

## Neglected Legacy

Among hundreds built in Texas for African-Americans, forgotten school in Brazoria County awaits rescue.



The Columbia Rosenwald Colored School opened in 1922. Abandoned in the 1950s and later moved to another site, the building remains recognizable but is rapidly decaying; top photo courtesy Columbia Historical Association; bottom photo by Ben Koush.

ON THE RURAL OUTSKIRTS OF WEST COLUMBIA, along State Highway 35 about 50 miles southwest of Houston, a decrepit frame building overgrown with wisteria and surrounded by languorous cows appears hardly worth a second glance. It is difficult to imagine that this abandoned structure was once the principal educational facility for all African-Americans in Brazoria County.

The Columbia Rosenwald Colored School, erected in 1922, is one of perhaps only 40 schools remaining of the 527 built in Texas under the aegis of Julius Rosenwald, a Chicago millionaire who ran Sears Roebuck. Profoundly affected by the impoverished conditions endured by African-Americans in the South forced to live under the era's "Jim Crow" laws, the business magnate established the Julius Rosenwald Fund in 1913 to help finance the construction of new schools to improve educational opportunities for the region's downtrodden black population. Instrumental in aiding Rosenwald to accomplish his philanthropic objective was Booker T. Washington, the prominent African-American activist who believed blacks could demand social equality with whites only after achieving economic parity through adequate education.

Not wishing the fund's outlays to be mere handouts, Rosenwald set strict conditions for disbursements which also encouraged cooperation between blacks and whites. First, the local community had to provide a publicly owned site of at least two acres and to pledge continued maintenance. In addition, African-Americans desiring a school had to contribute either cash or labor. (The Columbia school cost \$1,900 to build. Of the total, \$1,225 came from

local taxes, \$175 from African-American residents, and \$500 from the foundation.) And finally, the building had to conform to one of the sophisticated architectural designs devised by professors at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Despite such rigorous stipulations, the need was great and the response tremendous. Between 1913 and 1932, the Rosenwald Fund helped finance construction of 5,357 schools across the South. Enrollment peaked in the early 1930s at around 650,000 students, or nearly one-third of all African-American children living in the 15 southern states.

Derelict but still distinguishable, the one-story lap-sided Columbia Rosenwald Colored School con-

tinues to stand on five-foot piers above the Brazos River flood plain. (All Rosenwald schools were designed with a single story to save on construction cost and for quick escape in case of fire.) Originally, a row of large single-hung windows ran along the long east-facing side to provide light while a row of small "breeze windows" was set high in the west wall to increase air flow and minimize heat gain from the afternoon sun. The two-room plan allowed a classroom in front and a workshop or community room to the rear, with chalkboards built into the central partition that could be raised to allow communication between the rooms. The ceiling and interior walls were covered with tongue-and-groove pine boards. The original color scheme called for an exterior of white walls with gray trim and an interior with a white ceiling, light gray or cream walls, and dark brown wainscot. The Rosenwald Fund publications were specific about these colors, insisting to a skeptical rural audience that they would "materially increase the amount of light in the classroom...add beauty to the interior and will be more pleasing and restful to the eyes...better the sanitary conditions" and "increase the durability of the building."

The advent of school buses in the late 1940s eliminated the need for decentralized schools and, as a result, the Columbia Rosenwald Colored School and its smaller sister schools in Brazoria County were closed in favor of a single large facility. In the early 1950s the school was sold at a tax auction to James Phillips Sr. who moved the building from its original location on the banks of the Brazos River to his adjacent property about a quarter mile to the southwest for use as storage shed. When his son, James "Scooter" Phillips inherited the building a few years ago, it was all but abandoned to decay; its history almost completely forgotten.

Recently, members of the Columbia Historical Association rediscovered the the origins and historical significance of the former school building and secured its donation. The group now plans to move the building to a new site behind the downtown West Columbia Historical Museum for restoration and reuse as an African-American interpretive center. That is good news for this historic building. However, as other Rosenwald schools languish inconspicuously and slowly deteriorate, much work remains to be done to save Julius Rosenwald's legacy from being lost forever.

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