

MUSEUM OF THE SOUTHERN JEWISH EXPERIENCE

Rosenwald Schools Fact Sheet

At the beginning of the 20th century, some middle- and upper-class Americans created organizations to solve social problems like long work hours, child labor, unsafe living conditions, and alcoholism. They fought for women's right to vote. Others built schools and libraries. This time period became known as the Progressive Era and these people are known as the Progressives.

A Progressive Educational Vision

Many Progressives thought education was the best way to help improve poorer peoples' lives. In the South, schools were segregated by law and the white schools got more funding than black schools. This meant white students usually had better books, more teachers, and more comfortable school buildings than black students. Some white Progressives saw that education for black students needed to improve and some decided to work with African Americans to do something about the problem.

The Visionaries

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) was a well-known African American educator and Progressive Era reformer who helped found the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Washington was born around 1856 as a slave in Virginia. After the Civil War, he wanted to help poor African Americans in the South, so he studied to become a teacher and trained other African Americans to be teachers. Washington moved to Alabama in 1881 to help found a new school for teachers – the Tuskegee Institute.

Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932) was a Jewish American businessman who lived in Chicago, Illinois. In the early 1900s, he was the president of Sears, Roebuck and Company department store and was very wealthy. Rosenwald used his money to fund Progressive Era projects and causes. One of these causes was Southern education for African Americans. Rosenwald met Washington in Chicago in 1911 at a fundraiser and the two men discovered that they had similar goals.

The Plan

In 1912, Rosenwald gave a small grant to the Tuskegee Institute so it could build six African American schools. Washington used the funds to build these rural schools in Alabama. The first Rosenwald grants allowed black students to move into buildings designed to be schools. They no longer had to attend school in a church or a field. This was the start of the Rosenwald school building program. Although Washington died just three years later, this important project was well on its way to accomplishing its goals.

In 1917, Rosenwald created the Rosenwald Fund to manage the growing school building program. The Rosenwald Fund employees set high standards for schools. The grants required matching funds from the communities that wanted to build schools. The local African American community and its white school district had to match the amount of the grant. Rosenwald required these matches to encourage communities to work together in building the schools. Some Black community members contributed building materials and labor as their match, or held fish fries, bake sales, and other events to raise money.

The Rosenwald school building program sent out detailed building plans along with the matching grants. The Tuskegee Institute hired black architects to design the first schools. The schools were designed with large windows for good natural lighting, a moveable wall to create separate learning areas, and outdoor space for recreation and gardening. The Rosenwald program was most active between 1920 and 1928. During those years, it spent over \$350,000 a year and built thousands of schools.

An Important Legacy

Between 1917 and 1932, nearly 5,000 Rosenwald Schools for African Americans were built across the South. These schools helped greatly narrow the educational achievement gap between Black and white children in the South. Counted among the thousands of African American graduates of Rosenwald Schools is poet Maya Angelou, civil rights leaders Medgar Evers and Vernon Dahmer, Little Rock Nine pioneer Carlotta Walls LaNier, and Congressman John Lewis.

By working together toward a shared vision of educational equality, Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington promoted collaboration between blacks and whites, pioneered the concept of matching grants and public/private partnerships, and established a high standard for Black/Jewish relations, which was later carried over into the Civil Rights era.

This fact sheet was adapted from the National Park Service's Teaching with Historic Places Program.