

The Story of the Lost Schoolhouses

In the early 20th century, an unlikely partnership built nearly 5,000 schools for African American children across the rural South. Now only a few remain. Here, the stories behind four.

BY REX PERRY; PHOTOGRAPHY LAUREY W. GLENN, REX PERRY, CHARLES WALTON IV



The Carroll School, built in 1929, is again a place of learning and laughter after its restoration by the Rock Hill, South Carolina, School District. It is now used as a field-study school for fifth-grade students.

ONCE SYMBOLS OF HOPE and pride in African American communities, a few surviving Rosenwald schools sit empty down rural roads. Some are being repurposed by new generations; still others remain undiscovered or have disappeared. Built across the South from 1913 to 1932, these schools stood as a testament to the desire to educate African American children.

The schools were the result of a dream shared by Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Co., and Booker T. Washington, renowned author and leader of what is now Tuskegee University. Both men, one white and one black, promoted school building as a catalyst for empowering African American children disenfranchised by Jim Crow-era segregation. The pair created a grant program that provided seed money to build schools in 883 counties across 15 Southern states from Maryland to Texas.

The Rosenwald program typically covered less than a third of construction costs, but it launched African American communities into creative fund-raising efforts and encouraged the black community to work with local school systems. Penny drives, charitable giving, and self sacrifice provided the money to match the grants. Even with the added financial burden of community fund-raising by those who could least afford it, thousands of schools were built across the rural South.

Today, some of these treasures are being saved for future generations. But others are in danger of disappearing. When the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the schools to its 2002 list of America's Most Endangered Places, people began to recognize their significance. The National Trust estimates that about 10% to 15% of the schools stand today. We share the story of four survivors.



When the Rosenwald program ended in 1932, 4,977 schools had been built.

The South Carolina Schoolhouse: A Heritage Restored

THE CARROLL SCHOOL, ORIGINALLY built in 1929, stands in the flat farming country south of Rock Hill, South Carolina. Back in the 1940s, Bill Cathcart picked countless rows of cotton in the fall before he could put down his sack and step into the school that would take him beyond the fields worked by generations of his family. "The story of this school was almost forgotten," says Bill, a Carroll student from 1943 to 1950. "It was built with the idea that no matter

the sacrifice, our children must learn."

Every fifth grader in Rock Hill public schools spends a day at the Carroll School, now a field-study center, where teacher Melanie Hornsby, Bill, and instructor James Hart guide them through challenges facing students in the Depression-era South. "These kids are from different backgrounds, but they are captivated by the oral history shared by Bill and James," says Melanie. "The best way to learn history is from those who lived it."



"I had to milk three cows every morning before I could come to school," former student Bill Cathcart tells a class from Rosewood Elementary School.

The Tennessee Schoolhouse: The Untold Story of a Home



Ida Palmer (right), a former student and teacher at the Braden-Sinai School, visits with current owner Ann Smithwick. Ida still strolls down the same rural lane she walked as a student.

A LOT OF CHICKENS LOST THEIR lives to become Sunday box suppers to help pay for this school," says Ida Palmer, a student and later a teacher at the Braden-Sinai School, built in 1922, east of Memphis. "Farmers sold livestock or set aside a little plot of land, with the profit going toward the school."

Those sacrifices paid off for Ida, who graduated from Braden in the 1930s and then from a local high school and nearby Lane College. Afterward, having promised to teach at the school where she learned to read, she returned home. "I was paid \$12 a month," recalls Ida. "I went to the board of education, where they gave me a bucket, a water dipper, chalk, an eraser, and a broom and asked me to start teaching." She taught at the school until students transferred to integrated schools after the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954.

After its closure, Ida retired to her home that's within walking distance.

"The school was used for a Head Start program and then lay vacant for 18 years," says current owner



Students pose during Braden's school days.

Ann Smithwick, a documentary photographer who lives in the school with her husband and two daughters. "The previous owner remade the school into a home, but we added creative touches like a fireplace adorned with a mosaic alphabet."

Rosenwald-funded buildings used standardized plans incorporating the latest in school design. Banks of double-hung windows were placed to shine light over the students' shoulders from left to right so right-handed writers wouldn't cast shadows on their papers. The tall, double-hung windows in Ann's schoolhouse home have been replaced with French doors, but the clapboard siding, red tin roof, and familiar shape of the school remain.

"After we moved in, a neighbor said to me, 'You live in a Rosenwald School,' and I began to research their history," says Ann. She met her neighbor Ida and later got to know other former students. "I've come to this house as a passenger of history," Ann says. "I'm here to document its story through my photography. I'll bring former students into my studio, and a floodgate of memories will open. They had such great days in here."



Natural light was important to the architects of the Rosenwald Schools. Ann Smithwick chats with Ida in her schoolroom-turned-studio. See Ann's photos at www.schoolhousegal.com.



Liz Sims and her former classmates at the Shiloh School in Notsulga, Alabama, initiated the community action restoring the school as a center of local pride.



Completed in 1922, the Shiloh School taught children until the sixties.

LIZ SIMS RUBS HER FOOT ACROSS A warped floorboard inside the recently renovated 1922 Shiloh School in rural Notsulga, Alabama. "This is where I sat in the first grade," says Liz, finding the exact spot where she fidgeted at her tiny desk in 1955. "Mrs. Irving would tell me to stop picking at the floorboard with my shoe." She recalls strict but caring teachers and memories of Friday-night fund-raisers when parents and neighbors paid a dime to watch movies in the school's central classroom. "My dad couldn't read or write, but he knew that without education, you didn't have anything," says Liz. "Our grandparents built this school to give us a stepping-stone they never had," adds Liz's former classmate, Shirley Jackson.

Just as the Rosenwald Schools were the fruit of partnerships, preservation efforts at the Shiloh School reflect equally cooperative efforts. After the foundation was formed to renovate the school in 2006, students in the Design-Build Masters Program at nearby Auburn University offered free design services and hands-on construction help. Twelve students dedicated a school year to restoring the exterior and transforming a classroom into a community resource center. "It took a grassroots effort to build this school, and it's a grassroots effort bringing it back," says Cody Pierce as she and fellow students reinstall old beaded board.

Much of the funding for the preservation of the schools has come from the Lowe's Charitable & Educational Foundation. Lowe's, in partnership with the National Trust, has provided grants to restore 33 Rosenwald Schools in 12 states. A \$50,000 grant in 2009 will ensure the completion of the Shiloh School rehabilitation. "We realized the need to act quickly to save these structures," says Larry Stone, president and COO of Lowe's.



Students in Auburn University's Design-Build Masters Program are helping to restore the Shiloh School.



Willie Mae Davis wants to restore her abandoned alma mater, Smithville School. But she'll need much more than the original \$8,000 building cost to do so.

WILLIE MAE DAVIS PUSHES OPEN an unlocked door to the 1929 Smithville School, located in a peanut-farming community in southwest Georgia. Beams of light pour through jagged broken glass, illuminating piles of trash left by squatters. "We can't get grants until the courts decide ownership," says Willie Mae, who attended the school for eight years. "If my classmates and I quit paying the taxes, it might be torn down. If the bulldozers come, you'll find me sitting on the roof to stop them." ■

Get Involved

Tracy Hayes with the National Trust for Historic Preservation suggests ways to help preservation efforts.

- Visit www.rosenwaldschools.com for an in-depth history of the Rosenwald Schools, to learn more about the Lowe's grants, for Rosenwald School resources, and to search for schools in your state.
- The National Trust Web site (www.preservationnation.org) contains links to resources in each state and a link to contribute to the Alice Rosenwald Flexible Fund, which has awarded more than \$70,000 in matching grants for

Rosenwald School restoration, education, and planning projects. You'll also find info on contacting the National Trust about volunteer opportunities.

- The 2009 National Preservation Conference, October 13-17 in Nashville, will include educational sessions and a tour of a local Rosenwald School. Visit www.preservationnation.org, pull down the "Resources" tab, and click on "Conferences & Training."