

## Case 10

### Building Schools for Rural African Americans

*Julius Rosenwald Fund, 1920*

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*Background.* Julius Rosenwald amassed his fortune through the success of his clothing business and during his tenure as president of Sears, Roebuck & Co. Rosenwald's religious beliefs motivated him to use his fortune toward charitable ends.<sup>154</sup> Among the beneficiaries of his philanthropy were Hull House, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and various entities aimed at the betterment of educational opportunities for African Americans. Rosenwald's interest in African American education was inspired by *An American Citizen, the Life of William H. Baldwin* as well as the writings of Booker T. Washington. Through his contributions to a number of YMCA and YWCA buildings dedicated to African Americans, Rosenwald developed a relationship with Washington that further fueled his interest in African American education.

On his fiftieth birthday in 1912, Rosenwald gave \$650,000 in gifts to a number of charitable causes, including \$25,000 to Washington to support the expansion of the Tuskegee Institute. Washington, after using less than the full \$25,000 grant for offshoot campuses of Tuskegee, contemplated different uses for the remaining \$2,100. After deciding he would like to build six small, rural schoolhouses for African American pupils, Washington asked Rosenwald to approve this use. Upon Rosenwald's agreement, Washington built the six schools with the unused \$2,100 of Rosenwald's Tuskegee gift.

*Strategy.* Washington prepared a glowing report of the dedication of the six new schools, particularly noting large numbers of both black and white attendees at dedication ceremonies. Rosenwald, pleased with Washington's report, contributed an additional \$30,000 to Tuskegee to build 100 similar schools throughout rural Alabama. State agents of African American education in other Southern States, distressed with the condition of African American education in their own states, asked Rosenwald to expand the building program to other states in the South, but Rosenwald declined to expand the building program until the degree of success of the schools in Alabama could first be ascertained.

Tuskegee administered the building program with Rosenwald funding from 1913 until 1920.<sup>155</sup> For the duration of what would become a massive school-building program, Rosenwald annually reviewed the budget of the program, and he took great interest in the design and quality of the school buildings, even prompting an effort to modernize the designs midway through the program.

Rosenwald generally structured his philanthropic gifts in a way that attracted greater philanthropic and public financial support for his causes. He often provided less than 50 percent of the costs of various enterprises and challenged the recipients to raise the remaining funds from other sources.<sup>156</sup>

In 1917, while Rosenwald was in Washington to advise President Woodrow Wilson on financial matters related to World War I, he made an appearance at a conference on education to report on the school-building program. State education agents and officials in other Southern states urged Rosenwald to support similar building programs throughout the South, and Rosenwald finally agreed to do so. In October of 1917, Rosenwald incorporated a foundation, the Julius Rosenwald Fund, to administer his philanthropic endeavors. Because the school-building program had outgrown Tuskegee's administrative capacity, Rosenwald established a Southern Office of the Fund in Nashville in 1920 to take control of the rural school-building program, enlisting S.L. Smith, a former state agent of African American education in Tennessee, to serve the office as director. In the program's first year, 1920–21, the budget exceeded \$500,000.

*Impact.* In *The Emergence of the New South*, historian George Brown Tindall calls the rural school-

building program of the Rosenwald Fund “one of the most effective stratagems to outflank the prejudice and apathy that hobbled Negro education.”<sup>157</sup> Julius Rosenwald’s building program overhauled the educational infrastructure of African American education in the rural South. By the school-building program’s termination in 1932 (the year of Rosenwald’s death), the Fund had facilitated the construction of 4,977 rural schools throughout the South with an additional 380 homes and shops to complement the schools. Many of the schools operated continuously until desegregation, as ordered by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, was slowly enforced in the communities in which Rosenwald schools were operating. In 1928, Rosenwald schools accounted for one out of every five African American schools in the South, and these schools enrolled one of every three Southern African American pupils.<sup>158</sup>

Rosenwald schools were noted for their modern architectural designs. In some communities, the Rosenwald schools surpassed the quality of the local white schools, prompting renovations or new building projects for white pupils. The Rosenwald school-building program served as a countervailing force in a public environment that often sought to undermine African American education in the South. At a time when Jim Crow laws and pervasive racism made large-scale public support of African American education highly unlikely, Rosenwald’s program circumvented popular negative sentiment and sparked public financing for widely underfunded African American schools.

The final Rosenwald School was built in Warm Springs, Georgia in 1937, after the termination of the program, at the special request of President Franklin Roosevelt. When Roosevelt was governor of New York, he sought funding from the Rosenwald Fund for an African American school in his summer retreat home of Warm Springs, noting “[i]t must be a Rosenwald School because of the influence these schools have on the officials and communities.” For five years, the Rosenwald Fund did not take up the Warm Springs school, in part because the building program’s termination coincided approximately with Roosevelt’s initial request. In 1937, however, President Roosevelt renewed his request that the Rosenwald Fund build a school in Warm Springs. The Fund’s board granted approval of special funding to build the school, and President Roosevelt personally dedicated the building.<sup>159</sup>

Tindall notes that the larger impact of the Rosenwald Fund’s school-building program was the spark it ignited in providing public financial support for African American schools “while neutralizing the opposition of white taxpayers.”<sup>160</sup> The Fund’s contribution to the total cost of the program totaled only 15 percent of the overall building cost, but the program ignited local public funding of a majority of the building costs and almost all of the operating expenses of the rural schools.

## Notes

154. Roberts, Alicia S., “Julius Rosenwald,” *Learning to Give*, [http://www.learningtogive.com/papers/people/julius\\_rosenwald.html](http://www.learningtogive.com/papers/people/julius_rosenwald.html).

155. Ibid.

156. Julius Rosenwald, “The Burden of Wealth,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 1/5/1929, 136.

157. George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913–1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 271.

158. “History,” *The Rosenwald Schools Initiative*, <http://www.rosenwaldschools.com/history.html#5>.

159. S. L. Smith, *Builders of Goodwill: The Story of the State Agents of Negro Education in the South, 1910 to 1950* (Nashville: Tennessee Book Company, 1950), 72–74.

160. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*, 271.