

CULTURAL HISTORY

The Columbia Rosenwald School

by Teena Maenza

Editor's note: This month's column was written by guest author Teena Maenza. Maenza is the Editor of the *Brazoria County News* and has written numerous articles for several publications about the Columbia Rosenwald School.

The Columbia Rosenwald School, located in downtown West Columbia behind the Columbia Historical Museum, will open to the public as an interactive exhibit October 24, bringing a new chapter to the life of the building.

The school was originally built in 1921, and for nearly thirty years it served as the center of education for African American children in the East Columbia community. It is one of over 5,300 Rosenwald Schools built between 1913 and 1932. In Texas, 537 Rosenwald Schools were built, but today only around 40 are known to still exist.



Columbia Rosenwald School during restoration
West Columbia, Texas, August 2009

Photo: Neal McLain

The story of Julius Rosenwald and his efforts to ensure an adequate education for the black children of the rural South is a fascinating chapter of history. Education for black children, especially those in the rural South, was practically nonexistent in the early 1900s. The responsibility for education fell to the churches, and the quality varied widely. Classes were held in churches or lodge halls, wherever space could be found.

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Booker T. Washington
Photo: Wikipedia [1]

Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and the nation's foremost black educator, took up the cause of providing a more consistent education for these children. To help in achieving this goal, Washington turned to some of the top philanthropists of the day.

One of those men was Julius Rosenwald.

Rosenwald was born in Springfield, Illinois in 1862, the son of German Jewish immigrants. He dropped out of school at the age of 17, but after an apprenticeship in his uncle's clothing business, he soon opened his own men's clothing store.



Julius Rosenwald
Photo: Wikipedia [2]

Another Chicago businessman, Richard Sears, convinced Rosenwald to join his own fledgling enterprise—Sears, Roebuck and Co. Rosenwald became president of the firm in 1908.

As president, Rosenwald developed the mail-order strategies and satisfaction-guaranteed policy that turned Sears into an American institution—and made Rosenwald himself into one of the wealthiest men in America.

Rosenwald was already involved in a number of philanthropic efforts when he met Booker T. Washington, but after their friendship began, building schools became his primary focus. Any community desiring a school had to contribute matching funds. Not only did the black segment of the community have to donate, but the white segment as well, and the local school board had to take ownership and oversee the education of the children. The Rosenwald Fund contributed one-third of the amount needed to build a school, and strictly monitored every aspect, from teacher/student ratio down to the color of the paint on the walls.

The Columbia Rosenwald School was built on a pier-and-beam foundation, about five feet off the ground, because of its proximity to the Brazos River. Students attended the school until 1948, when it was closed and the students were moved to Charlie Brown School in West Columbia.

Students at Columbia Rosenwald School, date unknown.



Photo courtesy of Teena Maezna; original photographer unknown.

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The building was sold and moved to a pasture just south of its original location, where it was used as a hay barn. It sat there for decades, until members of the Columbia Historical Museum decided to try and save it.



The Columbia Rosenwald School building as it appeared after it was sold for use as a hay barn. For many years it was a common sight along State Highway 35, a few miles east of West Columbia.

Photo: Teena Maezna

Ownership was transferred to the Museum on July 2, 2002 by owners James P. Phillips and WHW Enterprises, Ltd., through Alex H. Weems. The West Columbia City Council gave the Museum permission to have the building moved into a city park behind the Museum on August 12, 2002.



Moving day.

Photo: Teena Maezna

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In December 2007, the Museum received a Texas Historical Commission subject marker. The National Trust for Historical Preservation, BASF, Lowe's and many others have joined time, talents and money to restore the building and open it as an interactive space giving children the opportunity to experience what attending school was like in the 1920s.

The October 24 dedication will begin at 2 p.m., but other events are planned throughout the day as well. The public is welcome to attend.

10:00 - 11:00 am	Gospel Music
11:00 - 12:00 pm	Programs by local elementary teachers
10:00 - 12:00 pm	Children's games from the 20's on the grounds
12:00 - 1:30 pm	Hot dogs (free)
2:00 pm	Dedication

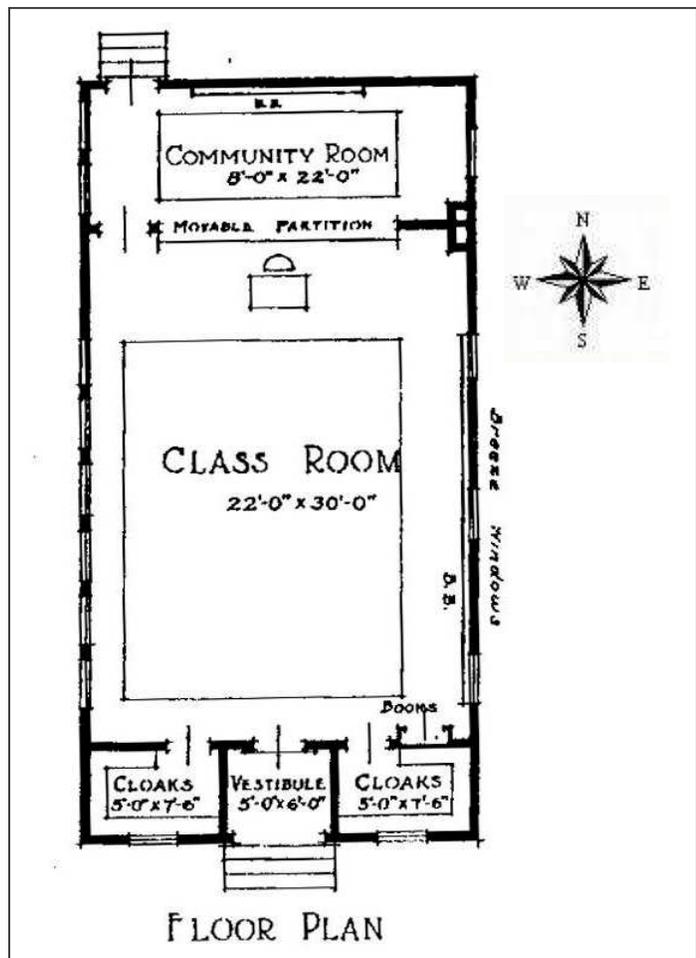
Editor's note: My thanks to Teena Maenza for writing this month's column and for providing the photographs. Following are some further observations of my own.

The Design of the School Buildings

by Neal McLain

Under specifications set down by the Rosenwald Fund, most Rosenwald Schools were built according to a similar floor plan. Each school was to include a vestibule, a classroom, a community room, and two cloakrooms. The buildings were designed to have large windows on the east side (to admit morning sun) and small high windows on the west side (to block afternoon sun).

In its original location, the Columbia Rosenwald School faced south, so the east windows are on the right side of the building as seen from the main entrance. In its new position south of the Columbia Historical Museum, the building has again been placed facing south.



Floor plan of the Columbia Rosenwald School. Under the Rosenwald Fund's specifications, this plan was typical of most Rosenwald Schools.

Floor plan courtesy of Teena Meazna.

Wall-mounted lighting fixture, one of several in the renovated Columbia Rosenwald School.



Photo: Neal McLain

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Exterior of the Columbia Rosenwald School during renovation, looking southwest, August 2009. Note the large windows on the east side of the building.

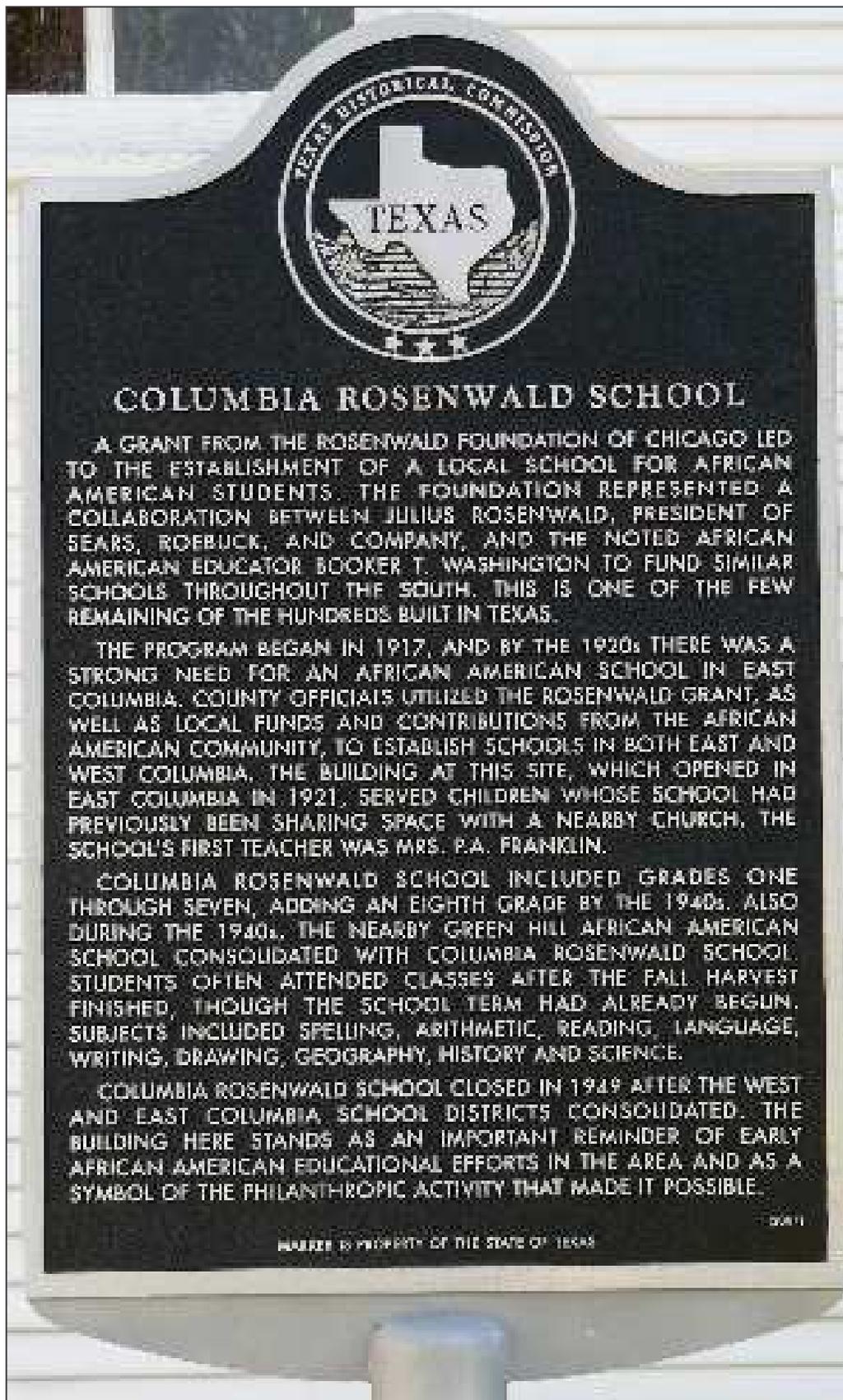
Photo: Neal McLain



Interior of the Columbia Rosenwald School during renovation, looking northwest, August 2009. Note the small windows above the blackboards on the west side of the building.

Photo: Neal McLain.

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The Columbia Rosenwald School is located immediately behind the Columbia Historical Museum at 247 E Brazos Ave, West Columbia, TX 77486-2727. Phone 979-345-6125.



[1] *Booker T. Washington in 1903*. Cheynes Studio, Hampton, Va. Copyrighted 1903 (expired). Selected Portraits From the Collections of the Library of Congress. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:BookerTWashington-Cheynes.LOC.jpg>>.

[2] *American business executive and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald (1882-1932)*. 1929. Photographer unknown. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Julius_Rosenwald_02.jpg>.