

Efforts to preserve the
legacy of Rosenwald
schools illuminate how
family-school-community
partnerships strengthen
students and communities



Working Together for All

Aida Rogers

They're scattered about now, most wrecked, some restored. And many are long gone. But for the families they served, the Rosenwald schools signaled hope for a better future.

Built between 1912 and 1923 for Black children in the American South, the schools thrummed with activity for entire communities. About 5,000 schools, teacherages and industrial shops were built in 15 states – 450 in South Carolina. Before their establishment, education for Blacks was hard to get. Systemic racism and subsequent segregation made it too costly.

"You only had what you could build, and Black folks weren't getting any money," recalls Bishop Frederick Calhoun James in *Rosenwald Schools of South Carolina*, an oral history exhibit at the University of South Carolina Libraries. "You had to pay the teachers. You had to pay for everything if you wanted to get any education. The state didn't give you anything."



Building an education: In service from 1925 to 1954, Howard Junior High in Prosperity was one of 26 built in Newberry County. It fulfilled Julius Rosenwald's desire to make education accessible in rural areas. Rosenwald schools were constructed using various standard plans; one signature is an array of long, narrow windows. Howard is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Photo courtesy of South Carolina Department of Archives and History.



Previously Black students were taught in churches, fields and old houses. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was a crime for them to be taught at all. Those caught teaching could be put in prison and beaten, James says in the oral history.

"So what was worse than even showing hatred, when you get people who sat down and rationally decided in a legislature [that getting an education was a crime]," James says. "If you really think about that, that's one of the worst things, I think."

James, now 101, attended Howard Junior High in Prosperity, a Rosenwald school. He later earned a bachelor's degree from Allen University in Columbia and a Master of Divinity degree from Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Pastor, professor, civil rights leader and friend of President Bill Clinton and Martin Luther King, Jr., James became Presiding Bishop of the AME Church in South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Namibia and Mozambique in 1972. Establishing schools in those countries is one of his many accomplishments. As he says in the oral history, his first teachers prepared him well:

"These were caring people about the profession. They were conscientious, which is a much better word to describe what I have in my mind about them. They were conscientious about their profession and they considered their profession a success when young people learned and developed. And I think that there was just as much concern about development as there was about learning."

Unexpected partnership

Rosenwald schools were the result of the unexpected partnership of Jewish businessman Julius Rosenwald of Chicago and Black educator Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. They were built using state and county education taxes and seed money from Rosenwald's foundation. CEO of Sears, Robuck and Co., Rosenwald was disturbed by the plight of southern Blacks; having experienced antisemitism, he identified with their persecution. After reading Washington's autobiography and touring Alabama with him, Rosenwald was inspired to aid his cause to improve their lives. With Rosenwald's money and Washington's architecture students – and their shared ability to make money go a long way – the schools were built and lives improved.

Still, Rosenwald schools were separate and unequal. In cold weather James and other boys collected coal dropped by locomotives along railroad tracks to keep their school's potbellied stoves working. Students repaired the fragile, worn books white schools passed down. Regardless of inequity, teachers made the difference.

"They were as members of the family. We had the same respect for them that we had for other members of the family because we would hear them talking to our parents about us, about whether we were doing what we could do or whether we were doing better than we were doing the last month or the last period. There was this concern above and beyond the call of the clock."

Principals also played memorable roles. Mildred Weathers McDuffie, a retired teacher and summary court judge, recalls Creswell Madden, principal at Celia Saxon Elementary in Columbia, from her days there in the early 1940s:

"He's deceased now but he was the principal and he was a strict one, strict but good," she says in the oral history. "And he was the kind of person who respected the integrity of the students, you know, regardless of whether you came from a one-parent home or two-parent home or out of the alley or wherever. Because you know a lot of times during that time a lot of African Americans lived in areas that had alleys. And so, he was a real good principal and I was one of his favorite students because I sang real well."

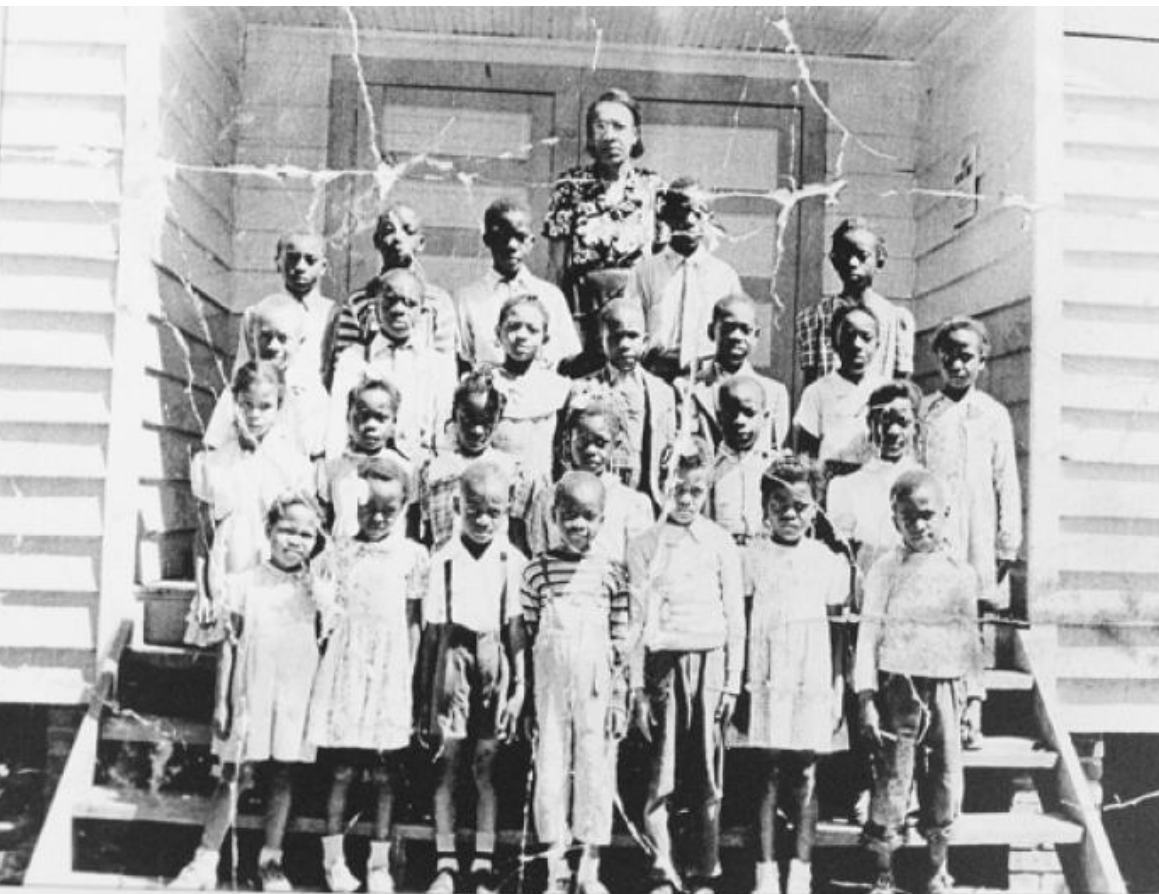
McDuffie and James are two of more than 74,000 students educated in a South Carolina Rosenwald school. Forty-one were interviewed for USC's oral history exhibit, conducted from 2006 through 2011 by Tom Crosby, Ph.D., who attended Rosenwald schools in Union County. Crosby retired as chair of the biology department at Allen University, where he'd earned his bachelor's degree. After earning graduate degrees from Indiana and Pennsylvania State Universities, he taught at Morgan State University in Baltimore. In his own oral history interview, Crosby recounts why he chose to become an educator. It stemmed from his experience at Poplar Grove Elementary, when a teacher asked him to work a math problem at the board, and Sims High, where students became teachers and principals for two days:

"On the application I think it asked, 'why do you want to major in this particular subject?' ... I wrote on there that 'I think I can get students to learn.'"



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-Bishop Frederick Calhoun James



Still standing: Of the 15 Rosenwald schools built in Richland County, Pine Grove (1923-1950) is the only one left. When the public school district closed it, families each paid \$20 to buy the land and continue using the building as a community center. Decades later they decided it to the Richland County Recreation Commission, which restored it. Listed on the National Register, Pine Grove was honored with a preservation award from the Historic Columbia Foundation. Photos courtesy of South Carolina Department of Archives and History



Bags of pennies

Continuing that legacy of education for Black children meant everything to their families. Blacks physically built Rosenwald schools using provided plans; they also held fundraisers to match Rosenwald's seed money – Crosby remembers fish fries. Over four decades, before integration made them obsolete, more than 700,000 students were educated in Rosenwald schools, *Smithsonian* magazine reported in 2021. Many of those students, famous or not, helped bring their race forward. Writer Rona Kobell chronicles their importance in the summer 2023 issue of *National Parks Magazine*. For her "Remembering Rosenwald" article, she interviewed the now-elderly graduates who are working to restore their beloved schools and others connected to their history. Kobell reports how back then, a cross-section of adults made sure their students and those schools succeeded:

Thanks to clean and well-lit spaces for learning, devoted teachers, involved parents and strong, supportive communities, the Rosenwald school students thrived. Families contributed resources, manpower and capital; elders frequently showed up at fundraisers with bags of pennies. That commitment and investment helped incubate leaders, and many Rosenwald students ended up at the vanguard of social justice movements. The late Congressman John Lewis, the revered civil rights leader, attended a Rosenwald school, as did Maya Angelou, Medgar Evers and Carlotta Walls LaNier, one of the Little Rock Nine who integrated Central High School in 1957.

Kobell quotes Newall Quinton, who attended Sharptown Colored School, a Rosenwald school in Maryland. "My father would pray all the time that his kids had a better life than he did," Quinton recalled. "And my mom would say, 'You're as good as anybody else.'" The National Parks Conservation Association is creating a park in Chicago for Julius Rosenwald, the first national park to honor a Jewish American. They also are considering a series of historic sites based on the Rosenwald schools still standing. One reason many people haven't heard of the schools is because



Community service: As with many Rosenwald schools, St. George Rosenwald School could boast an auditorium. Why? Because the adults in the area needed a place to meet just as their children needed a place to learn. Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington realized their schools could meet many needs, including as community centers. After its recent restoration, community gatherings are happening in the auditorium again. Photos courtesy of St. George Rosenwald School.

Julius Rosenwald, adhering to his faith, didn't want his name attached to those schools. Many are known by the names communities chose for them.

Only North Carolina, with 813, and Mississippi, with 633, had more Rosenwald schools (and industrial shops and teacherages) than South Carolina. Now there are 44 in the Palmetto State, including a teacherage.

"Conditions vary from just a few sticks to fully rehabilitated and every condition in between," reports Brad Sauls with the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

A couple have been converted into homes, others moved and attached to churches. Most are in serious disrepair. Not so in St. George, where retired municipal judge Ralph James led the effort to restore his boyhood school. Williams Memorial High School, named for the principal who worked to secure the Rosenwald funds to build it, is no longer an abandoned ruin. Photos and videos show a spacious building with rows of tall narrow windows, a hallmark of Rosenwald schools. Based on Plan 6-A from the "Community School Plans" created for the Rosenwald Fund by Fletcher B. Dresslar and Samuel L. Smith, St. George Rosenwald is larger than many, with an auditorium. Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington, from the beginning, envisioned their schools as gathering places, hence the addition of auditoriums and gyms in some of their plans.

Like others, St. George Rosenwald produced students who achieved and served others:

"No matter how difficult the journey was, I got the background that I needed to do the things I did," reflects alumna Thelma Harper, retired district superintendent in Brooklyn, New York. "Without that, who would have thought a young lady from Grover, South Carolina – St. George, South Carolina, [could be] prepared to face the world?"



And oh-so-appropriately, the school has been restored through collaboration. The town of St. George, state representatives, the Children's Museum of the Lowcountry, South Carolina State University, and the Electric Cooperatives of South Carolina have all pitched in. Now, the school is a museum, community center, and part of the African American Civil Rights Network. But for James, "community" means the most.

"We're going to enrich the community," James promises in the video. "We hope to empower the community with information about programs and experiences that will broaden their aspect and outlook on life. One of the main things we hope to do is make productive citizens just as it was before. We were encouraging participation into the community and community life and we will begin to have the citizens within this community participate and give back to the community. It was done before and we hope to do it again. It's very seldom you have the opportunity to look back 50, 60, 70 years and be able to repeat those years again."



Remarkable transformation: Built as a six-teacher school in 1925, St. George Rosenwald originally was named for its first principal, Rev. A.D. Williams, who worked to secure the funds to build a school in this part of Dorchester County. Williams Memorial High operated until 1954 and then continued its role as a community center. Photos courtesy of St. George Rosenwald School



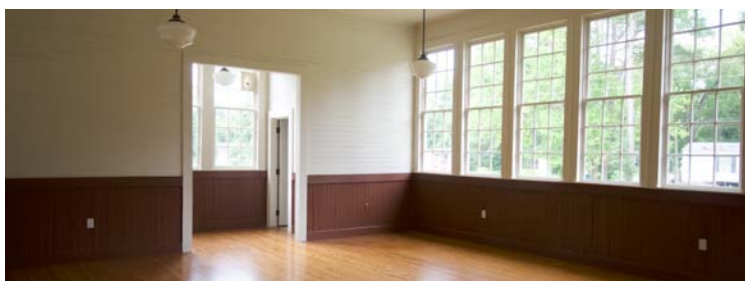
Learn more about Rosenwald Schools

Start your journey with “Remembering Rosenwald” in *National Parks Magazine*:
<https://www.npca.org/articles/3526-remembering-rosenwald>

To listen to and read more of Dr. Crosby’s oral history interviews with Rosenwald graduates in South Carolina: <https://digital.library.sc.edu/exhibits/rosenwald/tom-crosby-oral-history-interview-1-of-2/> and Tom Crosby Oral History Interview 2 of 2 – Rosenwald Schools of South Carolina

For more about the restored school in St. George: <https://stgeorgerosenwald.org/>

A new book about the Rosenwald mission:
<https://ugapress.org/book/9780820358413/a-better-life-for-their-children/>





CFEC is housed in the SC School Improvement Council at the College of Education at the University of South Carolina and is funded by federal grants #U310A180058 and #S320A230032. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not represent views of the U.S. Department of Education.



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