



Southport Historical Society  
 Susan Sellers Carson Scholarship  
 Rosenwald Schools Essay  
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After the Civil War, education became the top priority for freed slaves, and their desire for education was so strong that they often outnumbered white students in southern schools. Booker T. Washington said, “It was a whole race trying to go to school” (Fraser). But this created numerous problems and as Reconstruction ended, whites across the South began to take back control of their states. Even though Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment, by the mid-1870s states began to disenfranchise African Americans (McConarty). This, and the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court ruling, led to racial segregation under the separate but equal doctrine (History.com Editors). Public schools became segregated and African American schools were not funded at the same level as white schools. These schools had serious challenges, suffering from overcrowding, poor facilities, and lack of resources. The solution to these problems came from an unlikely partnership.

Booker T. Washington was born a slave in Virginia in 1856, but became one of the most well-known African American supporters of education. In 1881, he founded the Tuskegee Institute, a school originally dedicated to training public school teachers (History.com Editors). As the condition of African American education in the South got worse, Washington worked to develop solutions to the problems. He devised a plan for a huge program to improve schooling for rural African Americans throughout the South. The only problem was the cost. However, since Washington had used wealthy Northerners to help fund and build the Tuskegee Institute, he decided to try to do the same thing to fund this idea (Hanchett, Saving the South's Rosenwald Schools).

Julius Rosenwald was born to Jewish immigrants in Springfield, Illinois, in 1862. He was not educated, but instead went into the clothing industry. He joined Sears, Roebuck, and Company in 1897 and by 1909, became president of the company. As he made more and more money, he was always looking to help various charitable causes. He became inspired to help African Americans after reading Washington’s book, *Up from Slavery* (Wilcox). His friend, Paul Sachs, introduced him to Washington in 1911. Rosenwald became a trustee at the Tuskegee Institute and in 1912, made a

\$25,000 donation to the school. Washington used some of that money to help six local communities build rural elementary schools. Therefore, the first six Rosenwald schools were built in Alabama in 1913 and 1914 (Rosenwald School Legacy).

By the time Washington died in 1915, Rosenwald had already provided enough money to build 80 schools in three states (Rosenwald Schools in North Carolina). After Washington's death, Rosenwald continued to fund building rural schools throughout the South. In 1917, the Rosenwald Fund was created and used to build everything from public elementary schools to colleges and universities (Maurer). In 1920, Rosenwald created the Southern office, took over construction management from the Tuskegee Institute, and expanded the services provided to include drawing school plans. By 1924, the Southern Office produced a pamphlet called *Community School Plans*, which included seventeen different school designs based on the number of teachers a school would have (Rosenwald Schools in North Carolina). School designs included a central meeting space or auditorium so that the school would become the center of the community. The schools were built to strict specifications, including room size, blackboard placement, and paint colors. They also had huge bays of windows to allow as much natural light as possible into the building. This was important because there was usually no electricity in these rural schools (Emanuel).

Rosenwald had a unique way of ensuring that local communities were invested in their schools. Before donating money, he required the African Americans in the community to raise 20 percent of the cost of the school. Once they had raised the money, he would ensure that the local school board, usually run by whites, would agree to operate the school. After those conditions were met, he would donate the money to build the school (Hanchett, *The Rosenwald Schools and Black Education in North Carolina*). This process ensured the ultimate success of the school.

By 1928, over 33 percent of African American students in the South were being taught in Rosenwald Schools. (Rosenwald Schools) That percentage was closer to 50 percent in North

Carolina. Rosenwald died in 1932 and funding for school construction stopped. By that time, Rosenwald had donated money to build 5,357 new buildings, including 4,977 schools, in 883 counties throughout 15 states (Hanchett, *Saving the South's Rosenwald Schools*). These buildings cost over \$28 million, of which \$4.3 million came from the Rosenwald Fund and \$4.7 million was raised by African American communities. The final \$18 million was spent by local governments, including donations from white residents. North Carolina had the most Rosenwald buildings with 813, including 787 schools (*Rosenwald Schools in North Carolina*). Eleven of those buildings were built in Brunswick County, including the Brunswick County Training School (BCT) on Lord Street in Southport (*Southport Historical Society*).

The Brunswick County Training School was finished in 1922 as a four-teacher building, and African American residents in the county raised \$2,000 toward its construction (Stack). The school's total cost at that time was \$8,920. The Rosenwald Fund donated \$1,200 toward construction (Joyner). Unfortunately, the first building burned down in 1922 and had to be rebuilt. The second building was completed in 1924 as a six-teacher school at a cost of \$11,374 (Joyner), and African American residents raised \$5,050 for this building (Stack). The Rosenwald Fund donated a total of \$1,950 toward this school. The school was accredited and also graduated its first graduate, Bertha Bryant, in 1929 (Joyner). From the time it was built through the early 1950s, BCT was the only high school for African American students in Brunswick County.

Many say the success of BCT was due directly to Alvin Caviness. He came to Southport as a teacher in 1925 and became the principal of BCT in 1932, replacing E. Orlando Gandy (Joyner). Caviness was disciplined, innovative, and creative in building and organizing the school, especially with no budget. He took used and second hand books and equipment from the white schools and integrated them into the BCT curriculum (Lewis). He was responsible for school expansion by obtaining both wings from the old high school building in Franklin Square. The State Port Pilot

reported on April 1, 1935 that the south wing had finally reached its location at BCT (There at Last). The April 24, 1935 newspaper announced the second wing of the old school would also be given to BCT (Moving Two Wings Old School Building), but was not moved until February 26, 1936 (Reaves, Southport Brunswick County, North Carolina: Volume III, 1920-1940, A Chronology). In addition to the facilities, many say the quality of the education improved after Caviness' arrival and the many programs he created and classes he added to the curriculum increased student opportunities.

BCT changed its name to Brunswick County High School in July 1964 (Reaves, Southport (Smithville): A Chronology, Volume IV, 1941-1970), but was still only attended by African American students, even though the Supreme Court had struck down racial segregation of children in public schools in *Brown v. The Board of Education* in 1954 (History.com Editors). High schools in Southport were finally integrated in 1969, but only after Southport High School burned down (Lewis). After integration, there was no longer a need for Brunswick County High School and the Rosenwald School in Southport finally closed in 1971-1972.

Rosenwald's donations to build schools for African American students in the South had a huge impact on communities as a whole. Not only did they help to solve some of the education problems experienced after the Civil War, but they also became a central figure and source of pride for their communities. Even though the schools were originally intended to provide trade skills to their students, these schools produced many prominent individuals, most who returned to their community and served the school in some capacity. The schools improved the lives of many in the community, even beyond the students attending the school. Without the generosity of Julius Rosenwald, an entire generation of African Americans may not have had the same educational opportunities. He is an important historical figure and should be remembered.

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