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PRESERVING ROSENWALD SCHOOLS IN EAST TEXAS: THE SAND FLAT AND RICHLAND SCHOOL PROJECT

By James Conrad and Theodore M. Lawe

Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the popularity of the television documentary "Roots," an intense effort to preserve African American heritage is sweeping Texas and the nation. More than 100 African American museums have been established in the last forty years.¹ Numerous preservation groups have been organized and have actively worked to protect African American cultural sites, structures, and history in Texas. Over the past decade, several county historical commissions have acquired Texas Historical Commission markers for African American churches, schools, and communities. Even more impressive, a handful of organizations and individuals have embarked on ambitious projects such as setting up African American archives and libraries, cleaning up cemeteries, conducting oral history projects, and opening historical museums. These endeavors receive support from various organizations, including the Texas Historical Commission (THC), the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP), and a host of county historical commissions and societies.

Perhaps the most impressive East Texas African American historical institution is the A.C. McMillan African American Museum in Emory. The museum displays historical artifacts and authentic African American and African art and sculptures.

To ensure new attractions for returning visitors, the curator changes the non-permanent exhibits annually. In addition to its permanent exhibits, the museum follows a comprehensive plan to collect local African American family histories and preserve local African American historical sites and buildings, including the Rosenwald School at Sand Flat.

Rosenwald schools possess a unique history. In 1912 Booker T. Washington, founder and president of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama, and Julius Rosenwald, multimillionaire president and CEO of Sears and Roebuck, partnered to upgrade African American education in the South. They financed the construction of new, modern school buildings with support from local black communities and public school systems.² The need for modern school buildings for rural blacks was great indeed. While traveling through the lower South around the turn of the century, Washington had witnessed firsthand the need to revolutionize rural education for African Americans. Almost without exception, schools for blacks were smaller and understaffed compared to white schools. Black schools in the South possessed grossly inferior facilities; many held classes outdoors under brush arbors, in one room log cabins, or in churches that generally lacked adequate furnishings and supplies. Not only were the African American schools physically inferior, but the length of the school term was shorter than that in white

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schools. Put simply, equality did not exist in Texas public schools. According to historian William Brophy, the total value of the furniture in white schools in Texas exceeded the total value of all the black schools in Texas. Washington and Rosenwald sought to address this disparity with the Rosenwald Fund, a philanthropic foundation.

Rosenwald Schools were common in rural East and Central Texas well into the middle of the twentieth century. The Rosenwald Fund, along with local African-American communities, joined forces to build classrooms, industrial shops, and teacher's houses between 1920 and 1932. Eventually, however, two forces made the school buildings obsolete. First, desegregation of public schools as mandated by the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* forced school consolidation. Second, massive population shifts from rural to urban areas following World War II resulted in a loss of rural population. A recent survey found only a handful of school buildings still intact, though undoubtedly others exist. Something so common only five decades ago – Texas once boasted 527 Rosenwald Schools – now appears to be a rarity. Rosenwald Schools improved rural African American education, and the story of the schools is essential to understanding the necessity to preserve and document the remaining structures.³

Rosenwald Schools were excellent examples of public-private cooperation. Following the example of other philanthropic organizations, the Rosenwald Fund contributed a matching grant that would pay about one-third of the costs of building a school. The remaining expenses would be shouldered by local African American communities and county and state governments. The terms of the grant required that the school be in continuous session for more than five months per academic year; that the building and property be deeded to local authorities; and that the local public school system assume responsibility for staffing and maintenance.⁴ Historians refer to the Rosenwald School Program as the most successful effort at enhancing education undertaken by private efforts in the history of the United States. The record is astonishing. Rosenwald-funded schools first appeared in Texas in 1920 and continued to be built until 1932, when the Fund ceased to support rural school construction. During that period, the Rosenwald Fund had erected over 5,300 buildings in southern states. Texas' 527 school buildings ranked it third only behind North Carolina and Alabama. Bowie, Cass, and Smith counties in far northeast Texas accounted for the largest number of schools in the state, while a few Texas counties with large African American populations, such as Dallas County, had no Rosenwald Schools. Such absences perhaps resulted from prejudice, since some participation by white residents was required for a Rosenwald School to be built.

The Rosenwald Fund provided primary financial support, but other northern philanthropic organizations contributed substantial sums as well. The John H. Slater Foundation funded teacher training schools, trained rural teachers, and supplemented teachers' salaries. Yet another foundation, the Anna T. Jeanes Fund, supported "Jeanes supervisors" to recruit rural teachers, present home demonstration programs, and organize fundraising rallies at Rosenwald

Schools. In a 1935 report on African American education, the Texas Department of Education summarized the purpose of the Jeanes Fund field agents: "The Jeanes Supervisors were agents to help with supervising programs for the education of Negro children and the welfare of the Negro people." The Jeanes supervisors first appeared in Texas after World War I. Twenty-two counties employed Jeanes teachers by 1930, the peak year of the program.

A third private foundation, the General Education Board, financed state agents for African American schools, conducted county training programs, and provided summer school for African American teachers. According to the Texas Department of Education, "the General Education Board provided all salaries and official travel expenses for the State Agents and Assistant State Agents for Negro Education. The Fund also defrayed the expense of State Agents to several national conferences on education." These three funds, along with others, played vital roles in the success of Rosenwald Schools. In Texas, they were administered through the Texas Department of Education in conjunction with Prairie View State College, which acted as the site for program coordination and training.⁶

Rosenwald Schools were built according to standardized architectural plans that incorporated the latest in layout, furnishings, and sanitation facilities. An almost universal feature of the two- and three-room schools was a sliding partition between classrooms which, when opened, created a large auditorium for special programs, public meetings, county agent demonstrations, church programs, and Juneteenth celebrations. The school buildings also included kitchens, industrial shops, and space on the grounds for baseball fields, basketball courts, and gardens. In an era before rural electrification, large banks of windows on the east and west sides of the buildings maximized available natural light.

The small but growing movement to preserve Rosenwald Schools is a new initiative to maintain for future generations a part of the African American heritage. At the national level, the NTHP coordinates "The Rosenwald Initiative," funded in part by a \$100,000 grant from the Rosenwald family foundation and matching private donors. This initiative is designed to set up a network to share information and generate public interest among state and local organizations interested in preserving Rosenwald Schools. Recently, the NTHP has sponsored several national conferences and workshops that focused attention on the historic significance of Rosenwald Schools and discussed strategies for saving the extant school buildings.⁷

The Texas Humanities Council, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, municipal governments, and museums like the A.C. McMillan African American Museum are in the forefront of Rosenwald School preservation in Texas. To date, the most impressive steps at the state level came in 2001, when the NTHP sent historian Karen Riles into the field to identify surviving Rosenwald Schools in Texas, an endeavor that resulted in a lengthy report and the identification of twenty-five existing buildings.⁸ Riles' work

generated numerous newspaper stories about Rosenwald Schools and their importance to African American education and communities.⁹ Following up on the Riles' report, the NTHP office in Austin launched a campaign to encourage nominations of Rosenwald Schools for listing on the National Register. To date, four Rosenwald Schools in Texas have been listed – Lockhart Vocational School (Caldwell County), Sweet Home Vocational and Agricultural School (Guadalupe County), Garland Community School Teacherage (Bowie County), and Pleasant Hill Rosenwald School (Cass County).¹⁰

At present, several community based groups and organizations are working to document and restore Rosenwald Schools in Texas. Their intent is to have these buildings recognized as Historical Landmarks by the THC and/or listed on the National Register. Acquisition of state markers and National Register listings enhances the prestige of historic properties by conferring state and national recognition, thereby improving the chances for raising money for repairs and restoration. In addition, those applying for markers and NTHP listing must undergo a rigorous process of collecting and evaluating documents related to the history of the school building, the students, the teachers, and the community. If nothing else is accomplished, this alone is a worthwhile endeavor, for it provides a permanent record for future historians and researchers.

Restoring a Rosenwald School is a much more complex and expensive enterprise than simply securing historical markers. Without question, the major challenge facing preservationists is locating adequate financial resources for professional restoration and modification for adaptive use. Philanthropic foundations do not generally offer grants for private restoration, regardless of the intended use of the structure. Municipalities, counties, states, and the federal government, along with corporate and individual donors, provide the bulk of the funding. The process of restoration is expensive if done by expert architects and contractors, while amateur and volunteer work usually results in diminished historical integrity.

Aside from raising money, the most problematic aspect of preserving a building often is finding an appropriate use for it once it has been restored. Since Rosenwald Schools tend to be found in isolated rural areas or in Freedom Colonies (all black rural communities) away from centers of population, they are subject to vandalism. Furthermore the buildings, with few exceptions, are of wood frame construction, subjecting them to accidental fire or arson. Some preservation groups solve this dilemma by moving the buildings to nearby cities or historical parks. This, however, renders them ineligible for Texas Historical Landmark designation and for listing on the National Register. Removing a building from its original setting decreases its historical significance, although in some cases removing an historical structure is the only way to save it. A review of past successful projects indicates that options for future adaptive use do exist for Rosenwald Schools. Restored structures throughout the South have become private schools, day care centers, commu-

nity centers, museums, residences, businesses, and visitor centers. Modifying the interior to suit a new function does not usually preclude acquiring or keeping an historical marker, but the exterior must retain its original appearance. Schools that are to be used as museums should be preserved in their original condition inside and out, or returned as nearly as possible to their original condition. Several examples of rural schoolhouse museums exist; one of the best is in Old City Park in Dallas, in a fully equipped, restored rural school building.

The A.C. McMillan African American Museum is mobilizing the African American community in Rains County for the purpose of documenting, restoring, and planning for future adaptive use of the Sand Flat Rosenwald School just outside of Emory, which was built in 1921 and 1922 on land donated by the Murray family.¹¹ Rains County once boasted two Rosenwald Schools—the Richland School and the Sand Flat School. The Richland School, located outside of Point in North Rains County, was destroyed by fire in 2002. Plans are being made to have a marker placed at the site of the former school.

Preserving Rosenwald Schools preserves an important yet often-forgotten part of Texas' history. During the decades after the Civil War, African American desire for education was so strong that, against all odds, 678 African American schools were operating in Texas in 1877. Education for African Americans in Rains County can be documented back at least to 1895.¹² According to Gwendolyn McMillan Lawe, four public schools for African Americans operated in the county between 1896 and 1898 – Emory #1, Chapel Hill #5, Richland #9, and Isaiah Bunkley #19.¹³ One of the first black teachers in Rains County was Dora McMillan, a mulatto. She was the grandmother of A.C. McMillan, the last principal of the Sand Flat School who became the principal at Rains Junior High School after desegregation. The local A.C. McMillan African American Museum was named in his honor.¹⁴

According to *The Forgotten Texas Census of 1887-88*, white teachers were paid \$49.55 a month and black teachers were paid \$41.26 in Rains County.¹⁵ The schools programs were “separate and unequal.” Interviews with several graduates and former teachers of the two Rosenwald Schools reveal that the students had only second-hand books, supplies, and equipment handed down from the white schools. Most of those interviewed, however, generally believed that the school fostered a family environment in the community.¹⁶ Doris Washington, a former teacher of first- and third-grade students, remembers the multiple roles that teachers played, such as bus driver, kitchen helper, and fundraiser.¹⁷ Another teacher, Terecia Carraway, remembers the close working relationships among the schools, the families, and the church at Sand Flat. She credits her being hired as a teacher with her being hired as a church musician. Because there were no available houses or apartments for rent, teachers, most of who were recruited from outside the community, were boarded with local families. The teachers were college educated, certified, and registered with Rains County.¹⁸

Many of the students who attended the two Rosenwald Schools in the 1920s and 1930s had children who also attended the same schools. Lois Lane is one such second-generation Rosenwald graduate now employed by the City of Dallas. She remembers Professor C.C. and Mrs. Oma Wesley, a husband-and-wife team that taught all grade levels at Richland School.¹⁹ She credits them with her going to college and her success in life.

The Rosenwald students, many of whom desegregated Rains County Public Schools in 1965, vividly recall the cultural shock of going from an all-African American school environment to an all-white school environment. Mrs. Audie Shiflet, a business teacher at the integrated school, played a major role in helping newly arrived African American students adjust and feel comfortable in their new surroundings. She later became a charter volunteer when The A.C. McMillan African American Museum opened in Emory in 2000. She accepted the invitation to volunteer from her former student, Gwendolyn McMillan Lawe, museum co-founder and director. Mildred Garrett, former Mayor Pro Tem of Emory and a graduate of Sand Flat, remembered that the school stressed high academic standards but also emphasized values, perfect attendance, and social etiquette. Her son, Howard Garrett, had perfect attendance from the first through the eighth grade.²⁰

Desegregation of public schools in Rains County began with the transfer of African American students from St. Paul High School, also a Rosenwald School in Neylandville, located in Hunt County between Greenville and Commerce. These students were residents of Rains County, but because there was no high school for them in Rains County, they were bused approximately forty miles each way to Hunt County. Public education for African Americans in Rains County before 1965 was limited to the eighth grade.

In both the Sand Flat and Richland communities the Rosenwald School buildings, along with the local churches, were the centers of community activity and the entities that defined the communities. Many graduates of these schools have gone on to become teachers, principals, government workers, health care professionals, career military men and women, and business owners. As was the case in other communities with Rosenwald Schools, African American residents of Rains County enthusiastically supported education and thirsted for knowledge. They recognized the value of education to improving their economic and social status.

The plans for restoring and re-using the Sand Flat School building acknowledge the necessity for a broad-based collaborative partnership and financial and technical support from local, regional, state, and national agencies. Museum personnel have formed a relationship with the NTHP, attending national conferences and requesting technical assistance. Once the origins and history of the Sand Flat School are documented and the building restored into a museum, the community will have a location for cultural enrichment, civic programs, and networking. The Sand Flat preservation group realizes that this is a long and tedious project. Such undertakings are essential for the preservation of African American heritage.²¹

The preservation of buildings and sites related to African American history and culture reaches far beyond Rosenwald Schools. For example, additional research and attention needs to be focused on the origin and development of African American neighborhoods and communities in medium and large cities in Texas. These were once thriving centers of business, culture, and social life for African Americans, but have now largely fell into disrepair. While the history of African Americans in Texas is less familiar and tends to be more fragile than other, better-known parts of our collective past, it must be preserved. Rosenwald Schools are a vital element in preserving the saga of African American education in Texas.

NOTES

¹*Official Museum Directory* (Washington, D.C., 2004).

²Thad Sitton and James Conrad, *Freedom Colonies* (Austin, 2005), pp. 135–136; Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington The Wizard of Tuskegee. 1901–1915* (New York, 1983), p. 197.

³Karen Riles, “Texas Rosenwald Schools Survey,” National Trust for Historic Preservation, Austin, Texas, 2001.

⁴Sitton and Conrad, *Freedom Colonies*, pp. 135–136.

⁵*Negro Education in Texas, 1934–35*, Bulletin, Texas State Department of Education, Vol., XL, No. 3, Austin, Texas, March 1935, p. 20.

⁶*Negro Education in Texas*, p. 26.

⁷“Restore America: Communities at Crossroads” National Preservation Conference, Louisville, Kentucky, September 28–October 3, 2004. <http://www.rosenwaldschools.com>: “Trust Me.” *Preservation*, November/December 2004, p. 9.

⁸Riles. “Texas Rosenwald Schools Survey.” The surviving schools identified by Riles are: Hopewell School, Bastrop County; St. Mary’s School, Bastrop County; Lot Canada School, Beeville, Bee County; Garland School Teacherage, Bowie County; Lockhart Vocational High School, Caldwell County; Linden School, Cass County; Pleasant Hill Community School Vicinity, Cass County; Ashbury High School, Yoakum, Dewitt County; Mount Vernon, Franklin County; Anderson, Grimes County; Sweet Home Vocational School; Seguin, Guadalupe County; York Creek School, Guadalupe County; Dayton School, Liberty County; Mt. Pilgrim School, Matagorda County; Davilla School, Milam County; Kerens School, Navarro County; Sand Flat School, Rains County; Calvert School, Robertson County; Sagamore Hill, Tarrant County, Lillig School, Travis County; Pilot Point School, Travis County; El Campo School, Wharton County, Wharton County Training School, Wharton County; Coupland School, Williamson County; Hopewell School, Round Rock, Williams County.

⁹“Texas Rosenwald Properties on 11 Most Endangered List,” Texas Historical Commission News Release, July 1, 2002; Donald E. McLeod, “Rosenwald Schools Served Blacks in South,” *The Bryan-College Station Eagle*, February 26, 2004; Lonnie Mabin, “School Symbolize a Legacy,” *The Detroit News*, January 9, 2000; Dionne Victory, “Rosenwald Schools Marked Turning Point in Black Education,” *Texarkana Gazette*, February 29, 2004.

¹⁰“Texas Rosenwald Properties,” Texas Historical Commission News Release, p. 2; Communications from Gregg Smith of National Trust for Historic Preservation, Austin, Texas to James Conrad, November 29, 2004.

¹¹Memorandum from Gwendolyn M. Lawe, Director of the A.C. McMillan African American Museum to Reverend Willie Byrd, Pastor, Prairie Grove Baptist Church, July 16, 2004.

¹²Gwendolyn McMillan Lawe, “From Wolf to Wolfwood: An Autobiography and Historical

Study of the McMillan and the African American Families of Emory, Texas, 1833–2004.” unpublished manuscript.

¹Lawe. “From Wolf to Wolfwood.”

²Rains County Treasurer, Rains County School Account Register. 1897. Rains County Courthouse, Emory, Texas.

³L.L. Foster, editor. *Forgotten Texas Census First Annual Report of the Agricultural Bureau of the Department of Agricultural, Insurance Statistics and History, 1887–88* (Austin, 2002), pp. 183–194.

⁴Interview with former students Hella Mayberry, Harold McMillan, Dock Mayberry, Modis Mayberry, and Lois Lane. December 2 and 4, 2004.

⁵Interview with former teacher Doris Washington, December 2, 2004.

⁶Rains County Treasurer. School Accounts.

⁷Interview with former student Lois Lane, December 2, 2004.

⁸Interview with former student and teacher Mildred Garrett, December 2, 2004.

⁹Memorandum from Lawe to Byrd, July 17, 2004. This memorandum argues for the restoration of the Sand Flat School and proposes plans for its reuse.