these communities, but the

Rosenwald program offered suitable facilities and qualified teachers,” she said. “These schools served as a model for people in rural African American communities to develop quality schools and a better-educated population.”

As demand for these schools grew, Rosenwald consolidated his financial holdings and formed the Julius Rosenwald Fund in 1917. The schools, constructed using standardized plans, did not appear in Texas until 1920. By 1928, the Rosenwald Fund reported that Texas had the greatest activity in schoolhouse construction with 51 facilities built that year. The last Texas Rosenwald building was constructed in 1931, and school district consolidation and desegregation rendered most of the facilities obsolete by the late 1950s.

Karen Riles, one of Texas’ only specialists on Rosenwald schools, recently visited a Nacogdoches facility in poor condition. Riles, a historian at the Austin History Center, said the building was surrounded by dense foliage and in serious disrepair, typical

of many remaining Rosenwald schools in Texas.

"There were skinny little trees all over the place, so it felt like we were trapped behind prison bars in the middle of the woods," Riles recalled. "There were still rusty old desks and broken chalkboards in there. It was like somebody said 'school's out!' 50 years ago and nobody ever came back. Come to think of it, that's exactly what happened."

According to Riles, there are not enough resources in Southern states to conduct a thorough inventory to determine the number and condition of original Rosenwald school buildings. Although nearly 30 documented Texas facilities remain, some as schools or barns, the vast majority are dilapidated or have been moved, altered or demolished.

"It's challenging to find these buildings because many of them were in rural areas that are no longer inhabited," Riles said.

Rosenwald schools were mostly built in East Texas to serve the state's African American population in the 1920s. Previous schools were housed in inadequate buildings and the teachers, typically with insufficient educational backgrounds, had problems creating proper curriculum plans. To be comparable with the education of white children, Rosenwald required his schools to have certified college-educated teachers and a calendar year of at least five months.

Because the schools provided significant educational improvements, additional funding became available from state and national programs. This funding paid for expanded curricula and, more importantly, additional high school levels. With the establishment of colleges such as Prairie View A&M University and Texas Southern University, African Americans were able to complete 12 years of public school and go on to receive a college education.

"Black students were excited about having extra grade levels and having the

option of furthering their education — they realized it was an attainable goal," Riles said. "They were able to dream beyond just working for someone else. They could work for themselves, and that represented true freedom."

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*— Dr. Mamie McKnight,
THC commissioner*

Rosenwald schools also became focal points for community life. The buildings were usually situated in the center of a neighborhood or rural area, allowing residents easy access to the facility for activities such as Juneteenth gatherings, political rallies, holiday events and church services.

"I remember going to the Hopewell schoolhouse with my family every other week for some sort of community event," McDonald said. "I was a 4-H Club boy, so I even ran meetings there when I was president of the local chapter. I spent a lot of time in that place."

Like McDonald, it would take residents of Texas' rural African American communities many decades to fully appreciate the unique opportunity they experienced with Rosenwald schools. From arithmetic lessons to revivals, life in many small Texas towns during the early 1900s revolved around these special schoolhouses.

"People who graduated from Rosenwald schools only realize in hindsight how significant the facilities were," Riles said. "They still have pride that they went to these schools and got a



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really good education from high quality teachers. For lots of people, these are some of the most wonderful memories of their lives." ★

This article was written by Andy Rhodes, managing editor of The Medallion.

On the cover: Students at the Sandy Grove School in Burleson County

Opposite page: Hopewell School, Bastrop County

Above, from top: A Rosenwald School in Coldspring; community members still use the Hopewell School in Bastrop County for local events; a Tom Thumb wedding in Luling.