

# Rosenwald schools



Rosenwald school

The students and staff of Pee Dee School—a Rosenwald school—in Marion County, South Carolina, c. 1935–1950.



Reynolds's Political Map of the United States

Political map of the United States by William C. Reynolds and J.C. Jones, c. 1856. The mapmakers used 1850 U.S. census data to compare the areas of states permitting slavery, states prohibiting slavery, and territories open to either status.



Julius Rosenwald

Julius Rosenwald, American businessman and philanthropist.

**Rosenwald schools**, any of roughly 5,000 rural schools for African American students that were built in the American South in the early 20th century. Rosenwald schools were the result of a collaboration between Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald, the president and part owner of Sears, Roebuck and Company. The schools boosted educational attainment and literacy rates in rural Black communities and helped educate the generation who would lead the civil rights movement. Many of the buildings are still intact, and several dozen are included on the National Register of Historic Places—though only a few still operate as schools.

At the turn of the 20th century, Southern schools were generally starved for funding. This was a result of both the region's lagging economy and the consolidation of money in the hands of the wealthy. In 1900–01, for instance, Alabama schools spent an average of only \$3.10 for each child attending school—less than a tenth of the amount spent on students that year in the North Atlantic states, and the state constitution ratified in late 1901 restricted funding even more. Although education funds were meager in general, the institutional racism in Jim Crow states meant that conditions tended to be even worse for Black students than for white ones. About the turn of the century, an average of \$4.92 was spent on white students in the former slave states, compared with \$2.21 on Black children.

Northern philanthropists, including John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and George Foster Peabody, stepped in to alleviate the problem, channeling most of their donations through the newly created Southern Education Board. Thanks to their gifts, the total annual expenditures for public schools in the South rose from \$21.4 million in 1900 to \$71.4 million in 1913. Despite such endeavors, funds for rural Black schools were still severely lacking.

In 1911 Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald met for the first time, having been introduced by a mutual friend. Rosenwald, the son of a German Jewish immigrant, lived in Chicago, where he served as president of Sears, Roebuck, and Company. He had read Washington's autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, and was keen to use his money to help African Americans.

**Read the text of Washington's influential "The Road to African American Progress" (1895) speech [here](#).**

In 1912 Rosenwald gave Washington \$25,000 to aid Black colleges and preparatory academies. Washington said he wanted to use a small portion for grants to Black

communities near Tuskegee, Alabama, so they could build rural elementary schools. Rosenwald agreed on the condition that each community had to raise matching funds. The first school built with such matched Rosenwald funds was dedicated in Alabama the following year. By the time of Washington's death, in 1915, Rosenwald had given matching grants for some 80 Black schools in

three states. He incorporated the Rosenwald Fund in 1917, and in 1920 he established an office in Nashville that would serve as a headquarters.

However, individual communities tended to be the primary drivers in the construction of these buildings—the Rosenwald Fund was there to aid their efforts. According to historian Mary Hoffschwelle, rural Black residents, teachers, and community leaders “grasped the tool of the Rosenwald school-building program to force open public coffers and demand attention and resources from white public officials and educators.” They appeared at school-board meetings, demanded meetings with school superintendents, worked whatever political connections they had, and contributed their own money and land—above their tax obligations—to establish the schools.

The fund issued stock blueprints for the schools. Most buildings had two, three, or four classrooms and were designed to maximize the use of natural light since most of them lacked electricity. For instance, floor plans always called for students to sit with the windows to their left, so their arms would not cast shadows on their desks as they wrote. Another standard feature was an “industrial room,” where girls would learn to cook and sew and boys would learn to farm and work with tools.

The schools also served as meeting spaces for adults in the communities and sometimes as resource hubs. The Mobile County Training School in Alabama, for instance, hosted workshops on canning and agricultural techniques and sponsored a mothers’ club and a business league.

By 1932, when the building program ended, it had been responsible for the construction of 4,977 schools spanning 15 states. One out of every five schools in the South was a Rosenwald school at that point. The fund itself had contributed \$4.3 million, which was surpassed by donations from Black communities totaling \$4.7 million. The project also compelled local governments to spend \$18.1 million and was thus instrumental in increasing government spending on Black public education. At the same time, the leaders of the fund had to be careful not to offend elite white Southerners. The schools did not challenge segregation, and they generally stopped educating students after eighth grade. As historian Thomas Hanchett stated, “Rosenwald schools educated students to be good farmers, instead of giving them the capability to leave rural life.”

Despite these shortcomings, the schools massively raised the literacy rate in poor Black communities and played a crucial role in narrowing the literacy gap between Black and white Americans between the world wars. Notable alumni from Rosenwald schools include Maya Angelou, Medgar Evers, and John Lewis.

Many Rosenwald schools closed in the 1950s and ’60s, when *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) required Southern states to desegregate public schools and move Black students into white institutions. Most of the buildings were abandoned and left to fall apart, but some were repurposed as community centers, homes, and storage sheds. In recent years, historic preservationists have fought to save many of the buildings. In 2002 the National Trust for Historic Preservation included the schools on its list of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. The trust estimates that only 10–12 percent of the buildings are still intact. An effort is underway to create a Julius Rosenwald & Rosenwald Schools National Historic Park, which would include several of the schoolhouses in various states.

Nick Tabor