

Noble Hill Rosenwald School: A Community Project

By James Moon

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

The Noble Hill Rosenwald School historical marker is located on Joe Frank Harris Parkway in Cartersville, Georgia. Unlike the other historical markers on the same highway, the Noble Hill marker is not alongside the road. It is up a short driveway, not visible from the main road.

Former Volunteer Director of Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center, Suzie W. Wheeler, prepared the marker proposal form. The marker was erected in 1995 and stands in front of the old, restored white schoolhouse, which now serves as a museum.

There is a quaint, little schoolhouse located in Cartersville, Georgia called Noble Hill Rosenwald School. The school is off the highway and up a short drive in a wooded area. The Georgia Historical Marker in front of the school commemorates Bartow County's first standardized "school for Black children." Today, the schoolhouse serves as a museum called Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center, which educates people on "Black life in Bartow from the early 1900's to the present."¹ Unlike the other historical markers on the same highway, the Noble Hill marker is well off of the main road so it cannot be seen by passing cars. Chances are, if someone happens to see the marker it is because he or she is visiting the museum. The museum houses artifacts from the early 20th century, as well as photographs and museum panels that describe the school's founders, its history, and the legacy it hopes will endure.

Hanging on the wall of the museum is a photograph of Julius Rosenwald, a Jewish philanthropist who started the fund that helped build the school in 1923. Rosenwald became the

CEO of Sears, Roebuck and Company in 1909 and began working with Booker T. Washington to help build schools in the South for Black children.² From 1912 to 1932, resources from the Rosenwald Fund were used to build 4,977 new African-American schools in fifteen southern states. In Georgia, proceeds from the fund were utilized to construct 242 schools in 103 of Georgia's counties. The initiative got its start on Rosenwald's fiftieth birthday when he gave \$25,000 to Tuskegee. The institute used the money to fund African-American schools that employed the same school archetype as Tuskegee. Washington convinced Rosenwald to let him use \$2,000 of the money to build a number of schools in rural Alabama for African-American elementary school children.³ In 1923 the ambitious efforts of these two men made its way to Cassville, Georgia, and the Noble Hill Rosenwald School was created.

The school was the first Rosenwald School in Northwest Georgia, as well as the first school for black children that operated by the Bartow County School System's standards and specifications. Before the construction of Noble Hill, a one-room school served the African-American students in Cassville from 1885 to 1921, which is the same year that teachers C. W. Williams and his wife Myra Williams moved from Atlanta to Cassville. Mr. Williams was familiar with the Rosenwald Fund, so he asked the school superintendent and the local trustees of Noble Hill if he could try to get some funding for a new school. He gained the grant in 1922-1923 on the condition that the community match 50 percent of the funds needed to construct the new school.⁴ Rosenwald and Washington believed that if they matched the funds raised by African-Americans, school boards, and whites it would cause people to work together to help strengthen the community. Community whites contributed the least amount of money for Rosenwald schools; some of the funds came from tax dollars, and the rest was raised by members of the African-American community. There was also a stipulation that the county

school board had to supply support for the school, take ownership of the new school property, and keep up with the school's maintenance.⁵ These arrangements caused the Bartow Board of Education and the school's board of trustees to have an ongoing relationship. Thirty-seven percent of Noble Hill's funds were borrowed or donated by African Americans, and 14 percent of the materials and labor came from African Americans. The Board of Education donated 7 percent and the Rosenwald Fund supplied 34 percent. Whites donated a mere twenty-five dollars and fifty cents.⁶ Marian Coleman a former curator of the museum, current volunteer, and member of the last class that attended the Noble Hill Rosenwald School, recalled how the Rosenwald Fund did not "give the whole amount needed to build the school," and "people of the community got together at fundraisers and raised money."⁷ Once the initial construction costs were raised, the community continued to raise money for the needs of the children. "My dad said they were always having suppers and fundraisers, helping parents who couldn't afford books for their children, or getting money for coal or wood to heat the school," she remembered. The school also became a place for African-American community meetings, as it was big enough to accommodate large crowds.⁸

Rosenwald schools had particular standards and specifications that had to be met in order to receive funding, such as the length of the school year, and the community's provision of blackboards and desks. It was also very important to Washington and director of the Rosenwald fund, Samuel L. Smith, that the schools had adequate natural lighting to protect the children's eyesight. Using tall windows with small framing for the sashes helped "illuminate the blackboards and desks."⁹ Marian Coleman recalled, "In the early years they didn't have electricity. Any type of bad weather, a lot of times they got sent home early because they wouldn't be able to see very well to study."¹⁰

Noble Hill was a two-teacher schoolhouse in the North or South Facing B Plan, but just as there were specifications for windows, certain conditions had to be met in order to get the funding for the school. Samuel L. Smith, director of the Rosenwald Fund's Office in Nashville, wrote *Community School Plans*. In it, Smith gave detailed instructions on where and how the schoolhouses were to be built. He insisted that the "school should be erected as near the center of population as is possible" and "located near a public highway." The new school should be built to accommodate "additional pupils that a new modern school is sure to attract." Smith knew students from all around would want to experience what a new school had to offer, so he made sure that accessibility was not a problem. He also pointed out that the school be "designed to serve the entire community for twelve months in the year." Smith realized that the success of the school depended on the cooperation of the community. Sanitation in the form of two privies and a source of clean water were also stipulations on a school's construction.¹¹

When Marian Coleman's great-grandfather, Webster Wheeler, found out that Cassville was going to get a Rosenwald school, he left Detroit and the Ford Motor Company to return to his old community and build the school. Wheeler had the help of volunteer Danny Harris in the construction of the school. Both Wheeler and Harris stayed on as trustees of the school after its completion.¹² They knew how important the school was for the community, and they selflessly worked to make sure it was completed and run properly. Many teachers and principals served at the school during its years of operation. Marian Coleman remembers her favorite teacher, Mrs. Ponder, who taught second grade. "We just thought she was so pretty. We enjoyed coming to school because we knew she was going to be here," Coleman recalled, adding, "But we also had some very strict teachers like Mrs. Beavers. I'd be so afraid sometimes because back then you could paddle. If she had paddled me, I probably would have fainted. I made sure I got my work

done in her class.” Coleman remembered that when the two schools of Mission Road and Sugar Valley were consolidated into Noble Hill in the early fifties, army barracks were brought in to accommodate the influx of new students. Coleman also recalled how the boys would climb trees at recess and the girls would make “mud pies” and “build houses out of pine straw.” She said everyone remembers the “bear ditch,” which was where children would “slide down the hill in the ditch and get that red clay dirt in their clothes.”¹³

In 1955 the children all said goodbye to the bear ditch and Noble Hill when all the schools were consolidated into Bartow Elementary. The property was eventually sold to Bethel Wheeler, who used it as a storage facility for bailing paper. In 1983 some people in the community started showing interest in the old schoolhouse, thinking it would make a nice museum. Bethel’s wife, Bertha, donated a section of the property so that the interested parties could start fundraising for the Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center. The center is named after its chief builder, Webster Wheeler and his son Bethel. Just as when the school was built in 1923, the community pitched in, and the restoration was completed in 1989.¹⁴ Today, the museum is open to the public, hosts many school field trips, caters to large meetings, and has an annual Labor Day celebration for its alumni and citizens. The museum is working on acquiring the land next door, with hopes of expanding. It is Coleman’s wish that the museum add a new structure for large meetings, banquets, and family reunions. She would also like to see the construction of an old-time 1920s-1930s era village, complete with a replica doctor’s office, library, barbershop, garden, and a store that features demonstrations on the old way of canning vegetables. Coleman is “concerned about people coming to visit, because we have people that have lived here all their lives that never knew about Noble Hill.”¹⁵ It is unfortunate that more people are not aware of the school and the impact that it had on its students and the community. Hopefully, in the future

more people will discover the rich history of the Noble Hill Rosenwald School, and become familiar with Bartow County's best-kept secret.

¹ "Noble Hill Rosenwald School," Georgia Historical Society, accessed October 12, 2018, https://georgiahistory.com/ghmi_marker_updated/noble-hill-rosenwald-school/.

² Tom Hanchett, "Rosenwald School History: Saving the South's Rosenwald Schools," History South, accessed October 12, 2018, <https://www.historysouth.org/schoolhistory/>.

³ Beverly Jones, "Rosenwald Schools," New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified September 1, 2016, accessed October 12, 2018, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/education/rosenwald-schools>.

⁴ *Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center 1990 Handbook*, (Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center Board of Trustees, 1990), 8, 10, 11.

⁵ "Grassroots Guide to Saving Rosenwald Schools PDF," National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2-5, last modified April 7, 2016, accessed October 14, 2018, https://forum.savingplaces.org/connect/community-home/librarydocuments/viewdocument?DocumentKey=459b5f97-0237-4559-b952-3f9d5eda04cb&_ga=2.49930159.82127408.1539625653-1215158477.1538092421&_gac=1.215291493.1539179049.Cj0KCQjwxvbdBRC0ARIsAKm ec9Y8b1DWsRju1pqsgvX-RPWaXR718eu4kewARfW5NDIIJ9Vrxbcq9YMaAp8FEALw wcb.

⁶ *Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center 1990 Handbook*

⁷ "Lillie Marian Wheeler Coleman," Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center, accessed October 14, 2018, <https://noblehillwheeler.org/lillie-marian-wheeler-coleman/>.

⁸ Tom Hanchett, "Rosenwald School History: Saving the South's Rosenwald Schools."

⁹ "Grassroots Guide to Saving Rosenwald Schools PDF."

¹⁰ Marian Coleman, interviewed by James Moon, September 13, 2018, "Noble Hill Rosenwald School: A Bartow Legacy."

¹¹ S. L. Smith, "Community School Plans, Bulletin No. 3, the Julius Rosenwald Fund," State Library of North Carolina, accessed October 14, 2018, <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p16062coll13/id/4554>.

¹² *Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center 1990 Handbook*, 9.

¹³ Marian Coleman, "Noble Hill Rosenwald School: A Bartow Legacy."

¹⁴ *Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center 1990 Handbook*, 8, 13, 14, 21.

¹⁵ Marian Coleman, "Noble Hill Rosenwald School: A Bartow Legacy."

Bibliography

- “Grassroots Guide to Saving Rosenwald Schools PDF.” National Trust for Historic Preservation. Last modified April 7, 2016. Accessed October 14, 2018. https://forum.savingplaces.org/connect/community-home/librarydocuments/viewdocument?DocumentKey=459b5f97-0237-4559-b952-3f9d5eda04cb&_ga=2.49930159.82127408.1539625653-1215158477.1538092421&_gac=1.215291493.1539179049.Cj0KCQjwxvbdBRC0ARIsAKmec9Y8b1DWsRju1pqsgvX-RPWaXR718eu4kewARfW5NDIIJ9VrxbCq9YMaAp8FEALw_wcB.
- Hanchett, Tom. “Rosenwald School History: Saving the South’s Rosenwald Schools.” History South. Accessed October 12, 2018. <https://www.historysouth.org/schoolhistory/>.
- Jones, Beverly. “Rosenwald Schools.” New Georgia Encyclopedia. Last modified September 1, 2016. Accessed October 12, 2018. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/education/rosenwald-schools>.
- “Lillie Marian Wheeler Coleman.” Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center. Accessed October 14, 2018. <https://noblehillwheeler.org/lillie-marian-wheeler-coleman/>.
- “Noble Hill Rosenwald School.” Georgia Historical Society. Accessed October 12, 2018. https://georgiahistory.com/ghmi_marker_updated/noble-hill-rosenwald-school/.
- Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center 1990 Handbook*. (Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center Board of Trustees, 1990).
- Smith, S.L. “Community School Plans, Bulletin No. 3, the Julius Rosenwald Fund.” State Library of North Carolina. Accessed October 14, 2018. <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p16062coll13/id/4554>.