

Rosenwald School in Florence aided education of African Americans

– contributed by Carol Brooks; Posted on February 17, 2023 at 3:24 PM by Tamara Vaughan;

<https://www.highpointnc.gov/Blog.aspx?IID=96>

Longleaf Productions recently debuted at the High Point Museum their documentary on Rosenwald Schools in North Carolina. Unlocking the Doors of Opportunity / The Rosenwald Schools of North Carolina (2023) features scholars as well as teachers and students of these schools, and our program also included a short talk by one of these scholars, Dr. Tom Hanchett. In his presentation, Dr. Hanchett identified ten Rosenwald schools that operated in Guilford County. Carol Brooks takes a look at the Florence School, in the eastern part of High Point.

Today, Florence Elementary School on Penny Road on the outskirts of High Point is a thriving segment of the Guilford County School System. Its success is due to a man who may have never visited North Carolina.

Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald was president of Sears, Roebuck and Company from 1910 to 1925. Like his friend, Booker T. Washington, he was concerned about the poor quality of education (if there was any at all) for African Americans in the South. Washington had been born into slavery in Virginia and became the first president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He gained national prominence as an author, speaker, and educational and political leader.

A 2015 documentary, *Rosenwald: A Remarkable Story of a Jewish Partnership with African-American Communities*, relates that Rosenwald was shocked when he learned of the anti-Jewish programs in Russia and realized America's treatment of African Americans was no better.

According to HistorySouth.org, "by 1915, public schools in North Carolina spent \$7.40 per white pupil but only \$2.30 per black pupil." This was not an unusual state of affairs, according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation: "By the early 20th Century, most schools for African Americans across the South were underfunded and in serious disrepair."

Rosenwald believed education was the key to success for rural African Americans and established the Rosenwald Fund in 1917 to increase educational opportunities in those areas. Prior to this fund, most of the education for African Americans in the South had been provided post-Civil War as part of the Freedmen's Bureau. Judith Mendenhall operated a Freedmen's school around 1866, thought to have been located in the area that is now High Point City Lake Park in Jamestown.

By the time the Fund ended in 1932, North Carolina had constructed more Rosenwald structures than any other Southern state – 813

buildings, including teachers' residences and industrial education shops.

Two of these schools were in the Florence community, on the same site as today's elementary school. There had been previous schools for African American children in Florence in the past, but the community opted to become part of the Rosenwald system.

According to information from the North Carolina Museum of History, school building committees had a catalog of stock blueprints, floor plans, and exterior renderings from which to choose so "any rural community could build a top-flight facility without architects' fees."

Designed as a matching grant system, local communities were asked to provide labor, materials and, in some cases, land. The Museum of History also notes that raising local money was no simple task among the poor cotton and tobacco tenant farmers of North Carolina. However, rallies raised both cash donations and pledges, often a penny and a nickel at a time.

The Florence school committee picked Floor Plan No. 20 for the original design in 1916 and No. 5 for the replacement in 1927 when overcrowding became a problem. The original school was a standard two-room wooden schoolhouse with a room for cooking and sewing instruction. It was probably staffed by two teachers.

The new brick building had four classrooms and an auditorium and was designed for seven teachers. It was built on the Nashville Plan and was "to face east or west only." How the building was to be sited – east to west or north to south – was important because few had access to electricity and had only windows to provide light for the student classrooms.

Leon R. Harris, a Black man and writer, began teaching at what he termed the "Florence community Negro school" in 1912, continuing to 1914. Unhappy with his work in Virginia, Harris had jumped a freight train going south, ending up in High Point. He got a job as a farmer with a Mr. Lyons in Florence. When Lyons gave up farming, Harris was asked to teach at the school, using his training from Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. Locals urged him to get teaching credentials.

"I took the examination and was given a first-grade certificate. No teacher with a first-grade certificate had ever taught their school." Harris said.

"The compulsory school attendance law went into effect that year. The Florence school had

never had an enrollment over 40. My enrollment was 80. The second year it rose to over 100."

Soon, word of the school spread not only to the Black community but also to the whites, who were invited by Blacks to attend.

"The little schoolhouse was running over," Harris said. "One day Prof. [Thomas R.] Foust, our County Superintendent of Schools, and two of the Education Board members came out to visit us. Prof. Foust got no further than the door.

"Where did all these children come from?" he asked me.

"We must have a new building before next term," I told him."

Harris had heard of the Rosenwald Fund and investigated. Since the Florence church was the center of community life, the community decided the new school should be near the church.

"All of us got together, white and Negro," Harris continued. "The white people donated all the timber for the rough lumber and some gave money. I took my axe into the woods with the others. We felled the trees, cut the logs, and hauled them to the sawmill. But every sill under that schoolhouse was hand-hewn."

Unfortunately, due to family matters Harris had to leave the area before he had a chance to teach in the new school. But as he left, he said his farewells to good friend Clay Briggs, whose descendants still live in the Florence community. Harris became an author, poet, and editor of an African American newspaper in Richmond in the 1920s.

The Rosenwald Fund has been called the most important initiative to advance African American education in the early 20th Century, according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Although references differ in numbers, when the school-building program ended in 1932, approximately 5,357 structures had been built in 883 counties in 15 states at a cost of between \$24.4 and 28.4 million. The schools served more than seven million African American children.

Only about 500 of these school buildings remain. New efforts have been launched to save some of them. In 2021, the Julius Rosenwald and Rosenwald Schools Study Act (H.R. 3250) was signed into law. The National Park Service launched a special resource study process in June 2022 to evaluate a select list of Rosenwald Schools and sites.