

Booker T. Washington & The Rosenwald Schools

A ray of hope during the Jim Crow Era in the South

1912 - 1932

Visionary Design

Collaborative Planning

Community Investment

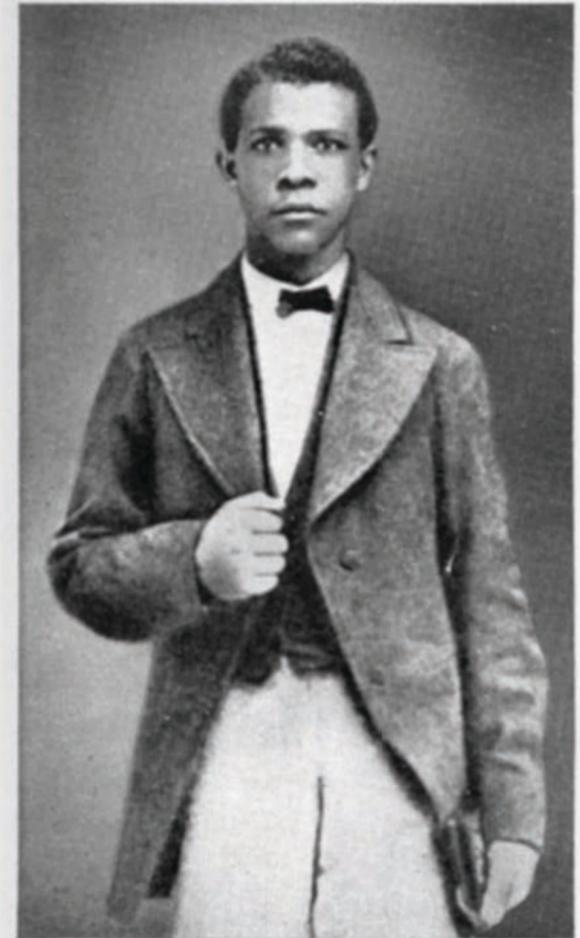
Built nearly 5,000 Schools



Booker T. Washington

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856-1915) was likely the most famous Black public intellectual in America. But Washington did not achieve this status easily.

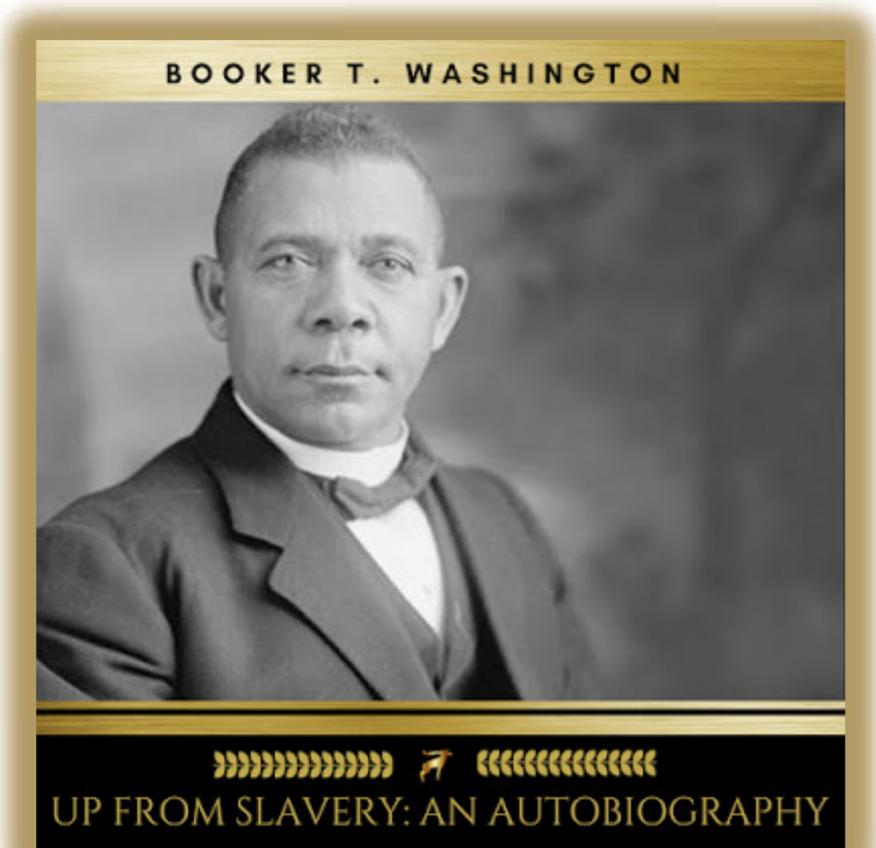
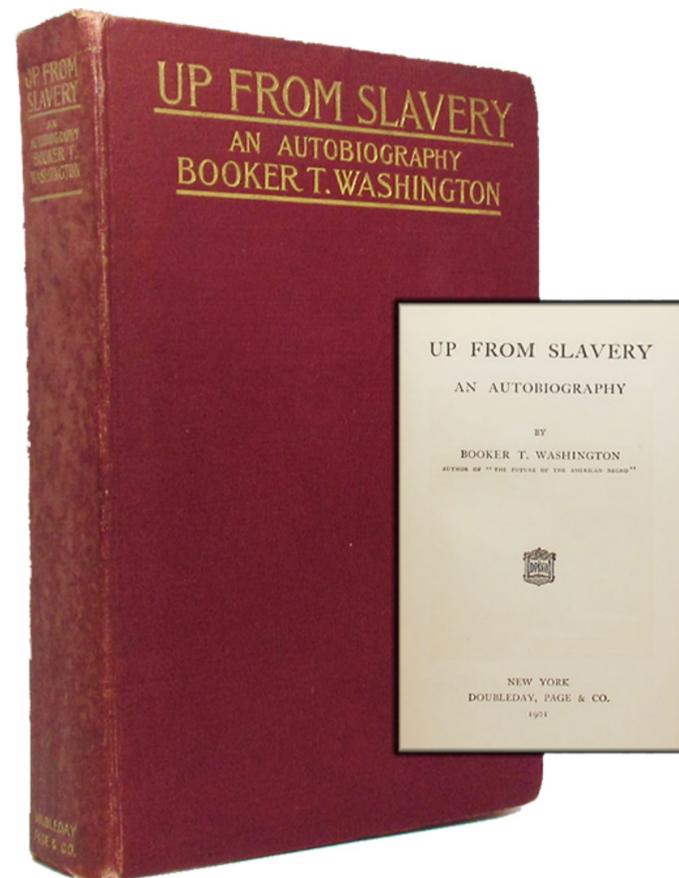
Born into slavery in antebellum Virginia, Washington grew up experiencing destitution and racial discrimination. Despite these obstacles, his perseverance and disciplined upbringing eventually led to an education at what is now known as Hampton University.



AN EARLY PORTRAIT OF BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

Up From Slavery

In his bestselling autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901), Washington describes his personal odyssey from enslaved, illiterate child to teacher and education reformer, elaborating on his pragmatic view of racial progress and reconciliation.



The Vision of Booker T. Washington



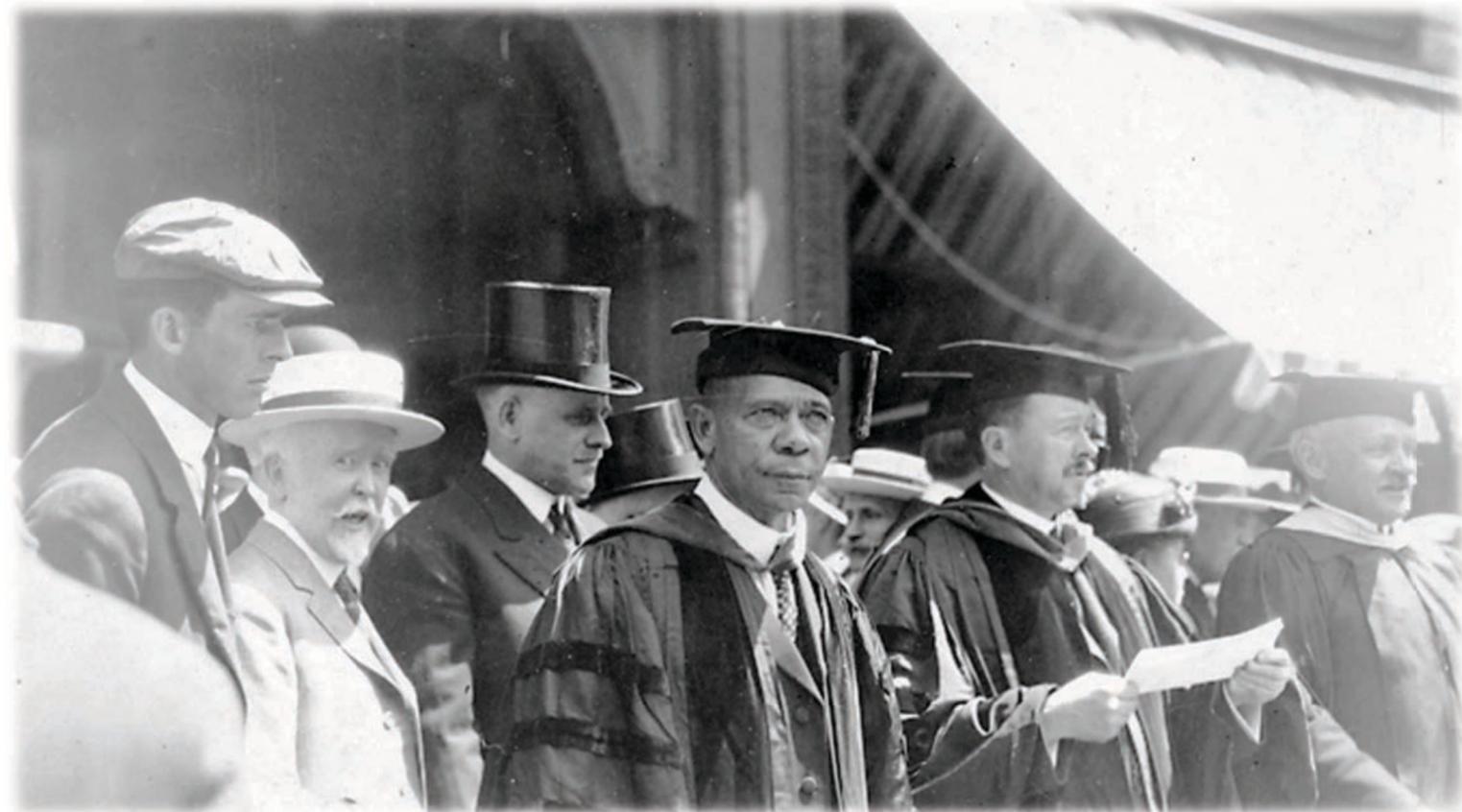
Washington believed that lifting Black America out of poverty came primarily through economic advancement, and that legal protections and the softening of racist attitudes among Whites were secondary responses that would surely follow.

While he supported legislation to secure equal rights for Black Americans, he also advocated for vocational training, free enterprise, patience, and thrift as the best paths to progress.

Vision of Booker T. Washington

As an educator, he was instrumental in transforming Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute into Tuskegee University—perhaps the most famous, well-funded, and influential Black research facility of its era.

Washington's central concern was expanding educational opportunities for Black Americans.



Vision of Booker T. Washington

In the segregated South of the early 1900s, Black children often received their education in churches and lodge halls because local White governments refused to fund schools for Blacks.

Having experienced deep racial disparities in the rural South firsthand, Washington dreamed of a school-building project for Black communities that could help begin to lift them out of poverty.

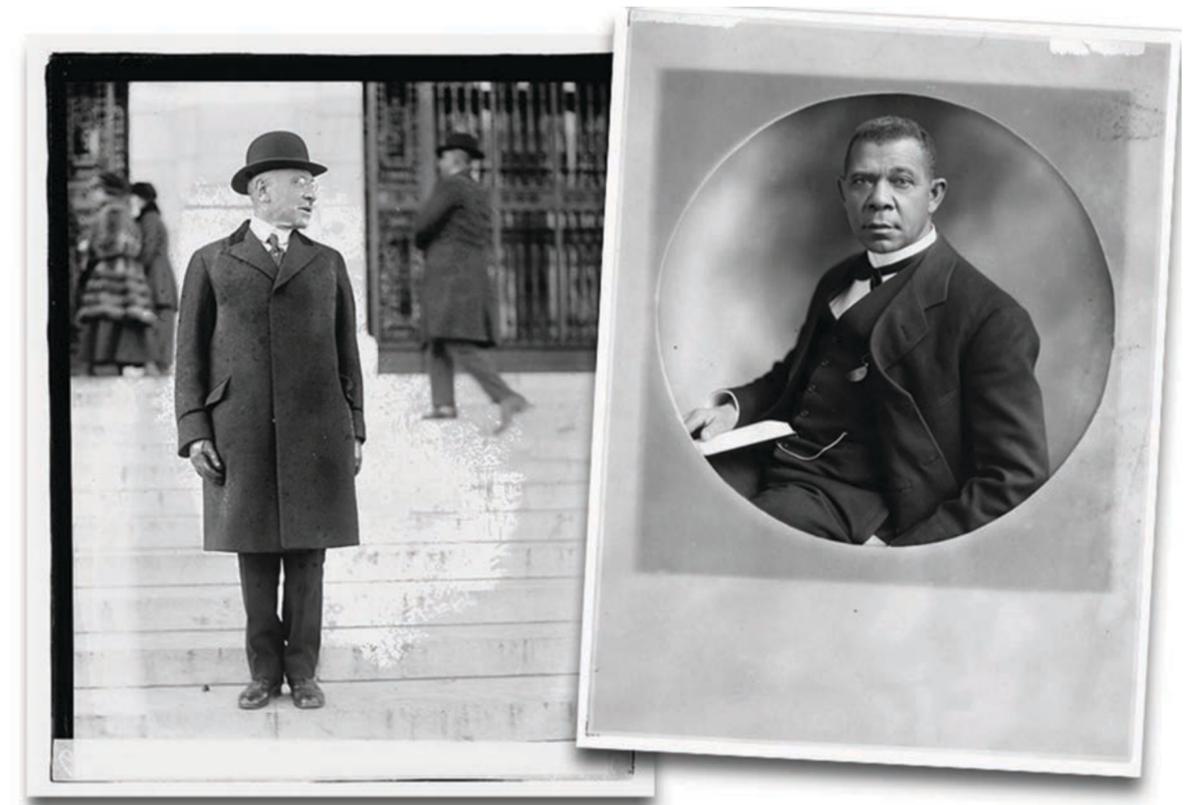
Recognizing the Black-White education gap, Washington dreamed of constructing high-quality schoolhouses that would be financially and socially supported by surrounding Black communities.



A Collaborative Effort

In 1912, Washington presented his ideas to Julius Rosenwald, a wealthy American philanthropist who was already a member of Tuskegee's board of trustees and well-known for working on problems related to racial inequality.

With Rosenwald's financial contributions, Washington's hopeful dream soon became a reality.



A Collaborative Effort

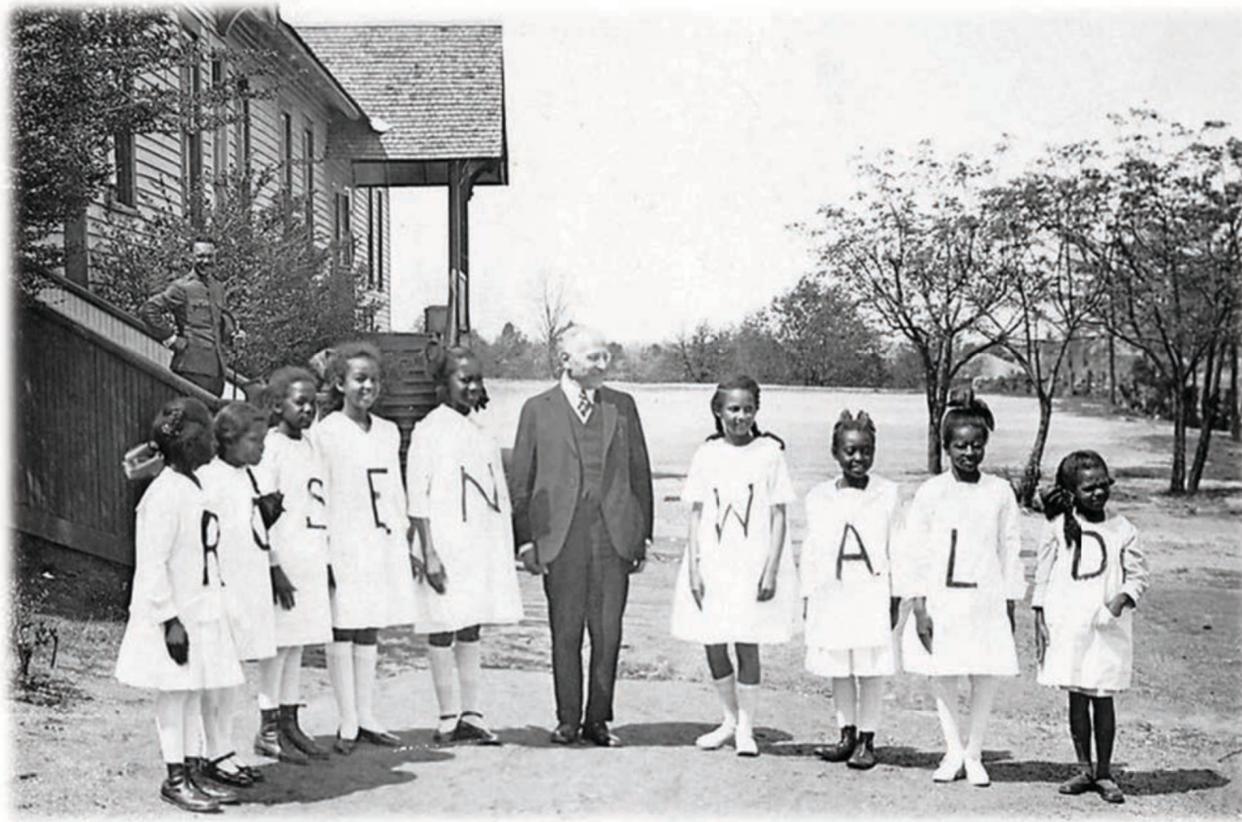
In a little over a decade, Washington and Rosenwald's efforts had built thousands of schools.

Washington's vision guided both the physical design and the substance of the schools' educational curriculum.



Philanthropy

In total, Rosenwald donated \$4.3 million (\$75 million today) to build schools in 15 states. The schools became social centers and sources of pride for the communities they served.



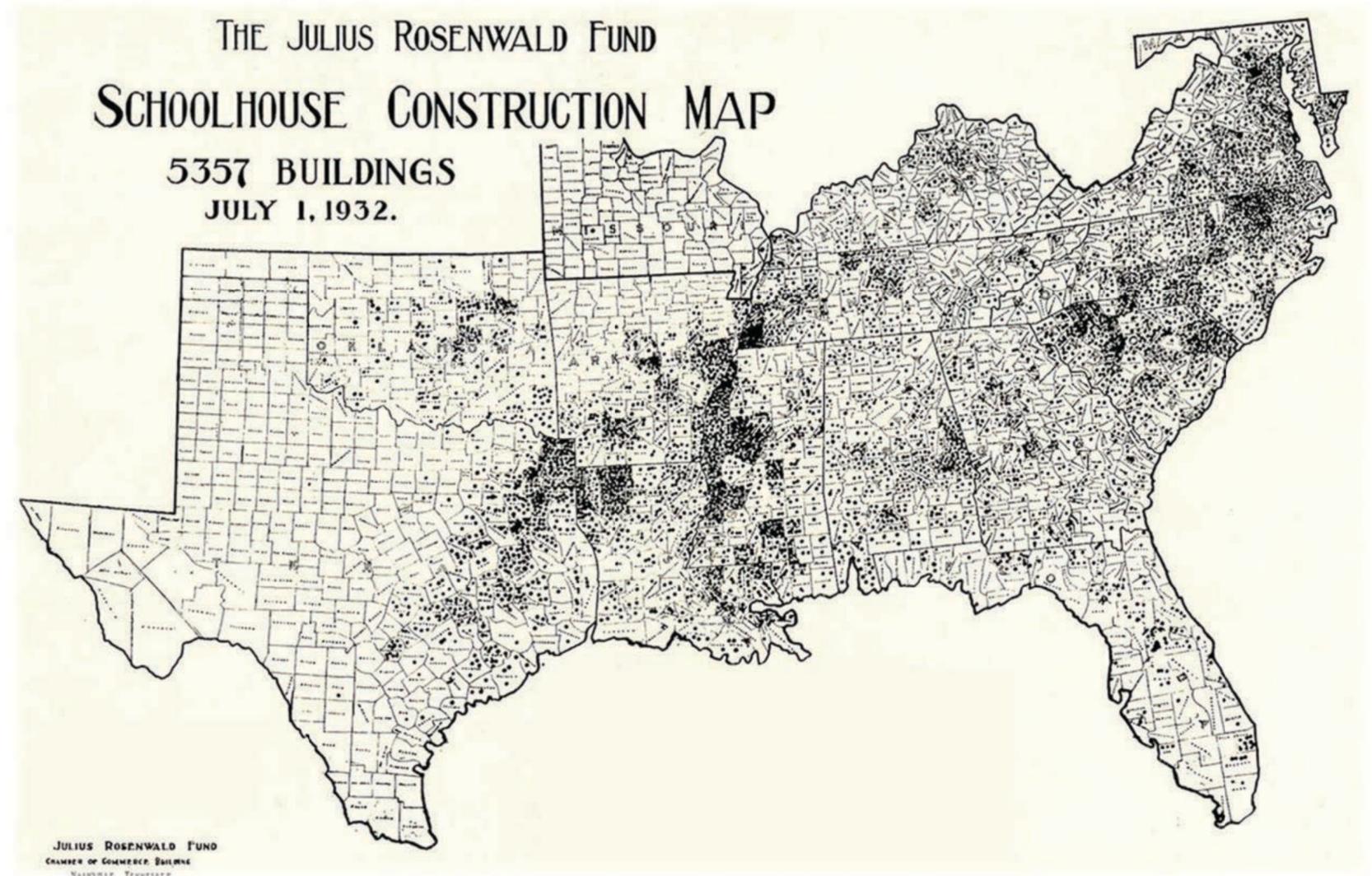
The almost 5,000 schools built in the rural American South between 1912 and 1932 became known as “Rosenwald schools”.

Many more schools were later built in a similar style and were also informally known as Rosenwald schools.

Thousands of Schools

Rosenwald, the son of German Jewish immigrants who made his fortune as one of the heads of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, founded the Rosenwald Fund as a philanthropic effort to address the problems facing Black Americans in the age of segregation.

Based on Washington's plans, the Rosenwald Fund, along with matching funds required from each community, helped pay for the construction of over 5,000 school buildings including schoolhouses, teacher residences, and administrative offices.



Plans for Schools

The school-building project was the brainchild of Black intellectuals affiliated with Tuskegee Institute. Washington insisted that the schools be designed by Black architects and Robert Robinson Taylor, a Tuskegee faculty member, was charged with designing the schools. Taylor was the first Black graduate of the Massachusetts Technical Institute and first accredited Black architect in America when he graduated in 1892.

In a region of the United States where “Jim Crow” racial segregation was law, and rural poverty was widespread on both sides of the color line, these facilities were typically built and partially funded by the populations they served.



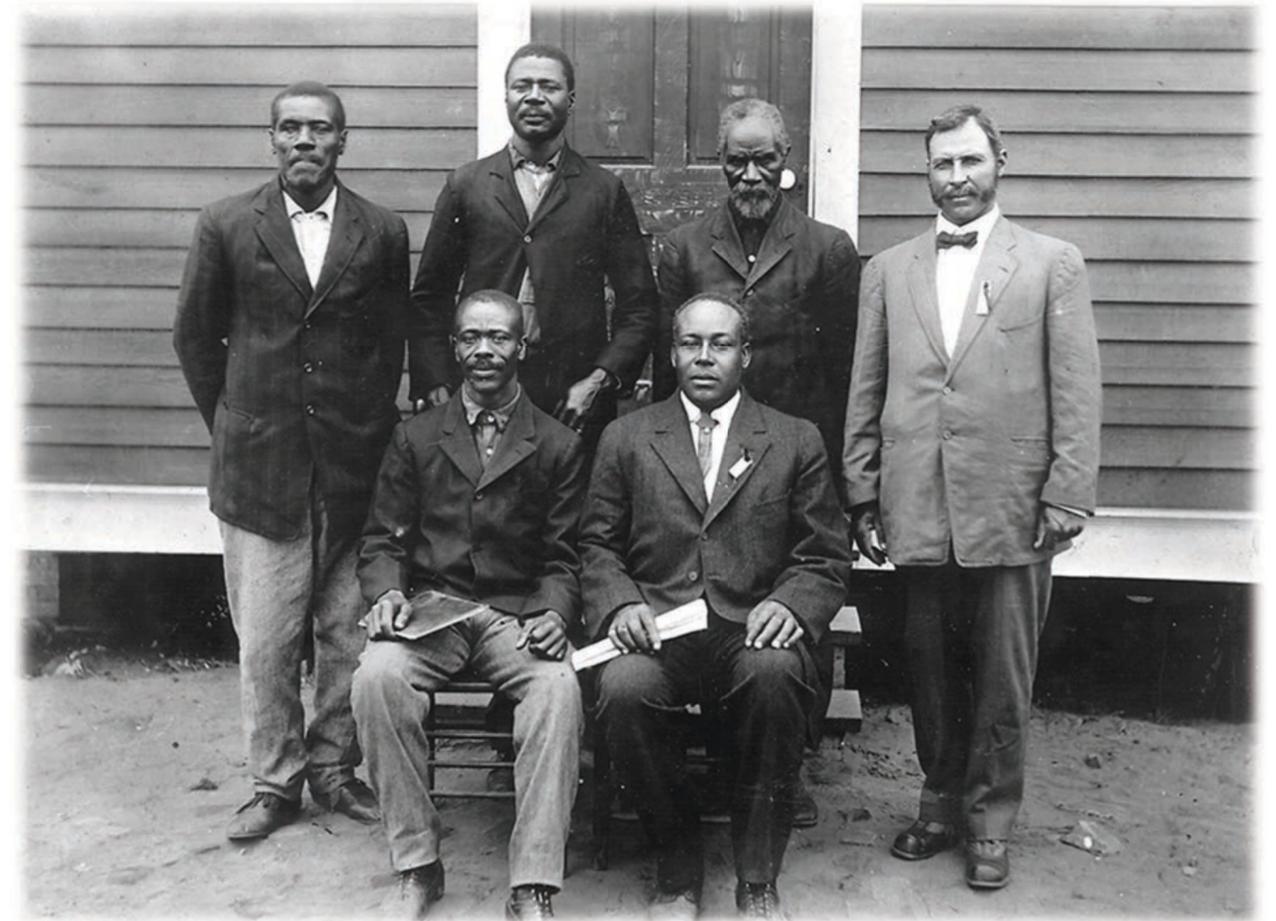
*A Rosenwald School in
Macon, Alabama - circa 1915*



Self-Empowerment

Washington and Rosenwald were both firm believers that true lasting progress occurs in communities that are self-empowered and work together. They wanted each community to be a stakeholder in the enterprise.

Rosenwald's charitable funding acted only as seed money, with matching contributions from community members who would eventually take over the schools themselves.



Ownership

The objective was for parents and children in these rural Black communities to have a clear sense of ownership.



The involvement of everyone in the community was the driving force behind the Rosenwald program and the source of its meaning for southern communities.

A Hopeful Future

The Rosenwald schools were a product of its hopeful vision of the future.

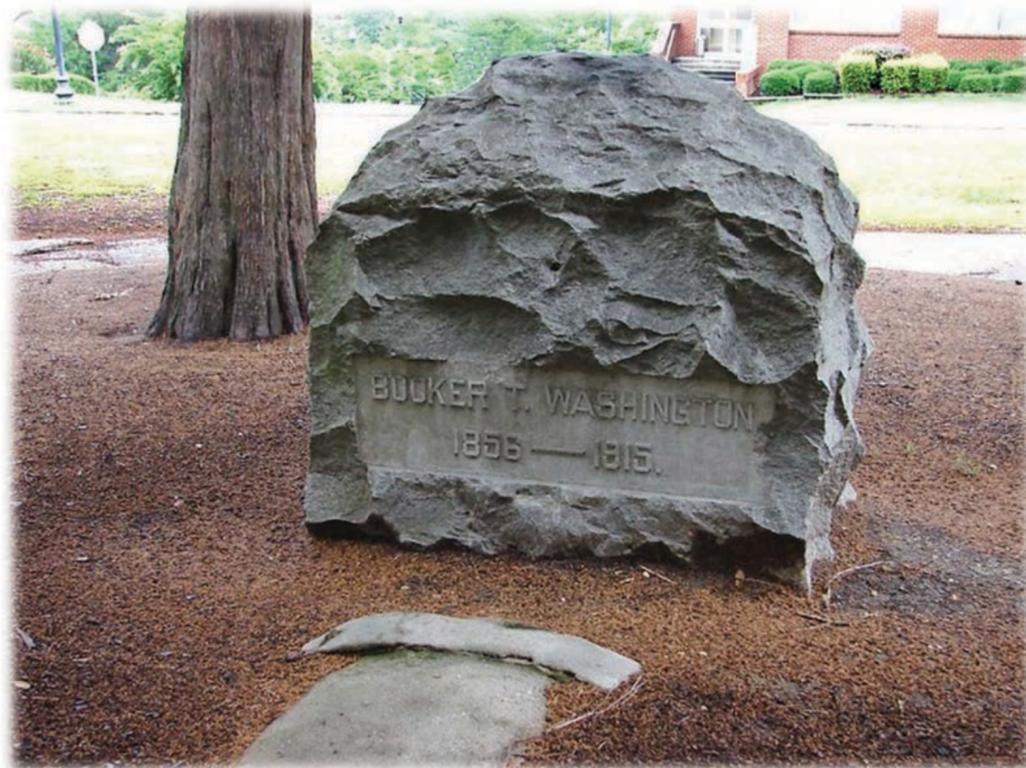
According to historian Stephanie Deutsch, the schoolhouses “*were new and modern, with big tall windows, and lots of light streaming in. They felt special [to the students], because they were new and they were theirs.*”

The Rosenwald schools offered two generations of Black Americans a quality education in pleasant, well-functioning new schoolhouses.



Booker T. Washington's Death

Sadly, Washington did not live to see his schoolhouse project completed. In the fall of 1915, he fell ill while visiting New York City. He returned to Alabama, where he died a short time later at the age of 59. He was buried in the Tuskegee University Campus Cemetery.



Rosenwald wrote to Washington's widow: *"One of our noblest and foremost citizens has passed to his reward. The service he has rendered his fellow men will live forever."*

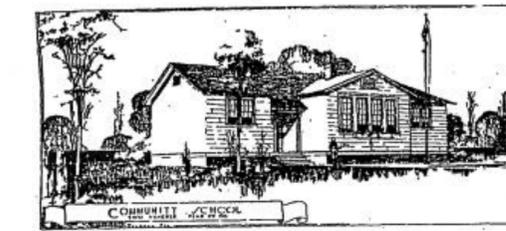
Rosenwald continued with the school-building effort that Washington had envisioned.

Growth of the Schools

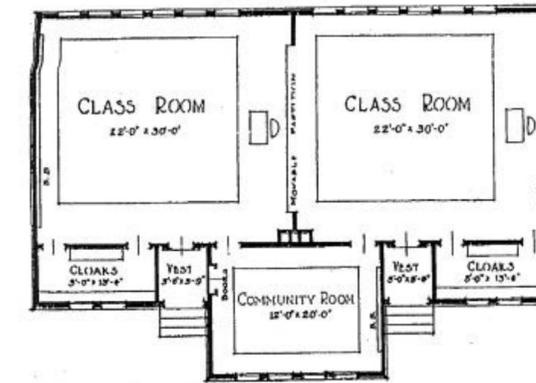
After Booker T. Washington's untimely death, Rosenwald worked with Washington's colleagues at Tuskegee to continue designing and building schoolhouses throughout the South.

Each school was carefully designed based on specific factors such as local population size and number of staff available.

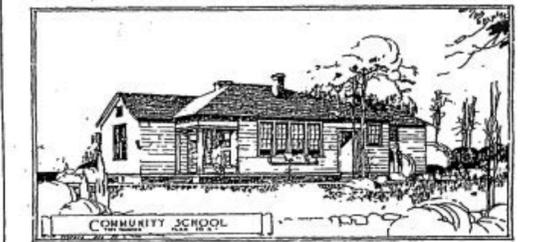
While these efforts were often resisted by White bureaucrats, the enthusiasm from rural Black communities was overwhelming. In many counties, the local fund-raising efforts resources far surpassed what the Rosenwald Fund required of them to receive funding.



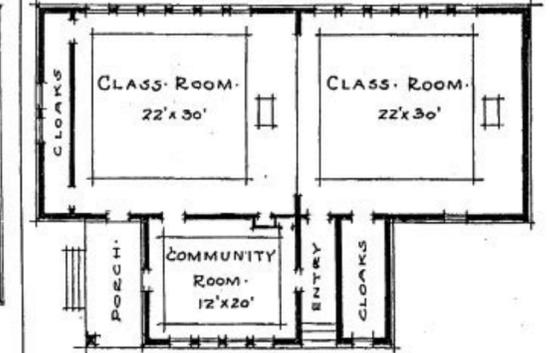
Two Teacher School



FLOOR PLAN No 20
TWO TEACHER COMMUNITY SCHOOL
TO FACE EAST OR WEST ONLY



Two Teacher School



FLOOR PLAN No 20-A
COMMUNITY SCHOOL
TO FACE NORTH OR SOUTH ONLY

Growth of the Schools

By the 1930s, one out of every three Black children in the South was educated at a Rosenwald school.

The schools emphasized not only the so-called “3 Rs” (reading, writing, and arithmetic) but also life skills like cooking, canning, sewing, and carpentry, in preparation for adulthood.

The schools were often located in out-of-the-way locations, providing students and teachers the seclusion necessary to focus on learning.



Narrowing the Gap

During the first half of the 20th century, the Rosenwald schools helped close the Black-White academic achievement gap.

Researchers at the Chicago Federal Reserve argue that in the regions where “the Rosenwald Rural Schools Initiative built most of its schools, the education gap between Southern-born Black and White males narrowed sharply in areas such as school attendance, literacy, and cognitive-test scores. Using census data and World War II records, the researchers found that Rosenwald’s program explained a stunning 40 percent narrowing of the racial education gap.”



After Desegregation

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education* that school segregation and the concept of “separate but equal” were unconstitutional.

While this was a victory for racial justice and equality before the law, it was also the beginning of the end for the thousands of Rosenwald schools throughout the American South.

Integration efforts brought the Rosenwald school era to a close.



End of the Rosenwald Schools Era

As the National Trust for Historic Preservation put it:

*“Once the pride of their communities,
many were abandoned or demolished.”*

On one hand, Rosenwald schools were a source of pride and achievement for Black Americans throughout the rural South; on the other hand, their demise began with the judicial victory which set the whole country—not just the South—on the difficult path towards racially integrated school systems and, hopefully, educational equality.

Despite student protests over their closing and demolition, most of the schools were gone by the 1970s.



Preservation & Legacy

Beginning in the early 21st century, the legacy of the schools was reexamined and celebrated. Today, a few remaining school buildings are the subject of preservation efforts, and are now education centers and museums that keep the Rosenwald school spirit alive.

*Restored Rosenwald School in
Hiram, Georgia - circa 1930*



Preservation & Legacy

Preservation efforts continue to this day, conserving both the architectural and cultural achievement of Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald's collaboration.

Today, only around 10-12 percent of the over 5,000 original Rosenwald school houses, teacher residences, and administrative buildings are still standing.



Preservation & Legacy

In 2002, the National Trust for Historic Preservation “joined forces with grassroots activists, local officials, and preservationists to help raise awareness of this important but little-known segment of our nation’s history” and placed the remaining schools on its list of 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. The trust also provides “technical assistance, grants, workshops, and conferences to help save these icons of progressive architecture for community use.”

Since then, many Rosenwald schoolhouse projects have been completed to preserve both the physical structures and the memory of the Rosenwald schools.

*Restored Ridgeley School in
Capital Heights, Maryland - circa 1927*



Preservation & Legacy

Even though the physical buildings certainly have historic and architectural significance, the schools are worth preserving because they symbolize the spirit of resilience, community investment, and concern for the common good.



A century after the first Rosenwald schools were built, their legacy remains a positive testament to the power of philanthropy when applied to a pragmatic, optimistic goal.

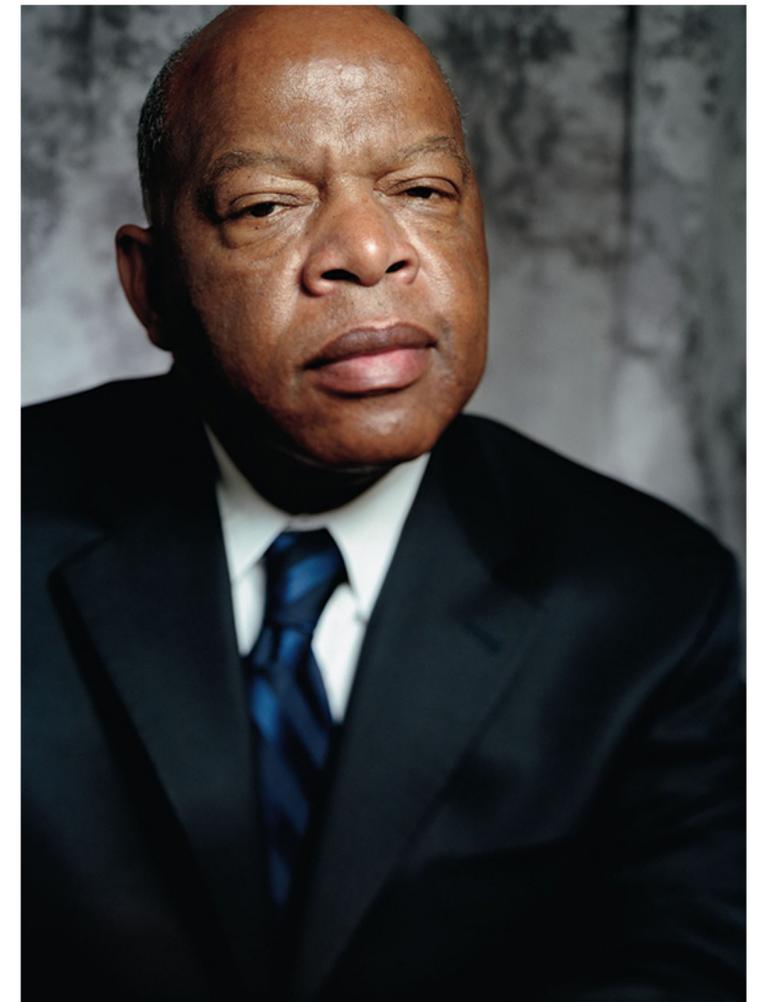
Alumni of Rosenwald Schools

Graduates of Rosenwald schools include novelist Maya Angelou and Congressman John Lewis, both of whom played key roles in the civil rights movement, along with tens of thousands of others whose lives were transformed for the better by the schools.

Maya Angelou



Representative
John Lewis



Vocabulary

Disparities
Collaborative
Segregation
Desegregation
Integration
“Jim Crow”
Stakeholder
Philanthropist
Pragmatic
Antebellum
Demise
Icons
Progressive
Seclusion



1776

UNITES