

Within the city of Hiram's city limits stands a remnant from the American South's segregated past. Separate and unequal best described the state of African-American education during the turn of the previous century and Co-founder of Sears & Roebuck Co. Julius Rosenwald uses his connections with American business leaders and Civil Rights advocates to build over 5000 schools within the American South. The Hiram Rosenwald School is one such school, and despite many Rosenwald schools fading into obscurity and demolition, still stands today open for the public.

Hiram Rosenwald School

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The following paper was prepared under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Dickey at Kennesaw State University for an Introduction to Public History course.

The Hiram Rosenwald School is located in Hiram, Georgia, nearly 45 minutes away from downtown Atlanta. The school itself sits upon property directly off Highway 92 and is easily located from the road. The antiquated schoolhouse is of modest design yet practical and worthy of its intended purpose. Originally built in 1930 and named the "Hiram Colored School," the school was constructed largely with funds from philanthropist and president of Sears and Roebuck Company, Julius Rosenwald, with assistance from the African-American community as well as leaders such as Booker T. Washington.¹

The Georgia Historical Society, U.N.I.T.E., and the Hiram Rosenwald School Preservation Committee erected the historical marker in 2005 and it contributes to the Rosenwald School series of markers. The marker's inscription is as follows:

"In 1912 Julius Rosenwald, President of Sears, Roebuck and Company, established the Rosenwald Fund to assist in community school construction of public schools for African-American students in the South. The Julius Rosenwald Fund assisted local communities who raised additional funds. By the 1930's one in every five rural southern schools for blacks had been constructed with aid from the Rosenwald Fund, a total of nearly five thousand schools throughout the South. The Hiram Rosenwald school opened in 1930 as the Hiram Colored School. It was the only Rosenwald school in Paulding County and, at that time, the only African-American school with a library in the county. The school operated from 1930 until 1955."²

While the marker's inscription does offer the visitor information on the who, what, and where of the Hiram Rosenwald school, it does not explain why the school was built.

¹ Crellin, Brendan. "The Hiram Rosenwald School." Georgia Historical Society. https://georgiahistory.com/ghmi_marker_updated/the-hiram-rosenwald-school/.

² Seibert, David. *The Hiram Rosenwald School Historical Marker* https://georgiahistory.com/ghmi_marker_updated/the-hiram-rosenwald-school

Why did Julius Rosenwald set up a fund to further African-American education in the Deep South? Why did the Hiram Rosenwald school and other Rosenwald schools only operate from 1930-1955? The historical marker has limited space, so this paper answers these questions to supplement what the historical marker does not include.

Julius Rosenwald was born in 1862, the son of German-Jewish immigrant Samuel Rosenwald. Samuel Rosenwald's trade was managing general stores and tailoring. Rosenwald's grandson, Peter Ascoli, of Julius Rosenwald's biography, *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South*, writes about his grandfather's humble apprenticeship in New York City with his uncle,

“Despite the lavish surroundings in which he lived, JR [Julius Rosenwald] started as a stock clerk, earning \$5 a week. To supplement this modest income, he made an additional \$2 a week working Saturday evenings at either Rogers, Peet & Co. or Carhart, Whitford & Co... Within two and a half years of his arrival in New York, he was traveling to cities such as Trenton, New Jersey, with a suitcase...”³

After enjoying success in his business and financial life, eventually rising to become a co-founder and President of Sears & Roebuck Co., Julius Rosenwald turned his attention towards philanthropy. Longtime friend and business partner Paul J. Sachs of Goldman Sachs collaborated with Rosenwald on many occasions when they spent time together. The two men would often discuss the political and social direction of the nation. Both men agreed that the need for education as well as other forms of social assistance was great within the African-American population, more specifically in the American South where Jim Crow limited the upward mobility of African-American citizens immensely.⁴

³ Ascoli, Peter M. *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁴ *Ibid.*

As the two businessmen spoke more of the issue, Rosenwald was eventually introduced to African-American educator and civil rights advocate Booker T. Washington and Dr. Robert Moton of the Tuskegee Institute. Together, these men helped to establish the Rosenwald Fund, which they organized to fund the construction and finance the operation of 5,000 schools within the South. The fund was set up to last 30 years, after which the trust would dissolve and funding for the schools was to be sourced from local communities. Naturally, news of Rosenwald's funding being directed towards African-American communities as opposed to both African American and/or solely white communities caused some agitation. Holly Roose of University of Santa Barbara writes, "Many white Southerners considered providing any education for blacks as troublesome and unnecessary. Rosenwald felt otherwise, and maintained the firm belief that black self-help was as important as the donation of monetary resources by outsiders."⁵

The Hiram Rosenwald School opened in 1930, merely two years before Julius Rosenwald's death. It would continue to serve the African-American community in and around Hiram, Georgia, past the dissolution of the Rosenwald Fund in 1948. In 1954 the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. The Board of Education* essentially made Rosenwald schools across the American South obsolete. However, as many former teachers of these schools left to find work elsewhere, some buildings remained to serve as community centers within the African-American community. This was not the case for many Rosenwald schools, as many schoolhouses were demolished and their properties sold. The National Trust for Historic Preservation writes in regards to the demolition of

⁵ Roose, Holly. "Rosenwald Fund Schools (1912-1932)." Rosenwald Fund Schools (1912-1932) | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed. <https://blackpast.org/aah/rosenwald-fund-schools-1912-1932>.

Rosenwald schools, “Of the 5,357 schools, shops, and teacher homes constructed between 1917 and 1932, only 10–12 percent are estimated to survive today.”⁶

Viewing the Hiram Rosenwald School today through a modern lens gives insight as to the conditions of Southern education during Jim Crow. Although the Hiram Rosenwald School was tremendously helpful in furthering the education of African Americans within the vicinity of Hiram, Georgia, one cannot help but notice just how small the school actually is. The schoolhouse itself holds only two classrooms, and to have multiple grade levels of students learning there daily would have not only been extremely confined, but also difficult for teachers to organize. It is important to remember that such schools did not have air conditioning, and schoolhouses like the Hiram Rosenwald School, which serves as a general representation of most Rosenwald schools in design and layout, would have been uncomfortable for students during the warmer parts of the southern seasons. Teachers could also expect less pay for their services than their white counterparts due to lack of standardization, which was prevalent of the American education system during the Great Depression in both white and black communities.

Today the City of Hiram funds the Hiram Rosenwald School with a \$2,000 yearly grant, and the school is a proud landmark for the city of Hiram to have within its city limits. A local newspaper, the *West Georgia Neighbor*, writes “Hiram Mayor Teresa Philyaw grew up in the city...She said the city is ‘very proud of’ the museum. ‘It’s probably the most historic thing we have in Hiram.’”⁷ It remains among the busy streets of

⁶ "National Trust for Historic Preservation: Return to Home Page." Rosenwald Schools | National Trust for Historic Preservation. <https://savingplaces.org/places/rosenwald-schools#.W8VN2ntKiUk>.

⁷ Spigolon, Tom. "Hiram Museum Helps Bring to Life past Era of School Segregation in Georgia." MDJOnline.com. March 14, 2018. https://www.mdjonline.com/neighbor_newspapers/west_georgia/community/hiram-museum-helps-bring-to-life-past-era-of-school/article_283d61de-2776-11e8-b957-c70aaaf2ae02.html.

a growing suburb of Atlanta and as time goes on, the challenges of preserving the site will only increase. Today one will notice when touring the site that the weeds are growing into some of the brickwork walkways as well as the grass on the two-acre lot looks unkempt. As for the building itself, it certainly looks and feels aged, and as time goes on, the budget that the city of Hiram grants to the site will not be enough to insure and maintain the site with the dignity that it deserves.

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